Jewish Philosophy as Minority Philosophy (01.30.22)

״ ׳ויגד לאברם העִברי' ... רבי יהודה אומר: כל העולם כולו מעבר אחד והוא מעבר אחד.״ [[1]](#footnote-1)

Jewish philosophy has seen better days. It has been quite a while since the discipline of Jewish philosophy enjoyed the respect of the wider philosophical community, and an obvious question is what are the reasons for this state of things? Providing a detailed and thorough answer to this question is beyond the scope of the current chapter. Still, I would like to contribute here a few ideas that might shed *some* light on the current predicament and its causes. Such an attempt is timely because the current moment in the development of Anglo-American philosophy is impregnated with a promise – which I hope is sincere – to turn the study of philosophy and the history of philosophy into an inclusive and genuinely universal field of inquiry, shared equally by all human beings, rather than an imposition of the prevalent beliefs of white Christian European males. A study of philosophy that is *genuinely* ecumenical could profit enormously from the encounter and dialogue with the philosophical thinking of minority cultures, since it is precisely this encounter with the philosophical thought of minority cultures that could expose the potentially numerous blind spots of the majority. If anything can heal Western philosophy from the prejudice that what one takes to be natural must be equally judged so by all rational human beings, it is only the encounter with non-Christian, or non-Western, philosophical thinking that could refute its illusory pretense of universality. Obviously, the real issue at stake is the sincerity of the attempt to understand foreign cultures and their philosophical thinking in their own terms. An identity politics that is merely interested in extending fig leaves would be far worse than the old, conservative state of things, insofar as the new and “inclusive” appearance would only provide the majority culture with a sense of self-satisfaction that would allow it to stick to its old and obstinate prejudicial practices.

My aims in the current chapter are pretty modest and concrete. In the first two parts of the chapter, I will attempt to shed light on two blind spots related to perceptions of Jewish philosophy, from without and from within, respectively. These two parts will thus inquire into the nature of Jewish philosophy as *minority* philosophy. In the third and final part, I will turn to the rudimentary requirements of Jewish philosophy qua *philosophy*. In this part, I will suggest some fundamental desiderata which might – I hope – help the field flourish and achieve the recognition it deserves. Here too, my claims would be quite plain, as most of the desired characteristics I would argue for are pretty trivial, yet unfortunately still mostly lacking.

Part 1: Christian Supremacy

The first volume in the esteemed series, *Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts* appeared in 1988[[2]](#footnote-2) and was dedicated to texts in logic and philosophy of language. The blurb on the back of the book reads:

This is the first of a three-volume anthology intended as a companion to *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Volume 1 is concerned with the logic and the philosophy of language, and comprises fifteen important texts on questions of meaning and inference that formed the basis of Medieval philosophy. As far as is practicable, complete works or topically complete segments of larger works have been selected. The editors have provided a full introduction to the volume and detailed introductory headnotes to each text; the volume is also indexed comprehensively.

The fifteen texts selected for this volume were written by: Boethius, an anonymous author, Peter of Spain (two texts), Lambert of Auxerre, another anonymous author, Nicholas of Paris, Robert Kilwardby, Walter Burley (two texts), William Ockham, Albert of Saxony, William Heytesbury (two texts), and Boethius of Dacia. Fifteen out of the fifteen texts were written by Christian authors. No text by a medieval Islamic or Jewish author was included in the collection.

The second volume in the series, this time focusing on ethics and political philosophy, appeared in 2001.[[4]](#footnote-4) The seventeen texts included in this collection were authored by: Albert the Great, Bonaventure, Giles of Rome, Peter of Auvergne, Henry of Ghent (two texts), Godfrey of Fontanes (three texts), James of Viterbo (two texts), John of Naples, William of Ockham (two texts), Augustine of Ancona, Jean Buridan, and John Wyclif. Seventeen out of the seventeen texts were authored by Christian writers. Late medieval Jewish or Islamic texts on ethics or politics? Not in our school.

I assume that at this point, the reader has a reasonable sense of the mindset behind the series, but just in order to expel any remaining doubts, let me note that the third volume of the series, this time dedicated to Mind and Knowledge and appearing in 2009,[[5]](#footnote-5) contained twelve texts, of which, as one now might expect, twelve were Christian. No Islamic or Jewish sources made the cut. In light of the success of the series, the press decided to expand the series by two more volumes, dedicated to metaphysics and philosophical theology respectively. While not yet published, I guess it would not be a risky bet to assume that neither volume will include any texts by Islamic or Jewish authors. It is hard to avoid the suspicion that from the point of view of the editors of the series, there were no Islamic or Jewish philosophers in late medieval times (or at least no Jewish or Islamic philosophers who wrote on logic, philosophy of language, ethics, politics, or philosophy of mind and whose works deserve attention).

