Topics in Jewish philosophy

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Abstract: This essay introduces the present *Religious Studies Archives* issue on Jewish Philosophy. It aims to reconstruct from important articles of *Religious Studies* an overview of some of the major problems that Jewish philosophers throughout history have dealt with, and to shed light on the main concerns that underlie their philosophical investigations. My starting point will be a brief discussion of the nature and definition of Jewish philosophy. I proceed therefrom in presenting some major trends in Jewish philosophy through the lens of the selected articles.

In the history of philosophy, there is a constant repetition of the question of 'what is philosophy?' For many philosophers, the question itself constitutes one of philosophy's major inquiries which, like most philosophical inquiries, remains open. Yet the characteristic of philosophy as a methodical speculation about different aspects of reality and human experience is perhaps beyond debate. Medieval Jewish philosophers could not have agreed more. The prominent 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides implies this characteristic of philosophy as he justifies the reliance on the 'words of the philosophers' from other religious traditions, 'ancient and recent,' for the sake of 'the truth' (Raphael 2009, 5). For Maimonides and succeeding Jewish philosophers what matters is the truth, to which philosophy, unqualifiedly construed, is a substantive route.

Given this universalistic understanding of philosophy, what then makes a philosophy *Jewish*? The question of 'what is Jewish philosophy?' seems to presuppose that there is a branch of philosophy that has always maintained distinctive features which entail its characterization as Jewish. However, defending this presumption is no easy task. Daniel Frank, in his introduction to *The History of Jewish Philosophy*, points out that Jewish philosophy is a particularly 'academic discipline' whose 'invention' was occasioned by ideological motivations of the nineteenth-century Jewish academics (Frank and Leaman 1997, 2). Before that invention, the question of 'what is Jewish philosophy?' did not exist, simply because 'the subject did not exist,' and even any attempt to offer defining criteria for the subject would encounter difficulties.

One difficulty comes to the fore as we consider the intellectual tradition of medieval Jews. Was there a deliberately constructed *Jewish* philosophy in the Middle Ages? Answering this question in the positive would obviously clash with the fact that medieval Jewish thinkers did not identify themselves as specifically *Jewish* philosophers. However, their philosophical enterprise was not detached from Judaism either. Indeed,

medieval Jewish thinkers shared a tendency to philosophize about the precepts and directives of Judaism and, moreover, to use the Jewish tradition as a medium for philosophizing about the world and general matters (Rudavsky 2018, 8). On these considerations, some scholars have found it adequate to characterize their intellectual heritage as 'philosophy of Judaism' (Guttmann 1964; Frank and Leaman 1997, 3). This characterization finds support in the fact that the philosophical activities of medieval Jewish philosophers centred to a great extent, albeit not exclusively, on the question of the relationship between Judaism and science/philosophy, arguably with a view to demonstrating their congruence. Along these lines, some historians of philosophy adopt an essentialist approach, explaining that medieval Jewish philosophy consists particularly in the attempt to reconcile Jewish Scriptures with philosophy (Sirta 1990, 5).

Similarly, the question of 'what is *modern* Jewish philosophy' is not amenable to a straightforward answer for various reasons, some of which have to do with the tendency of some modern Jewish philosophers to separate Judaism from theoretical speculation and with the emergence of inter-religious pluralism inside Judaism. Famously, the nineteenth-century Jewish historian Isaac Husik remarks at the end of his *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* that 'there are Jews now and there are philosophers, but there are no Jewish philosophers and there is no Jewish philosophy' (Husik 1916, 432). Apart from Husik's sceptical view, scholars recognize the difficulties involved in defining modern Jewish philosophy and even constructing a unanimous list of modern Jewish philosophers. Yet this has not deterred attempts to delineate features and conduct systematic studies of modern Jewish philosophy. For these purposes, some scholars have adopted a 'pragmatic' criterion, which 'does not have to meet formal or substantive standards set in advance.' On this criterion, modern Jewish philosophy

> is the outcome of a multifaceted engagement between, on the one hand, thinking about issues relevant to understanding the Jewish condition or the meaning of Judaism and Jewish life, and, on the other hand, philosophical thinking that is indebted to and responds to the tradition of modern Western philosophy (Morgan and Gordon 2007, 5).

