

# Enlightenment and Prophecy

## A Critical Notice



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In his magisterial new book [Radikaler Universalismus. Jenseits von Identität](#) (Propyläen/Ullstein 2022), Omri Boehm appeals for a reappraisal of a concept of universal truth beyond the conventions and conformities of identity politics, both of the radical and more moderate kind. Over two long chapters Boehm reevaluates the legacy of abolitionist thought in American political history from the mid-19th century, while drawing on pre-eminent figures such as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Martin Luther King, and contrasting it with the post-civil war attempt to rein in all too fanatical—in the Kantian sense of “enthusiastic”—appeals to justice and truth, as evinced by the “pragmatist” and politically more conformist or conventionalist work of major figures in American political thought such as John Dewey, John Rawls, Richard Rorty and more recently Mark Lilla.

Boehm's central thesis is that both the moderate or centrist and radical left-wing camps in the current landscape of political theory and activism are forms of identity politics that reject a metaphysical conception or foundation of truth and justice at their peril, instead anchoring their politics in a thoroughgoing relativistic view of culture, society and history. The “We” liberalism (p. 15) of the Rawlsian-Rortyan-Lillan kind testifies, on balance, to an identity-political worldview as much as the radical so-called “woke” ideology—terminology that Boehm himself avoids—that monomaniacally focuses on culture, race and gender. Both emphasize inclusion, but effectively are exclusionary. A major difference between both camps is that the “We” liberals claim indeed to be universalists, while the radical left has made it their mission to cast aside *any* form of universalism as a hidden form of

exclusion politics: Eurocentric *universalism* as such is to be viewed as the culprit of much of what is wrong with contemporary society, starting with slavery and colonialism.

In fact, the Enlightenment itself is seen as the great offender. The Enlightenment is no longer considered, by a sizeable minority of left-wing liberals, the source for the improvement of humanity's future, but it is instead to be seen as that which in fact *produced* inequality and unfreedom for large swathes of mankind during the last couple of centuries. Rather than being a force for good, the political thought of major Enlightenment thinkers, including Kant's, has been a pernicious instrument in creating inequity and subjugation of entire peoples across the planet, through slavery, colonisation and different forms of imperialism, political and economical, today as well as in the past. And, crucially, this is not just because Enlightenment thought has been distorted and misused by wily or malevolent monarchs and rulers who instrumentalised enlightened values to their own iniquitous ends, e.g. to forcibly emancipate illiterate "savages" to a higher (read: European) form of civilisation, but rather because the Enlightenment project *itself*, in virtue of its own principles, lies at the heart of this problematic outcome. Through political and social enforcement, it has imposed its own set of norms, its own *normativity* in philosophical jargon, on all societies and individuals alike, in defiance of variety, context as well as opposition.

Boehm agrees here only to the extent that contemporary "We" liberalists spurn any metaphysical foundation for their conventionalist political theories, meaning that what they regard as universal is basically nothing more than what can be included in what we mean by "we" and "our", and what can "rightfully" be claimed to be "ours". Not to put too fine a point on it, this kind of universalism is indeed the white man's universalism; the "we" here is not a truly universal "we". It is what Boehm labels "false universalism" (p. 19), as it fully comports with an *Aufklärungspositivismus* which has ordained that only facts and established patterns and norms determine what we have agreed to mean by truth in the broadest sense. Boehm rejects *this* reading of Enlightenment, and argues instead for a "higher" conception of humanity and justice, which goes beyond human authority based on

cultural conformism and social and political conventions—in other words, for a re-reading of what really inspired and underwrites *Aufklärung*.

