

Willi Goetschel, *The discipline of philosophy and the invention of modern Jewish thought*

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The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought succeeds on many levels, and succeeds, in large part, because it moves between these levels insightfully and coherently. Willi Goetschel explores the disciplining of philosophy in the modern period to argue that Jewish philosophy should be understood as a critical supplement that can steer philosophy away from a stultifying and deceptive universalism; he makes a much-needed contribution to the post-colonial critique of philosophy by showing how Jewish philosophers starting with Spinoza reconceptualize the relation between the particular and the universal; and with attention to the themes of “dialogic” and “messianism,” he traces and deconstructs conceptual binaries that have structured western philosophy and culture in the modern period, including philosophy and religion, modernity and tradition, Greek and Hebrew, west and non-west. Goetschel offers, in short, a potentially transformative reading of modern philosophy from the perspective of Jewish thought. Given the recent resurgence in interest in figures such as Spinoza and Rosenzweig and creative work by philosophers, theologians, and cultural critics on topics such as the relation between Judaism and Christianity, secularization, and political theology, it is a timely and important contribution.

It also is one that raises many questions. To start, just what is “Jewish” philosophy? For the most part, the names in Goetschel’s book are familiar—Spinoza, Mendelssohn, Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig—though Goetschel does throw in figures less well known—Margarete Susman and Hermann Levin Goldschmidt—and surprisingly—Heinrich Heine. Maimonides, Adorno, and Derrida, though not the subject of focused exegetical attention, shape some of Goetschel’s most basic ideas. But what makes these thinkers “Jewish”? Goetschel argues that it is not any specific “Jewish” content but rather a particular mode of marginal or supplementary thinking that attends to and

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works out the lacunae in dominant streams of modern philosophy. Most important, it shows how philosophical claims to universality are grounded in repressed, and especially in Christian, forms of particularity. Jewish philosophy thus is characterized by “a philosophical critique of the hegemonic discourse of philosophy, whose secularized claims they challenge as traces of a persistent theological hold” (p. 82).

After an opening chapter that lays out the project, Chapter Two focuses on Heine’s efforts to highlight “the theological underpinning of the traditional concept of reason, whose secularism remains a function of an exclusionary construction that depends on compliance with the Christian code that defines modern philosophy in ‘the West’” (p. 16). Although Heine is largely responsible for the figure of cultural opposition between the “Greeks” and the “Hebrews” that came to play such an important role in Nietzsche and others, Goetschel argues that Heine deploys the figure ironically to make a space for thinking a trajectory of philosophy originating in Jewish sources. Chapter Three continues to set the terms of the project with a historical look at past efforts to define Jewish philosophy, most of which, according to Goetschel, fail to explore or question philosophy’s institutional history and so buy into the discipline’s ahistorical tendencies. Chapters Four and Five examine this history through the work of Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig. In one way or another, each responds to the marginal site of Jewish thinking *vis-à-vis* the German university (Chapter Four) and with respect to the 20th century study of Judaism in the university and in the Jewish House of Learning, which serves for Goetschel as a critical supplement to the university (Chapter Five). Chapters Six and Seven explore, respectively, the work of lesser-known, post-Shoah Jewish thinkers Susman and Goldschmidt. Goetschel is particularly interested in how Susman reads the Book of Job as a messianic disruption that makes possible movement from suffering past into hopeful future. What Goetschel describes as a “post-contemporary” universalism informed by Jewish particularity comes into particularly sharp focus in the chapter on Goldschmidt’s dialogic approach to philosophy (already, of course, central to Buber, but, according to Goetschel, also anticipated in Spinoza and Mendelssohn). He contrasts Goldschmidt’s dialogic to Hegel’s dialectic, arguing that where the latter “integrates, incorporates, and streamlines particularly as it transforms it into a part of a whole into which it makes it fit,” Goldschmidt places but also, in a critical vein, “sets free” particularity and thus renounces mastery of the whole (p. 130).

With the second half of the book, Goetschl moves back in time to show how the themes and ideas he treats in the first half help us to re-read Spinoza and Mendelssohn. Chapter Eight explores Spinoza’s perspectivalism as a philosophically revolutionary mode of thinking the relation between part and whole. Chapter Nine puts Spinoza in the context of the broader Enlightenment and is not only the most historically interesting chapter of the book but also, with the chapter on Susman, the most succinct statement of Goetschel’s project. He explores the controversial place of Spinoza in Jewish philosophy to argue that the relationship between Jewish and mainstream philosophy is itself in question as Spinoza undermines the “normative hold of the traditional logic of the supremacy of the universal over the particular” (p. 162). Finally, Chapters Ten through Twelve focus on Mendelssohn as a “profoundly original” political philosopher. Situating Jews as an indigenous colony in Germany and in Europe more generally, Mendelssohn exerts critical leverage on German claims about sovereignty

and political legitimacy by showing them to be based on problematic conceptions of homogenous space and population.