But perhaps we are rushing to conclusions much too quickly? Perhaps it was merely a matter of some technical or logistical difficulties – such as unavailability of competent translators from Arabic and Hebrew – that was the reason for the exclusion of Islamic and Jewish texts? If this were the case, we might, of course, wish to inquire about the reasons for the absence of competent translators (scholars in the field of medieval philosophy who are committed to a true representation of history and to avoiding racial and religious prejudices should have made sure that the necessary linguistic training required for a fair representation of the multi-cultural nature of medieval philosophy is available). But, for all I can tell, the availability, or absence thereof, of translators from Arabic and Hebrew had nothing to do with the exclusion of Jewish and Islamic texts in this series.[[6]](#footnote-6) Were the issue at stake merely technical, it would be very easy for the press and editors to amend the situation, by retitling the series as: *Cambridge Translations of Medieval* Christian *Philosophical Texts.* This would seem to be a simple matter of “truth in advertising.” And yet, this simple amendment did not occur. Why?

The subtitle of this part of the chapter – “Christian *Supremacy*” – might alert some readers and make them feel uncomfortable. So, before we go any further, let me state openly that some versions of “Christian supremacy” seem to me completely benign. It is perfectly legitimate for a person to consider her religion (or ideas) better than others, *if such a belief is not accompanied by the exclusion or effacement of alternative religions/cultures*.

Why did the editors of the *Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts* not adopt the more specific title which clarifies that the series is restricted to *Christian* texts? Presumably, the suggested qualification of the title of the series would make the series appear much more *parochial* (as the series indeed *is*), i.e., as *restricted to one specific religious tradition*. In attempting to present the Christian tradition as the only game in town in late medieval philosophy, the editors of the series seemed to wish to appear as engaged in universal philosophical discourse (rather than restricted to a particular religious tradition), and thus the exclusion of Islamic and Jewish texts was necessary for asserting the universality of Christianity. In this sense, it seems that old medieval patterns of religious violence did not fully disappear, but were merely moderated and turned symbolic.

An alternative explanation for the exclusion of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy would be that the series’ editors were simply unaware of the exclusionary, distorting, and discriminatory nature of their editorial decisions: they may have genuinely and innocently assumed that medieval philosophy is just Christian philosophy. Ascribing conceptual blindness of such a vast scope to highly competent scholars seems to me barely credible, and yet we cannot absolutely rule it out as a common mark of activity dominated by ideology.

Let us return briefly to the back-cover blurb to the first volume of the *Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts* series with which we began this part of the chapter. The blurb notes that the new series is “intended as a companion to *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*.” One may thus wonder whether medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy fared any better in this impressive 1050-page tome of top-notch scholarship. The quick answer to the last question is simple: there is no medieval Jewish philosophy, according to the volume’s editors (at least no Jewish philosopher requiring discussion in a thousand-page volume on the history of late medieval philosophy). Maimonides is mentioned, very briefly, twice – once in the body of the text, and for a second time in a note;[[7]](#footnote-7) Abraham ibn Daud, Samuel ibn Tibbon, Shem Tov ibn Falquera, Yedayah Bedersi, Isaac Albalag, Joseph Kaspi, Isaac Polqar, Gersonides, Moses Narboni, Hisdai Crescas, Simeon ben Zemah Duran, Joseph Albo, Joseph ibn Shem Tov, Abraham Bibago, Isaac Arama, Abraham Shalom, and Isaac Abrabanel (and this is a very incomplete list of medieval Jewish philosophers between 1200 and 1500) are completely absent. “*Malta Yok*,” as one would say.

The fate of Islamic philosophy in this magnificent volume is only slightly better; Avicenna and Averroes are marginally mentioned,[[8]](#footnote-8) but basically, they are merely ornaments which help explain the development of “true” philosophy, i.e. Christian philosophy. A biographical list of more than a hundred medieval philosophers which appears at the very end of the book (many of whom would be hardly familiar to the vast majority of readers) contains not even *one* name of a medieval Islamic or Jewish philosopher.