Having briefly articulated some of the theoretical issues involved in defining the nature and scope of Jewish philosophy, the remainder of this essay proffers selected articles on Jewish philosophy from the journal of *Religious Studies*. The articles are not selected with an essentialist view of Jewish philosophy in mind. In line with the pragmatic 'criterion,' I here introduce articles focusing on problems that have exercised Jewish philosophers throughout history in relation to the wider philosophical contexts with which they engaged. Some articles explore solutions to problems that are characteristic of monotheistic religions in general—but which are largely treated in the Jewish intellectual tradition in relation to Jewish Scriptures. Other articles deal with matters that are particular to Jewish religious and ideological concerns.

It is important to mention, lastly, that in selecting the articles, I have remained neutral to the religious affiliations of the authors. My aim is not to introduce Jewish

philosophy from a strictly Jewish perspective, but Jewish philosophy, irrespective of the religious or ideological affiliations of the scholar/philosopher engaged with the subject.

One problem that preoccupied monotheistic thinkers in the Middle Ages concerns the relation of human language to the true nature of Divine essence and attributes. From a philosophical perspective, the Supreme Divine Being is perfect and absolutely simple, which makes divine names and attributes that the Bible ascribes to God, let alone anthropomorphic descriptions, problematic. Since these attributes, as typical of human language, are embedded in the created world, they compromise the perfection and simplicity of God's essence. In the first article I select for this issue, 'Maimonides and Aquinas on the Names of God' (1987), Alexander Broadie discusses this problem through the lenses of Maimonides and Aquinas, both key authorities in their respective intellectual and religious contexts. Maimonides addresses this problem by arguing that all attributes and descriptions apply to God in the negative mode (*The Guide of the Perplexed* I:58). For Maimonides, names and attributes of God, including those expressing His existence, are equivocal and semantically vacuous, since there is no likeness between God and anything else. Nonetheless, they nourish our knowledge by helping us eliminate erroneous perceptions about God. Broadie notes that Maimonides's negative theology, though avoiding the implication of impairing divine perfection and simplicity, could lead to 'the brink of atheism' (160). Certainly, Maimonides entertains no doubt on the existence of God. However, within the framework of negative theology, His existence must be conceived of as unique and devoid of aspects of the created world.

Similar ambitions to avoid compromising God's perfection inform Aquinas's approach to divine names and attributes. Aquinas's solution, known as the 'analogical way,' suggests that human knowledge does not completely fail to signify God. However, it offers an 'imperfect' signification, inasmuch as it derives from limited conceptions of God's simplicity that are entrenched in speculations of the created world. Analogical explanations are essentially helpful for forming conceptions about God, yet they are conducive to imperfect understandings, hence inadequate linguistic expressions. Although this approach was intended to be a middle-ground solution between the negative and affirmative theologies, it eventually drifts towards the negative way. As Broadie advances, the *via negativa* of Maimonides and the *via analogica* of Aquinas were not distinct doctrines, for the latter considers attributes such as wisdom, power and goodness to be identical with each other and with God, thereby reducing them to one mode that is identical with God's unknowable and inexpressible essence.

Difficulties associated with human endeavour to apprehend God are not limited to His attributes and names, but extend, more acutely, to His conduct. One obstinate difficulty arises from the tension between the traditional conception of the deity as a providential God that metes out justice and the observed arbitrariness of evil and suffering in the world. The Bible offers a vivid portrait of human's anxiety over the randomness of suffering through the narrative of Job. Since righteousness does not protect from suffering and wickedness does not conflict with prosperity, hopes in God's providential care vanish. Job's fierce complaints to God reflect this state of despair.

In 'Maimonides, Aquinas and Gersonides on Providence and Evil' (1984), Burrell explores the philosophical engagements of Maimonides, Aquinas and Gersonides (Levi Ben Gershon 14th century, Provence) with the book of Job, focusing specifically on their viewpoints on the scope and nature of divine knowledge. The overarching problems that underlie the discussions of the three thinkers can be stated as follows: *if* God really knows human individuals and events, the fact that He does not interfere to remove evil and protect righteous individuals from suffering debunks our religious beliefs about His omnipotence and justice, or even existence.

Burrell expounds Maimonides's agnostic account of divine knowledge, which stresses the distinctiveness of God's knowledge from any form of human knowledge and its inaccessibility to human perception. Maimonides sets forth this agnostic account, while at the same time maintaining that God knows all existents and events, including future events. Things and events are known to God, as Maimonides explains, in the manner that an artifact is known to an artisan, i.e., independently of and prior to their occurrence. Moreover, God's mode of knowing is creative, that is, things 'follow upon His knowledge, which preceded and established them as they are' (*Guide* III:21, p. 485). Although Maimonides uses an analogy, his ultimate purpose is not to state that there is a similarity between human and divine knowledge, but to stress that the latter is distinct from our knowledge of things. Eventually, Maimonides offers an argument to the effect that God's mode of knowing lies entirely beyond human comprehension. This agnostic stance elicited the critique of Gersonides who, in response, undertakes to establish a rigorous philosophical account of divine knowledge. His account, however, carries within it the implication that God does not know particulars as particulars, for it limits His knowledge to the intelligible ordering of things.