However, identity politics of the radical left-wing kind is certainly not the right way forward either, as Boehm makes crystal clear in his philosophical exhortation. Like the “We” liberals, who appeal to convention and an in-group logic of interests and rights (to the exclusion of duties), the radical left has *mutatis mutandis* lost their way by being completely absorbed by the minutiae of discriminating between suppressed and suppressors, between minority groups and the privileged classes, between the one minority group and the other. They thereby have forfeited the *means* for justifying their sociopolitical logic of in- and exclusion since like their supposed political opposites, the centrist “We” liberals, they reject a metaphysical grounding of such logic. “Woke” identity politics is effectively as conventionalist and rights-oriented as the political conventionalism of “We” liberalism. Boehm pleads for a return to the Kantian variant of Enlightenment thinking and values, that is to say, to *radical*, true universalism, a universalism that goes *beyond* any particular political identity, beyond any particular convention and traditional, historical norms and rights, and emphasizes humanity as such, as an “abstract” rational and moral touchstone that any concrete politics should be measured by.

Though it only makes up a mere 27 pages out of a total of 175, and certainly not to diminish the fascinating account, in the preceding chapters, of the American Declaration of Independence, John Brown’s trial and Emerson’s and Thoreau’s interventions in the media of the day, the political and social aftermath of the Civil War, and the line of influence from Holmes Jr. to Dewey to Rorty to Lilla—something for which I don’t have the expertise to be able to emulate Boehm’s erudition here—I believe that the metaphysical meat of Boehm’s essay is to be located in the last chapter of the book, Chapter 3, entitled “Die abrahamitische Unterscheidung oder was *Aufklärung* ist”. In it, Boehm paints an illuminating, indeed enlightening, story of why Kant’s conception of *Aufklärung*—the vision of *Aufklärung* that Boehm endorses—should be seen as rooted in Judaic prophecy, in particular Abrahamitic prophecy, which in Boehm’s view provides a proto-

enlightenment model for *Selbstdenken* rather than being its faith-based antithesis that Enlightenment thought sought to overcome. Boehm's proposal is as subversive as it is intriguing.

## The Commandment to Think for Oneself

Boehm first returns to Kant's famous essay *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, from 1784, on which I wrote earlier (see [here](#)). At first blush, Kant appears to provide a negative criterion for the idea of 'enlightenment' (*Aufklärung*): "Selbst zu denken heißt, niemand anderem Autorität über unser Denken einzuräumen" (Boehm, p. 121). Boehm rightly draws attention to the fact that Kant uses exclamation marks twice: "Sapere aude! Habe Mut dich deines *eigenen* Verstandes zu bedienen!" In other words, it concerns, not just a descriptive definition of *Aufklärung*, but a command, an exhortation to act. In this way, it might seem, as Boehm points out, that Kant's conception of enlightenment has much in common with Spinoza's, say, who contrasts critical self-thinking with prophecy and religious obeisance, since biblical prophecy rests on the heteronomous acceptance of an authority other than ourselves.

However, Boehm believes, to think there is continuity between Spinoza and Kant on this point is misleading. He thinks there is a common theme that instead binds Kant's model of self-thinking to biblical prophecy. One aspect of Kant's argument which is often emphasized is what one could call a *Bequemlichkeitsargument* ("es ist so bequem, unmündig zu sein", as Kant writes): it is all too easy to defer to others, to experts or political leaders, for making decisions and in this way to delegate one's duty to think to others. Why should I want to think about certain matters when we have politicians or scientists or church leaders to do this on our behalf? It is much easier and more relaxed to let the experts do the thinking.

But Boehm points out that there is another, often overlooked aspect to Kant's view of immaturity, which is much more fundamental, namely a "way of thinking" (p. 123) that is mechanical, based on "Satzungen und Formeln", as Kant says. What is crucial here is the temptation to conform, to fall back on standards which others

set out *for* you, which steadily gnaws away at your natural ability to think for yourself.