Before we move to the next part of the chapter, let me briefly register three additional observations. First, current Anglo-American philosophy is seriously (and rightly) engaged with the question of how to rectify the past historical exclusion of various groups from the ranks of philosophy authors. The exclusion of medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy from the historiography of medieval philosophy is only partly similar to other forms of exclusion. The crucial difference is the temporal location of the excluding act. Medieval philosophical culture, despite all its problems, was significantly multicultural; Islamic, Jewish, and Christian authors frequently engaged each other’s work, sometimes even collaborating. It is only *we*, *today*, who are creating a purely Christian narrative which excludes Jewish and Islamic authors from the philosophical discourse.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Secondly, my words in this part of the chapter might seem exceedingly harsh. However, if these issues are not stated plainly and openly, the current state of things will never change. Over the past twenty to twenty-five years, the exclusion of non-Christian medieval philosophy in the American academy has worsened. A quarter century ago, one could still find experts in medieval Jewish philosophy who were regular faculty at top US philosophy departments, such as Columbia University, the University of Chicago, Rutgers University, University of Maryland at College Park, and Ohio State University. Today, Ohio State University is the only highly ranked philosophy department in the US that still boasts an expert in medieval Jewish philosophy among its faculty. This is a substantial change from bad to worse, and it did not have to be like that. Unlike in North America, the study of medieval philosophy in Europe is far more inclusive, and many European scholars of medieval philosophy are working with texts in Hebrew, Arabic *and* Latin. An adequate training of scholars of medieval philosophy might be somewhat demanding, but so is the training of scholars in ancient and early modern philosophy.

Finally, let me note that the subtitle of the current part of the chapter might be somewhat misleading, since it is not necessarily *religious* Christians who perpetrate the type of exclusion I have been highlighting. Notably, several deeply religious Christian philosophers, such as the identified Catholics Michael Dummett and Peter Geach, made religious inclusivity part of their vision of philosophy. Rather, those who currently tend to foster and enable a sense of Christian exclusivity in the historiography of philosophy are post-Christian secular scholars whose practices either uncritically embody old religious prejudices or simply create new ones.

Part 2: Exclusion Internalized

One of the most interesting (and despicable) forms of oppression takes place when the oppressed adopts and internalizes the very categories that are used to marginalize them. Indeed, to an extent, scholars of Jewish philosophy have been not only patient, but even comfortable, with their own marginalization.

Throughout the twentieth century, the prevailing cultural and ethnic order of US society *and* academia took it for granted that non-European thought should be studied in religion departments.[[10]](#footnote-10) Scholars of Jewish and Islamic philosophy could claim as much as they wished that both Averroes and Maimonides were born in Europe, but such claims were simply irrelevant and futile. This arrangement where Jewish (and Islamic) philosophy was taught in Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations (and Religion) departments was also, in many ways, convenient for some practitioners in these fields since it placed scholarly attention and rigor squarely on philological issues, while the discussion of the philosophical content was frequently restricted to sophomoric questions, such as “reason vs. faith.”

One of these sophomoric debates circled around the nature of “Jewish particularity” and how could it be reconciled with philosophical universalism.[[11]](#footnote-11) Philosophy, indeed, has both the duty and the ambition of being universal; whether it succeeds in being universal (rather than a mere imposition of the intuitions and conventions of one group of human beings on the rest) is a serious question. In contrast, the assumption that because Jews are a tiny minority of humanity their intuitions and conventions are less *valid*, or less *natural*, or in need of special justification, is just bigotry. It is bigotry that has a long history in Western thought,[[12]](#footnote-12) but bigotry nonetheless: in philosophy, we are supposed to weigh arguments, not count heads. A philosophical view that has many proponents might seem to some as more natural, but in all likelihood, such a view would be riddled with blind spots and other errors, precisely *because* it will be *less* subject to critical evaluation. Popularity is a poor guide to philosophical quality.

The modern Jewish philosophical discourse about “Jewish particularity” is deeply apologetic where no apology is needed. This discourse has been also accompanied by a deep sense of *shame* in one’s own cultural and religious heritage. Many enlightened Jews adopted and internalized assumptions of cultural hierarchy from modern German and other European philosophers, assumption which viewed Jewish religion and culture as backward and primitive. Those racist assumptions – which were shared by the vast majority of German philosophers since the mid-eighteenth century – were based not on any competent analysis of the Jewish religious canon, but rather on vast ignorance and prejudice, the old safe havens of the prejudiced. The bigotries of Kant and Hegel – the former calling for the euthanasia of Judaism[[13]](#footnote-13) – exercised an enormous influence on enlightened Jewish writers. Of course, *genuine* self-criticism should always be lauded, and shame could also be an indication of a person’s living conscience. But the source of the shame in the current case was not any horrific crime or teaching of traditional Judaism, but rather the vague perception of cultural backwardness, the deadliest sin for the bourgeois *Aufklärer*.