Using the same analogy of the artisan-artifact, Aquinas emphasises that God's knowledge, which is all-encompassing, is not derived from things themselves, but relates to things as their cause. Aquinas, moreover, explains that God knows the future through a mode of knowing that is absolutely distinct from the mode of knowing in humans: knowing from eternity. As Burrell suggests, Aquinas introduces the latter element, which is absent from Maimonides's account of divine knowledge, with a view to ruling out the implication that God's knowledge of the future eliminates the contingency of things. The distinction between knowing in time and knowing from eternity is meant to stress that God knows future contingencies as 'happening' not as 'what-will-happen,' which means that things are never future to God, but present (344-5). It remains true, however, as Burrell maintains, that this mode of divine knowing is entirely obscure to human comprehension, which refers us back to agnosticism. And this crystalizes from Burrell's analysis as an unavoidable obstacle to human efforts to apprehend and articulate the subtilties of God's knowledge and His relation to the universe and human beings (further on this point, see Burrell 1986). Yet, for Burrell, analogies remain a helpful means to display what we cannot express and to stress the otherness of divine knowledge.

The problem of evil and suffering is a persistent problem that Judaism shares with Christianity not only on a conceptual basis, but also on scriptural grounds. For Jewish and Christian thinkers, the book of Job constitutes a significant religious platform for

exploring the multi-faceted difficulties involved in comprehending God's justice and relation to the world. It is important to mention that the narrative of Job also appears in the Quran—though admittedly less comprehensively and expressively than in the Bible—which explains why the suffering of Job has become a fairly customary point of departure for philosophical investigations on the problem of evil in the Abrahamic traditions. With this in mind, an article that tackles the problem of evil and suffering by engaging analytically with the book of Job is worthy of consideration within the scope of the present *Archives* issue. I thus include here Wesley Morrison's article 'God's Answer to Job' (1996), especially that the article formulates its conclusion along the line of a Jewish Hasidic saying.

In this interesting article, Morrison debates the imports of God's answer to Job as defined by many contemporary philosophers. The central question concerns the relevance of God's answer to Job from the whirlwind during the Theophanic experience: how could that answer have served to mitigate Job's suffering and feeling of injustice? From the point of view of the 'Standard Interpretation' of many 'religiously committed' philosophers, the Theophany offered Job a reflection on the reality of human cognitive limitation and ignorance. In the case of Job, ignorance relates to either unnoticed sins, a hidden good or a 'Moral Order at work in the universe' that parallels the natural order celebrated in the Theophany (346). On this interpretation, Job's dramatic shift to a humble submission derives from a recognition of his ignorance in the face of God, hence incapacity to challenge Him.

For Morrison this interpretation reveals a striking misunderstanding of Job's insisting complaint and God's answer, neither of which confirms Job's sinfulness nor speaks directly of a Moral Order or unknown good reasons for suffering. On the whole, the Theophanic speeches addressed by God to Job state nothing explicitly reassuring in an imminent providential care that would induce hope in Job. Yet this observation does not promote the interpretation proposed by Stephen Mitchell, namely that the 'Theophany should be read as a wholesale rejection of Moral Order' (351). On this interpretation, Job finds a psychological comfort upon recognizing that the world is not made to be a Moral Order. When Job refrained from applying human norms onto the world and began to speculate in a wider context, he obtained a sense of the magnificence of the world and the comparatively insignificance of his loss. The outcome is a content acceptance of 'God's will' and God's world' as it is (352). Morrison finds Michell's interpretation unhelpful because it neglects explaining how detaching God from moral categories and responsibilities provides a good understanding of the world or the point behind evil.

Morrison concludes by pointing out the impracticability of a unilateral reading of the book of Job. Keeping in mind the tension in the Hebrew conception of God as being, on the one hand, transcendent and utterly inaccessible, and, on the other, loving and involved, Morrison underlines a two-dimensional ethos of God's answer which he fascinatingly explains through the saying of the Hasidic teacher Rabbi Bauman: 'A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, 'I am but dust and

ashes.' On the other, 'for my sake the world was created'(356). The book of Job tries to teach us how to use the two stones together.