Now Boehm's analysis here (p. 123–4) is subtle: what happens here, with immaturity, is not *just* that it is a dereliction of my duty to think for myself when I defer to others by compliantly submitting to their heteronomous authority, similar to how I would be summoned to simply obey a tyrannical monarch's censorious edicts. Rather, what happens is that I have "internalized" the norms according to which what is true and good "we" have come to an agreement about, so that what is in actual fact "an external authority" is presented to one as "inner", basically eliminating *self*-thinking. The spontaneous agent of thought has been replaced by an automaton that is parroting what *others* think. Mechanical, automated thinking has as it were become "second nature" (p. 20). (Kant refers to the fact that a human being is more than a "machine" at the end of the *Aufklärung* essay.) The most pernicious censorship is not blunt censorship by the state, but the sneaking censorship of self-censorship, an internalized conformity as a collectively sanctioned *way* of thinking that becomes the standard. Boehm writes, with explicit reference to Tocqueville's analysis of the emerging mass society:

Die größte Bedrohung für die Aufklärung lauert folglich nicht in irgendeinem gewaltsamen Auferlegen von außen, sondern in dieser einzigartigen 'Leistung' einer Tyrannei der Mehrheit, denkende Wesen in 'Hausvieh' [Kant's term] zu verwandeln. (p. 124)

At this point Boehm reconnects this theme to his earlier account in the book (p. 33) of how in the context of the trial of John Brown, the radical abolitionist who sought to end slavery by violent means, public figures such as Emerson and Thoreau complained about how the media betrayed their "conformism" by repeating the official law and order line of reasoning—also expressed by church leaders at the time—that Brown was a madman and was rightly sentenced to death (p. 125). In this context, Emerson evoked the term "genius" about which he wrote in his famous essay *Self-Reliance*, denoting the capacity "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men", suggesting that Brown acted from a higher authority, sincerely in line with his firm Christian

beliefs, and should be commended for it. Brown fought for justice from the singular belief that slavery, and not less so, the unionist consensus to tolerate it, was a grave injustice to humanity.

Boehm connects this to Kant's belief that for the majority of people maturity is quite demanding and requires a "few" others to take the lead, whose example one can follow in "throwing off the yoke" of conformism (p. 125). Boehm's compelling thesis is that these "few" can be compared to the Old Testament prophets, foremost Abraham, who set an early example of following his conscience rather than complying with a conventional, collectively sanctioned order or norm. *Aufklärung* as Kant understood it is in an important sense a translation or modernisation of this idea of prophecy as exemplarily incorporated in Abraham. "Abrahams höchste Form der Prophetie lässt sich als das ursprüngliche Beispiel von Aufklärung verstehen." How so?

## The Highest Level of Prophecy

Boehm takes as his cue the great Medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides' definition of prophecy for which the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) plays the crucial role, since "dessen Funktionsweise nicht durch gegebene Gegenstände oder vorgeschriebene Normen bestimmt ist" (p. 127). Imagination is as such "das politische Vermögen par excellence. Sie ermöglicht es dem Propheten nicht nur, einen Ruf von oben zu erfahren, sondern auch, den Massen diesen Ruf erfolgreich zu vermitteln" (p. 127). Now, crucially, the highest level of prophecy, according to Maimonides is to "see an angel in a vision". Boehm focuses on the way we should read, in this Maimonidean vein, the well-known story of the binding of Abraham's son Isaac.

The scene of the binding of Isaac is written down in Genesis 22:1–19:

Some time afterward, God [*Elohim*, אֱלֹהִים] put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you." So early next morning, Abraham saddled his ass and took with him two of his

servants and his son Isaac. He split the wood for the burnt offering, and he set out for the place of which God had told him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar. Then Abraham said to his servants, "You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you."

Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone and the knife; and the two walked off together. Then Isaac said to his father Abraham, "Father!" And he answered "Yes, my son." And he said, "Here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham said "God will see to the sheep for His burnt offering, my son." And the two of them walked on together.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. **Then an angel of the LORD [Yahweh, יהוה] called to him from heaven: "Abraham! Abraham!" And he answered, "Here I am." And he said, "Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me."** When Abraham looked up, his eye fell upon a ram, caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son. And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, "On the mount of the Lord there is vision."