Attempting to avoid parochiality, modern Jewish philosophers struggled to defend their very right for existence. As a result, they stressed, time and again, that they were committed to the very same Protestant values as their Christian counterparts. “What is the alternative?” you may ask, and the answer is quite simple. A multi-cultural society should not only accept unique features of minority cultures, but actually celebrate them. As such, Jewish thought has much more to contribute to the celebration of human diversity when it is not shackled by apologetics for its very existence. “Unnatural” features of Jewish culture – whether it is observance of the Sabbath or the Kabbalistic embracement of panentheism – should be stressed as badges of honor, not because they are “better,” but because they help us all expand our conceptual imagination and help us all realize that the common norm is not necessarily right. For the ancient Romans, the Jewish Sabbath appeared bizarre, unnatural and a mark of laziness. Today we tend to think that a society which provides *all* its members with ample leisure time is a better society, since it supports universal human flourishing. In the ancient world such a view would indeed be deemed unnatural and bizarre. But the unnatural is not necessarily wrong*.* *Ipso facto* for panentheism. The view of nature as divine was commonly viewed as heresy in Western Christendom, but this very same view was embraced as pious and holy by numerous Kabbalists and other Jewish religious thinkers.[[14]](#footnote-14) The fact that Jews were a tiny minority in Western Christendom is completely orthogonal to the question of the philosophical value of panentheism.

Jewish philosophy which reflects – in a manner as informed and unbiased as possible – on the unique features of Jewish letters and religion, would provide the most insightful and egalitarian contribution to a genuinely universal philosophical discourse.

Part 3: Desiderata

After discussing the nature of Jewish philosophy as *minority* philosophy in the previous two parts, we will now switch gears and turn to the rudimentary requirements from Jewish philosophy qua *philosophy*. In this part, I would like to suggest a few basic features which I believe are necessary for the flourishing of Jewish philosophy. Since these features are pretty much the very same features that are required for good philosophy overall, one could think it is redundant to present them at all. Unfortunately, some of these features are not always exhibited in the current literature, and therefore it should be valuable to review them here.

(*i) Open audience*. – Jewish philosophy should invite readers from all backgrounds, cultures, and religions. If – as I have argued – a major benefit of the philosophical exploration of minority cultures is the ability to reflect on the contingency of one own’s norms and unexamined assumptions, it goes without saying that those who are less informed about Jewish letters are likely to benefit the most from such an exploration. Yet, even for those who are at home in Jewish letters and cultures, a critical evaluation and questioning of the familiar is equally likely to bring about conceptual illumination of what we are normally used to accept as well known, or even obvious. Jewish philosophy should not remain a *mishpuche* (family) business.

*(ii) Conceptual accountability*. - Philosophy, unlike poetry, should strive for maximal clarity and transparency. Equivocations and nebulous language are frequently a virtue in poetry, but they are always, or almost always, a vice in philosophy. Obfuscations such as “*Das Nichts nichtet*” are really (attempts at) poetry,[[15]](#footnote-15) and should be evaluated through poetic norms. Frequently, the use of obfuscated language in philosophy is just a form of intellectual authoritarianism in which the author claims to be a Delphic genius commanding his readers to the role of servile guessers of the master’s intentions. Leaving aside the political abuse involved in such philosophical authoritarianism, obfuscations in philosophy frequently descend into brute nonsensical language in which all claims are equally sensible (or senseless). The proliferation of Delphic geniuses in some circles of contemporary philosophy created one of the most amusing spectacles in the history of (the attempts to write) philosophy. There is something noble about providing amusement to people, but amusement is one thing and philosophy another. And since the aims of philosophy are understanding and clarification, obfuscations undermine any prospect for progress it might have.

*(iii) Informed evaluation.* – Philosophy should be informed about its subject matter, e.g., a philosopher of mathematics should know at least some math, before he or she tells us what is the nature of mathematical entities or mathematical explanation. Similarly, a philosopher of religion should have a good grasp of religious texts and experiences, and if these texts and experiences vary significantly, she or he should have a good grasp of this variety.

The notion of the Essence of Judaism [*das Wesen des Judentums*] has been the subject of inquiry of quite a few modern Jewish thinkers. Unfortunately, many of these writers have had a very poor access to classical sources of Jewish letters. So much so, that at times one might have the impression that there is an *inverse* relation between an author’s knowledge of classical Jewish literature and the author’s willingness and readiness to announce the precise “essence of Judaism” (this should not take us by surprise, since obviously the more one knows about a certain subject matter, the more nuanced and careful one’s generalizations about this subject matter would be).

Here it might be useful to turn to the old parable of the team of blind zoologists who, following the examination of the different limbs of an elephant, each concluded with certainty that the animal in front of them was “clearly a snake,” “obviously a hippopotamus,” and “undoubtedly a rhino.” An attempt to point out the essence of a thing is likely to end in an embarrassing error if the knowledge one has of the subject matter is merely partial. Indeed, the more partial one’s knowledge of the subject matter is, the more likely one is to end up with an embarrassing error.