More favourably than the drama of the book of Job, other scriptural reports about God's interaction with man, such as those about the Exodus and Sinaic revelation, are hope-inspiring. The next article I select for this *Archives* issue is David Hartman's 'Sinai and Exodus: Two grounds for Hope in the Jewish Tradition' (1978). Hartman distinguishes between two kinds of hope, 'halakhic' and 'radical,' in relation to different messianic ideas, 'restorative' and 'utopian,' and traces their roots in 'historic memories' of the Exodus and Sinaic revelation. The former type of hope consists in a belief in progress and calls for development in one's action to achieve certain goals. Accordingly, sings of redemption are to be found in the progressive establishment of better conditions. The latter type of hope consists in belief in salvation that lends itself to 'waiting' (374). This kind of hope cherishes an 'apocalyptic' vision of redemption where God's promise of salvation plays the central role (375). Hartman finds echoes of these types of hope in the writings of two major medieval Jewish thinkers, namely Maimonides and Nahmanides.

Instead of anticipating the end of human history, Maimonides envisions that the distinctive feature of the messianic era will be exceptional socio-political conditions, the presence of which will provide the leisure necessary for fulfilling the intellectual and spiritual demands of the core event in Jewish history, the Sinaitic covenant, culminating in the intellectual love of God (further on this point see Hartman 1976). This messianic outlook conforms to the mode of hope evoked by the narrative of the Sinaic revelation. The giving of the commandments creates a sense of responsibility and confidence in one's ability to pursue certain goals, whilst recognizing his limitation and finitude. Hope, as Hartman explains, is bound into the obligation of the Torah. Nahmanides's messianic outlook, by contrast, anticipates an extraordinary solution, the emergence of a new history where man will be fully redeemed such that the Torah will be inscribed in his heart, and hence the tension between good and evil, and reason and inclination, will be abolished. All this essentially depends on God's will and intrusion in history, regardless of human act. This apocalyptic vision of redemption can have its source in and be buttressed by the memories of God's stepping into history and miraculously delivering the Israelites, as recounted in the Tradition about the Exodus.

Extending the discussion to the contemporary world, Hartman considers potential implications of the Exodus and Sinai paradigms of hope for human conduct and attitude and assesses their relevance to different religious sensibilities and philosophical outlooks. The two paradigms, Hartman remarks, may not remain wholly disconnected; they could be integrated to strengthen a person in different historical situations and hardships. Just as 'the passionate sobriety' of Maimonides's model with its emphasis on sustaining the struggle for better conditions and justice, nourishes moral responsibility and resilience to despondency, appealing to memories of 'mighty myths' can effectively provide comfort in times of great distress (386-7).

The theological models of hope inspired by the narratives of Exodus and Sinai and their potential role in shaping man's psychology and conduct direct us to explore the relevance of Jewish Law (*halakhah*) to other profound dimensions of human life. A major

concern for Jewish philosophers in the medieval period was to determine the significance of religious rituals and laws to the realization of man's ultimate goal. Maimonides, like many medieval Aristotelians, understood the ultimate goal of man to be a form of intellectual perfection. This goal is primarily realizable by means of philosophical speculation and reasoning. Religious Law is essential for this purpose inasmuch as it furnishes the prerequisite conditions for pursuing knowledge, welfare of body and society. In the Renaissance, Jewish philosophers proposed variable accounts of religious Law in accordance with contemporary cultural and intellectual ideals. In the next article I select for this *Archives* issue, 'The Power of Rituals: Mendelssohn and Cassirer on the Religious Dimension of the *Bildung*' (2014), Anne Pollok assesses the undertaking of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) to expound Jewish ceremonial laws in light of the framework of the Enlightenment's ideal of self-formation (*Bildung*), 'the enlightened way of becoming a self' (447). For Mendelssohn this ideal addresses rational and practical aspects, 'enlightenment' and 'culture' respectively (447). It requires, in addition to enhancing rationality, the engagement with the community and understanding our historical and traditional backgrounds, including religion, practically through hermeneutics. Yet it is admissible that hermeneutics is likely to lead to misrepresenting or misusing the signs of religion. Mendelssohn, Pollok argues, avoids these pitfalls by offering an account of religion as 'ritual.'

