

BOOK REVIEWS

1 of social advantage by institutions describing what is beautiful and what is ugly.
2 Ugliness, on this account, would be an injustice, as an unchosen form of
3 institutionally mediated disadvantage. (Certainly, different societies have had
4 different visions of beauty, all of them reinforced by institutions such as televi-
5 sion and mass media.) Why, then, is ugliness not a matter of justice, even on the
6 moderated, institutional form of luck egalitarianism Tan endorses? Tan wants to
7 avoid this result, of course, and focus only on economic goods; I worry, though,
8 that this exclusion seems somewhat ad hoc. If this is right, though, then Tan's
9 institutional egalitarianism may not avoid some of the difficulties that led many
10 of us to abandon it in the first place.

11 Tan's book, then, may not convince all of those who are hostile to luck
12 egalitarianism; it is, however, eminently worth reading, and represents the best
13 current defense that view has to offer.

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16 *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 125, No. 1, 2016

17 DOI 10.1215/00318108-3321771

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21 Samuel Fleischacker, *Divine Teaching and the Way of the World: A Defense of Revealed*
22 *Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press. x + 559 pp.

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25 In this substantial book, Samuel Fleischacker—a prominent historian of mod-
26 ern ethical and political theory—attempts to develop and defend a theory of
27 revealed religion that eschews the dangers of religious fundamentalism. The
28 chief claim of the book is stated clearly on its very first page: “revealed religions
29 can offer us something of great importance, but stand in danger of corruption
30 or fanaticism unless they are combined with secular scientific practices and a
31 secular morality” (by “secular,” Fleischacker seems to mean religiously neutral).

32 In the first two parts of the book, Fleischacker attempts to establish the
33 claim that strict commitment to scientific truth and morality must precede reli-
34 gion and that revelation cannot make claims against morality and science. Yet,
35 revelation has something important to offer us that secular morality and science
36 cannot provide and that is, claims Fleischacker, the satisfaction of our “telic
37 yearnings,” or “a conception of what we live *for*” (4). The third part of the
38 book is dedicated to a critical evaluation of various secular answers to the ques-
39 tion of what makes life worth living. In the fourth part, Fleischacker studies the
40 notion of revelation and the nature of revelatory texts as the ground of various
religions from Judaism and Christianity to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confu-

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1 cianism and argues that revealed religion succeeds precisely in the place where
2 secular morality fails—that is, in satisfying one’s “telic yearnings” and providing
3 an adequate account for what makes life worth living (309). In the fifth and last
4 part of the book, Fleischacker spells out the political implications of his theory,
5 arguing that while secular morality suffices “to define and ground politics”
6 (433), sincere commitment to revelatory texts—and specifically, the deep
7 sense of humility imbedded in these texts—should point the religious person
8 in the direction of liberal politics.

9 The book is written from a somewhat unique angle. On the one hand,
10 Fleischacker’s significant engagement with Biblical and rabbinic texts reflects
11 his own commitments as an observant Jew. On the other hand, he puts much
12 effort in trying to present his claims in ecumenical and inclusive terms. Overall,
13 the book is well written, clear, and systematic. Fleischacker’s interpretation of
14 rabbinic and Biblical sources is frequently insightful and rich, and the author’s
15 frequent appeals to a very personal phenomenology are both engaging and
16 inviting. I also found Fleischacker’s discussion of the Enlightenment critique
17 of revealed religion valuable.

18 Regrettably, however, the book contains a few imprecise factual claims ~~as
19 well as inadequately motivated arguments~~. Thus, for example, in his discussion
20 of revelation, Fleischacker makes the rather strong claim that “revelation *must*
21 be couched in poetry” (301; italics mine) and then argues that “the Torah is
22 largely an epic poem . . . and even its legal and narrative sections are com-
23 pressed, enigmatic, and suffused with metaphor and allusion” (307). The por-
24 tions of the Pentateuch that are ordinarily counted as poetry (Exodus 15 and
25 Deuteronomy 32) do not exceed more than a quarter of a percent. Of course,
26 one can, in principle, treat any text as poetry, but I do not see in what sense
27 Numbers 33 (or the entire book of Leviticus) is any more poetic than, say, a
28 shopping list (the kernel of truth in this claim of Fleischacker’s is that the Bib-
29 lical text has been treated *by rabbinic interpreters* with hermeneutic principles that
30 are otherwise commonly associated with poetry, taking every tiny nuance of the
31 text as significant).