Rabbinic literature is a complex and sometimes highly abstract (yet precise) body of literature, and the acquisition of good knowledge of this literature requires a significant investment of many years of study. We all have our limitations, and for all I know, none of us is omniscient. Recognizing this fact should not stop us from engaging in philosophical inquiry (or even in attempting to point out the essence of the subject we inquire about), but rather, to the contrary, motivate us to learn more, *and* to be careful about determining essences.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Conclusion

In the second part of this chapter, I argued that a serious exploration of Jewish philosophy should avoid the common apologetic tendency in modern Jewish thought to present elements of Jewish culture and religion as mere variations on the standard topics of Protestant thought and philosophy of religion. If all Jewish philosophy can offer us is a mere application of the themes of Protestant thought to some rudimentary Jewish (usually Biblical) texts, then this kind of Jewish philosophy is indeed redundant: why should one engage with the epigons of Schleiermacher when one can read Schleiermacher himself?

An alternative model to this apologetic project could be subsumed under the slogan: *Dare to be yourself!* Instead of engaging in the futile discourse of whether Jewish culture is inferior or superior to other cultures (and thus continuing the theme of the hierarchy of cultures which dominated modern German thought), we should engage in a serious and unbiased study of elements of Jewish cultures and letters regardless of whether they seem at first natural and intuitive or not. Obviously, many counterintuitive views are also wrong, but their wrongness should be spelled out and clarified. Some views we are likely to encounter in classical Jewish letters would seem to us odd and counterintuitive, but upon reflection, we could not point out reasons that disqualify them, other than the fact they are a tiny minority view. Such “counterintuitive” views should be treated as genuine gems, because it is precisely when we encounter such counterintuitive views whose wrongness it is extremely hard to spell out, that real philosophy begins. In this sense, minority cultures can contribute immensely to a genuine universal philosophical discourse not by effacing themselves, but rather by daring to be what they are.

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1. “ ‘[A]nd he told Abram, the Hebrew [*ivri*]’ (Gen. 14:13): R. Yehuda Said: The entire world was on one side [*ever*], and Abram was on the other side [*ever*]” *Bereshit Rabbah*, 42:8. I would like to thank Zach Gartenberg, Warren Zev Harvey, Liam Haviv, Neta Stahl, and Jason Yonover for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. N. Kretzmann & E. Stump (eds.), *Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts. Volume One: Logic and the Philosophy of Language.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. N. Kretzmann, A Kenny, J. Pinborg & E. Stump (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100-1600* (published 1988). We will discuss this volume shortly. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A.S. McGrade, J. Kilcullen, & M. Kempshall (eds.), *Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts. Volume Two: Ethics and Political Philosophy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. R. Pasnau (ed.), *Cambridge Translations of Medieval Philosophical Texts. Volume Three: Mind and Knowledge.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The introductions to the three volumes do not make *any* reference or attempt to justify the exclusion of Islamic and Jewish authors. The editors seem to suffer from blissful blindness to the discord between the generality of the title of the series and the parochial restriction of the scope of the texts selected. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. N. Kretzmann, A Kenny, J. Pinborg & E. Stump (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy: From the Rediscovery of Aristotle to the Disintegration of Scholasticism, 1100-1600*, pp. 349 and 569, n.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Especially in the chapter on essence and existence. One must think it absurd to write a history of the essence/existence distinction without making Avicenna a main figure in this history, but in the context of this volume, even this manifest truth is not obvious. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the not particularly successful struggle of Arthur Hyman to include Jewish philosophy in the curriculum of medieval philosophy in the US, see the eulogy by Warren Zev Harvey: https://seforimblog.com/2017/02/dean-of-historians-of-jewish-philosophy/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. And, where there was no religion department or school, non-European thought was simply not studied at all. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I am not citing here any specific works because my intention is to discuss and criticize views rather than to target individual authors. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, Ak. 7:53, in Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Melamed, “Hermann Cohen, Spinoza, and the Nature of Pantheism.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Whether they constitute good poetry or bad poetry, I will leave for others to judge. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. It would also be helpful if we make clear (first for ourselves, but perhaps also to the reader), what we understand by ‘essence,’ i.e., whether we identify necessary and essential qualities, or alternatively, provide a logical space for *propria* (‘*Segulot’* in medieval Hebrew), namely, properties that are as necessary as the essence of a thing but distinct from that essence (as the ability to laugh in the case of human beings). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)