As this brief synopsis indicates, Goetschel foregoes a chronological examination of modern Jewish philosophy. He describes his approach as one that “shuttles back and forth in time,” though it is more accurate to say that he charts out two trajectories, one moving from the institutionalizing of philosophy in the university in the 19th century, through the work of Cohen, Buber, and Rosenzweig to the post-Shoah thought of Susman and Goldschmidt, and the other moving from Spinoza to Mendelssohn. The point, for Goetschel, is to break from dominant stories of modern philosophy that he argues have obscured some of the most important contributions made by these early thinkers. Stylistically, this approach has some drawbacks. Having developed his main arguments in the first half of the book, Goetschel seems compelled in later chapters not just to identify and argue for the anticipations of these arguments in the earlier period, but to restate his main points over and over. Take this sentence, appearing in Chapter Nine: “This dialogical role that Jewish philosophy has come to play since the Enlightenment is not simply corrective but has become a fundamental part that constitutes philosophy as a critical project able to address its own limits productively” (p. 156). It is a useful summation of one of Goetschel’s main arguments, but by the time we read this, we have seen numerous versions of it already. It adds little and, more problematically, distracts the reader from his significant rereadings of Spinoza and Mendelssohn.

Nevertheless, this achronological reading of Jewish philosophy makes possible important and ambitious conceptual work. In particular, it helps Goetschel not only identify and explain but also illustrate the concept of the “messianic,” which, for him, is at the heart of modern Jewish philosophy. Most succinctly stated in Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, the messianic entails a critical, and a redemptive, standpoint “however minutely removed from the hold of existence (11), especially from historicisms that would freeze the past in a chain of natural and social causality and a religious apocalypticism that “knows” the future. In other words, messianism, on this reading, serves the critical function of keeping philosophy open to critical reconstellations of the past that allow moving creatively and freely into the future. Goetschel thus aligns himself with Jewish and other critics of historicism, for example in Rosenzweig and, more recently, Eric Santner, and with Derrida and others who have reflected profitably on the “inheritance” of tradition as a resource for creative thinking moving into the future. Goetschel’s achronological reading of Jewish philosophy exemplifies the kind of reconstellation necessary for creative and liberating engagement with tradition.

It also exemplifies a second crucial aspect of Jewish philosophy, the dialogical and post-contemporary universalism that makes philosophy genuinely critical. Goetschel argues that universalism as it has been conceptualized by the mainstream of western philosophy not only sets up a hierarchy that places the universal over the particular, but also represses the constitutive role that particularity plays in all universalisms. By contrast, Jewish philosophy is a philosophical and ethical universalism grounded *in* particularity. In dialogue, one declares oneself in one’s particularity as a condition of one’s relation to the other and to the whole. It is comparable, I’d suggest, to what Derrida calls the “impossible,” that is, a kind of horizon or orientation that opens all particulars to the unanticipatable, at once a recognition of one’s embeddedness in the

whole and a “promise of universal redemption in the name of the particular” (p. 223). Take Job’s dialogue with God, as Goetschel reads it in Susman. Here, the relation to God does not reveal to Job God’s “knowledge” of the cosmos and Job’s place in it. Rather, the relation is itself the revelation, a change of perspective, “wisdom” that enables Job to find in the particularity of his suffering the resources for a reconstellation of the past and thus a new future (p. 109).

Bound up closely with one another, the messianic and the dialogical are at the center of Goetschel’s effort to deconstruct the binaries that have relegated Jewish philosophy to a subordinate philosophical status—particular and universal, religion and philosophy, tradition and modernity, among others. Yet, does the disruption of these binaries come at the cost of reinforcing others? One effect of the book’s salutary effort to make explicit the Christian grounds (in secularized form) of western universalism is to obscure the ways in which Christian thought itself has been marginalized in the modern period, how, for instance, “theology” has been positioned as less “critical” than philosophy. It also leads him to oppose, rather uncritically, Jewish messianism to Christian “apocalyptic.” In both cases, “Christianity,” and particularly Christian “theology,” become the figures of discursive, critical, and historical closure (p. 102) that, unlike Jewish philosophy, cannot contribute to the critical supplementation of philosophy. But are all forms of apocalyptic thinking in Christianity “closed” and “deterministic” in the way Goetschel suggests? And what, exactly, makes Susman’s reading of Job, for example, both “religious” and “philosophical” but not “theological”?

We might also raise questions about Goetschel’s claim that it is the supplementary function, not the content, that makes a philosophy “Jewish.” If it is only a matter of supplementarity, what distinguishes Jewish from feminist, or African, or any other philosophy influenced by post-colonial and deconstructive methodologies? But perhaps supplementarity and a certain conceptual content, say messianism, have to go together. That is, for the kind of genuinely critical thinking Goetschel finds in his Jewish sources to be possible, the particular cannot simply be reduced to serving a function in relation to the larger whole. To do so would be to cancel out or sublimate Jewish philosophy. Goetschel wants to argue, however, that we can only understand the universal *through* the perspective of the particular. Here, the universal, to invoke another figure we might put at the margins of the already marginal discourse of Jewish philosophy, Stanley Cavell, is “acknowledged” in a way that keeps one grounded in the particular, that takes place in and through the declaration of particularity. There are points in the book, then, where Goetschel seems to lose the difficult balance required to maintain the perspective on the particular and universal for which he argues. Even so, he does a fine job of working through these extremely knotty issues and showing us the promise an engagement with Jewish philosophy holds for renewing philosophy.