32 Instead of listing the claims and arguments I found inadequate—many
33 of these have been highlighted as such by Gellman (2012)—I would prefer to
34 concentrate here on one crucial issue: the notion of revelation and Fleischacker’s
35 adoption of the common Enlightenment characterization of Judaism as a
36 religion of revelation. Though Fleischacker presents his book as a defense of
37 revelation from the Enlightenment critique, to my mind, he accepts much of
38 this critique too easily. An example of this is Fleischacker’s espousal of Enlight-
39 enment rhetoric against enthusiasm or *Schwärmerei* (9) without noting the role
40 of this rhetoric in justifying Enlightenment prejudices against non-European
cultures/religions and without acknowledging the indispensable role of enthu-
siasm in the founding of modern mathematics and the rehabilitation of actual
infinity by a certain *Schwärmer* by the name of Georg Cantor.

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1 Before we confront the issue of revelation, let me turn first to a
2 crucial methodological point that Fleischacker astutely notes. “Theorists of
3 religion tend to take Christianity as the paradigm religion and then pinch
4 and squeeze other traditions to fit that mold. Two features of this bias are (1)
5 an over-emphasis on *belief* as opposed to practice . . . and (2) a view of religions
6 as always proclaiming themselves to be the one right view for all humanity”
7 (12). Fleischacker further develops his argument and claims that this form
8 of cultural colonialism “is not only condescending, but most likely false” (14).
9 I share this evaluation and have witnessed the pattern described numerous
10 times. Yet, I tend to see it not so much as a result of malicious intent but
11 rather as an indication of genuine distress on the part of Christian writers
12 who attempt to escape parochialism by making these gestures of rather shallow
openness and ecumenicity.

13 Let’s now return to the issue of revelation. Enlightenment authors who
14 described “Judaism” as a religion of revelation had, *at best*, a very superficial
15 knowledge of rabbinic literature. For figures like Kant and Lessing, “Judaism”
16 was primarily associated with the Old Testament (and the characterization of the
17 Jews in the New Testament). It would definitely make sense for someone relying
18 on these sources to describe Judaism as a religion of revelation. However, once
19 we look at rabbinic literature—which historically was, and is, the main text of
20 study for traditional Jews—the story gets far more complicated.

21 Let us begin with the linguistic observation that the Hebrew term for
22 revelation (*hitgalut*) is *very* rare in pretwentieth-century Hebrew (this point
23 is conceded by Fleischacker on p. 305). Similarly, there is hardly any noun
24 in Yiddish for revelation. If revelation was the core of traditional Judaism,
25 how could it be that the two main Jewish languages did not develop a distinct
term for it?

26 Consider next one of the essential features of revelation according to
27 Fleischacker: “What we *mean* by revelation in the course of religious life is a
28 text . . . that corrects us, but that we do not correct, something that teaches us
29 from a position beyond us, rather than from a position to which we have access”
30 (306). The last characterization does not fit, to my mind, many parts of the Bible
31 in which exemplary biblical figures present *demands* to God—think of Abra-
32 ham’s words with regard to the people of Sodom: “Shall not the Judge of all the
33 earth do right?” (Gen 18:25)—and this attitude is just intensified by the Talmu-
34 dists who frequently explicate implicit harsh critiques of God by prominent
35 biblical figures, such as Moses, Elijah, and Hannah (see Babylonian Talmud,
36 *Tractate Brachot*, 31a–b). Indeed, in one of the stunning narratives of the Tal-
37 mud, God reveals himself and intervenes in a debate among Talmudic sages.
38 The Talmudists listen carefully to God’s revealed opinion, and . . . reject it
39 (Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Bava Metzia*, 59b. See also Fleischacker’s percep-
40 tive discussion of this source [389–90]).

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1 The gift of the Torah in Sinai has paramount importance in rabbinic
2 literature. Yet, interestingly, quite a few rabbinic authors attempted to limit
3 and minimize the direct contact with the divine. Though I cannot develop
4 this issue here, I suspect that the main motivation behind this move is the fear
5 of idolatry and fanatic cults guided by divine voices. In one of the most radical
6 statements of this tendency, a late eighteenth-century Hassidic master by the
7 name of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Riminow argued that the Children of
8 Israel heard, directly from God at Mount Sinai, nothing more than “*kamatz*
9 *Alef*”—namely, the vowel “a”; all the rest was humanly interpreted (Asher
10 Yeshaya of Rufshitz 1876, 5a).

11 Let me conclude by stressing that I learned much from Fleischacker’s
12 book. This is an insightful, original, rich, and serious work. It makes an import-
13 ant contribution to the development of a more open and egalitarian religious
14 discourse, and I am confident that it will engage scholars and philosophers for
15 some years to come.

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22 *Philosophical Review*, Vol. 125, No. 1, 2016
23 DOI 10.1215/00318108-3321781
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