**The angel of the LORD [Yahweh, יהוה] called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I swear, the LORD [Yahweh, יהוה] declares: Because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your favored one, I will bestow My blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands on the seashore; and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, because you have obeyed My command."**

Traditionally, this story is ascribed to the so-called Author E (the Elohist), whereas the second story about the angel in Genesis 22:15–19 (i.e. the second passage that is marked up in bold typeface in the quoted text above), right after Abraham has offered up the ram rather than his son, is considered a later Yahwist interpolation in the original text. The Elohim text is, as Boehm suggests quoting a bible interpreter, “wahrscheinlich die am prägnantesten formulierte Geschichte in der hebräischen Bibel...[D]ie zweite Engelsrede [ist] denn auch nichts weiter als eine ‘unbeholfene Ergänzung’ zu einer ‘ansonsten großartig geschriebenen Geschichte’” (p. 138). It is striking that the godhead in the angel passages is referred to as Yahweh rather than Elohim. The angel passages are also stylistically different from the surrounding passages.

However, the second angel story seems dialectically integral to the overall account, since it relates the story about God’s reward for Abraham’s obedience, which is recounted in the preceding passage that is part of the E source text. Specifically, Elohim’s commandment stands for the common practice, in pagan era Near East, of offering up one’s firstborn (p. 133–4). Furthermore, Elohim is in the first instance a reference to “staatliche Herrscher und Richter”, and only in the second instance a term for God or godheads. “Die zentrale Bedeutung von ‘Gott’ ist mithin nichts anderes als das Attribut juridischer Autorität: das staatliche Gesetz, die gemeinsame Norm des Landes, die durch kontingente Konventionen festgelegt wird” (p. 132). This is of significant relevance to Boehm’s moral interpretation of the Binding scene.

Boehm’s proposal for a solution to the paradox—the paradox, namely, arising from the distinction between the stylistically different second angel passage and the E source text, on the one hand, and the fact that dialectically the E text does seem to require it, on the other—is to say that the second angel passage is stylistically similar to the *first* angel passage, also more repetitive and poetic than the “extrem ökonomische Sprachverwendung” in the E source text. The first angel passage also shows the same kind of textual anomalies that one encounters in the second one (p. 139). Likewise, both angel passages use “Yahweh” rather than “Elohim” for God. In



other words, Boehm suggests, also the first angel passage seems to be an interpolation into the original text.

For Boehm, then, the original narrative is that Abraham “gegen Gottes Gebot [verstößt]” and offers “*aus eigenem Entschluss* den Widder ‘an seines Sohnes statt’” (p. 140, emphasis added). The interruption by the angel from Yahweh in fact removes the responsibility for the revocation of the test. That is to say, on the more traditional reading (which includes the angel) it is not Abraham’s ethical disobedience that is celebrated as a symbol of faith, which enjoins others to follow suit, but rather his meek submission, for which he should be rewarded; the test is then not so much aimed at showing Abraham’s *faith* as a manifestation of his strict obedience to a divine commandment, which should be read as saying that one unquestioningly conforms to human made conventions, to adapt to what society prescribes as just (p. 133). Now, is this really what the Binding of Isaac wants to tell us?

Boehm thus argues that the two angel passages come together: it is not that only the second one is an interpolation, for it is the first angel passage that in fact first introduces the idea of Abraham’s obedience, which naturally requires a reward, which is delineated in the second angel passage (p. 141). If we leave out both angel passages, we get the true sense of Abrahamitic faith, according to Boehm.

There are then two layers of meaning in the text of Genesis 22: the one that is familiar to us, namely a representation of absolute obedience to God, meaning that one adapts to the consensus of conventional norms, which then gets rewarded. The other that Boehm argues is one that Maimonides too points to, and Boehm submits is the better reading, is the forgotten idea which expresses Abraham’s “ethical disobedience”. And it is this latter meaning that is the true meaning of his faith. That is, “Abraham’s höchste Form der Prophetie besteht darin, dass er sich der Wahrheit und nicht dem Konsens unterwirft” (p. 134).

But it seems that despite its persuasive argumentative dialectic, there is a tension in this account of the Abrahamitic prophecy, which Boehm paints in terms of the Abrahamitic “distinction”. If, namely, the scene of the angel of Yahweh first

indicates the *distinction* between heteronomous obedience, on the one hand, and disobedience as the true sign of faith, on the other, then this does not comport well with the view, expressed by Boehm, that the angel passages, *both* the first and the second, are later interpolations. The higher level of prophecy is, according to Maimonides, “the vision of an angel”, after all (p. 131). It seems that, for Boehm, the true meaning of the Abrahamitic prophecy lies in Abraham’s disobedience and the offering of the ram entirely “of his own accord”, for which the intervention by an angel is not at all required, and in fact is antithetical to it. Boehm’s view of Abraham’s self-standing decision to disobey Elohim’s commandment, without the angel’s encouragement, is consistent of itself, as it is relying solely on the E source text, but how can this be squared with the Maimonidean view of the vision of Yahweh’s angel as the higher level of prophecy? On what does Abraham’s agency in Boehm’s account rest? Doesn’t there seem to be a discrepancy between what Maimonides regards as the higher level of prophecy and Boehm’s take on it?

## Abrahamitic Conscience

Now Boehm asks if it is at all sensible to assume that biblical monotheism, of the Abrahamitic kind, presented such a modern, enlightened view of the relation between God and the human being as he ascribes to it. The way Boehm sees Abraham’s placing moral authority even above God’s commandments would, at first blush, seem to be a kind of hermeneutic fallacy by projecting a conspicuously Kantian viewpoint about self-legislation on a vetero-testamentary story. However, Boehm’s idea that Kant’s Copernican turn “in Sachen Autorität” is already incorporated in Abraham (p. 145) seems confirmed by the story of the destruction of Sodom—which precedes the Binding of Isaac—where Abraham speaks as one of the most radical and modern prophets, and admonishes God (Yahweh) in the name of justice not to kill innocent people, even though he fully realizes that as a humble human being he has no right to speak to God in this reproachful manner:

Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well

as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?...Here I venture to speak to my Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.” (Genesis 18:23–27)

Boehm wonders if the Abraham that speaks here really just submits, at a later point, obediently to God’s command to offer his son. That doesn’t make sense. For Abraham, it is the consciousness of a duty to speak in the name of justice when he approaches God, the highest authority, to remind God of the fact that the law holds for Him as much as for human beings. Boehm aptly refers to a pronouncement of Kant’s in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, namely “Thus the virtuous man fears God without being afraid of him” (AA V:260). Abraham is the quintessentially virtuous man of whom Kant speaks, reverential but not fearful. It stands to reason that Abraham adopts the same stance in the case of the binding of Isaac, and acts out of a firm awareness of justice.

The question though is, if we go along with Boehm’s expositions, how to explain the acute decision, on Abraham’s part, not to carry out God’s command if it is not in virtue of the intervention of the angel who holds him back from doing so. Perhaps more expansion on the idea of Maimonidean “imagination”, and how this relates to Abraham’s decision to disobey, his agency to act “of his own accord”, would be of help here.

While I think the aforementioned textual contradictions in Boehm’s exposition of Genesis 22 remain, I also think it is enriching to discern, as Boehm does, a link between the Abrahamitic conscience—as is at any rate clear from the account in Genesis 18—and Kant’s moral law as the primordial “juridical” authority to which we all, including God himself, are bound. It is intriguing to think of Abraham as the father (“Abraham’s ganz eigene Neuerung”, p. 135) of the notion that even God himself is subject to the rationality of the moral law. It is this thought of a universal truth valid for all people and even God, which runs through the history of the Judæo-Christian tradition, and evinced by the likes of Brown and King in their fight against the grave injustices of slavery and discrimination, that lies at the heart of Boehm’s proposal for a “radical” universalism that overcomes all the doctrinaire divisiveness and fearful conformism of contemporary identity politics, left or right.

[*edit*: the translation used for the Genesis quotations is the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, Jerusalem edition (Sefer Ve Sefel Publishing 2000)]

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