Pollok explores Mendelssohn's view of Judaism as a 'law-guided' (*halakhic*) religion (450). The essence of Judaism is that it is a 'pure revelation of law' that enhances 'culture' by strengthening 'historical truths' (448). Religion fulfils this purpose only if members of the community take an active role in vivifying these historical truths and the ceremonial laws associated with them. Central to Mendelssohn's account is a division between 'the language of writing' and 'the language of symbolic action' (449). Understanding the latter, to which ceremonial laws belong, consists not in the interpretation of their written formulas but in producing their 'meaning through performance' and actively engaging with them in a community. In this way, the spirit of the laws remains uninterrupted by personal predispositions and the misunderstandings that often accompany the interpretation of the written language.

This view comes with a paradox as we consider Mendelssohn's emphasis that the proper realization of ceremonial laws demands, instead of gratuitous obedience, free interpersonal interpretive practices based on 'the believer's own interpretation' and in relation to their understanding in 'the believer's community' (454). Mendelssohn emphasises this while at the same time maintaining that the essence of revelation remains unchanged. Pollok proposes to offer a refined reading of this part of Mendelssohn's account of rituals through the lens of Ernest Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in particular its reflection on 'the dialogical structure' of the Jewish rituals and its role in saving the rituals from 'pure dogmatism,' allowing them to 'function as ethical standards' (454).

Modern and contemporary Jewish philosophers have continued to explore different aspects of Judaism and Scripture and expound them against the background of current philosophical outlooks. Revelation is a central concept to Judaism. In a very

significant sense, it marks a certain relation between God and human beings. How does this relation take place and what is its nature are perennial questions in philosophical discussions. The prominent Israeli philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965), considered one of the most important Jewish existentialists, introduces a dialogical conception of revelation, an essential element of his philosophy of *I-Thou*. The next paper I select for this *Archives* issue, Steven Katz's 'Dialogue and Revelation in the Thought of Martin Buber' (1978), offers a critical reading of Buber's philosophy of *I-Thou* and its related notions of dialogue and revelation.

Katz practically introduces the basic features of *I-Thou* by contrasting it with *I-It* (I, Thou, and It are variables that signify relational experiences between individuals, animate objects and God). In Buber's thought, the term *I-It* refers to a relation between the 'self' and the object of experience that parallels what is known in 'usual philosophical language' as the subject-object relation. Characteristically, *I-It* is an 'impersonal' relation between the knower and the object of experience. This relation yields indirect-mediated and objective knowledge. Moreover, *I-It* is 'a mechanistic model of relationship,' since it operates under 'causal' and 'spatio-temporal' laws (58). *I-Thou*, by contrast, is not a subject-object relationship; both members of the relation retain their 'subjectivity' in the dialogical encounter and each is aware of the 'other' as a 'subject' (59). This relation lies beyond the domain of causal and spatio-temporal laws where other conditions are operative. *I-Thou* knowledge is immediate and direct, and although it is not objective, it affords 'ontological certainty' about 'the foundations of one's life' (60).

Katz illustrates that Buber understands and elaborates the man-God relation, including revelation, in terms of *I-Thou* dialogical relation. The implication of this 'inter-subjective dialogical model' of revelation is that revelation emerges as 'contentless,' since this relation cannot be translated (60). Moreover, it situates God, the *Absolute Thou*, beyond logic and language, limiting man's knowledge of Him to the 'existential act of relation' in which God can only be 'addressed,' not 'defined' (61). Katz offers a systematic critique of this model of revelation. His main point of contention is that Buber's emphasis on the 'a-temporal,' 'a-spatial,' non-empirical,' and 'non-sensual' nature of revelation relegates it to 'empty abstractions' and precludes any meaningful understanding of the revelation's dialogical encounters (65).

Like most religions, Judaism has always striven for a rational justification. In different historical and intellectual contexts, many Jewish philosophers and theologians have taken a great interest in the question of the relation of Judaism to reason and attempted to demonstrate the compatibility of their faith with reason, for either purely philosophical or apologetic purposes. Along with this endeavour comes the need to define Judaism and the basic requirements for a person to be a Jew. In the last paper I select for this *Archives* issue, 'The Rational Defensibility of Being a Traditional Religious Jews' (1999), Joshua Golding undertakes to pin down a definition and a rational defence of being a traditional religious Jew in the light of contemporary debates of Philosophy of Religion on the relation of Reason to Faith.

In defining what a Jew is, Golding acknowledges the disputable nature of the subject. However, he affords his definition legitimacy by emphasising its rootedness in

classical Jewish sources. On this definition, a traditional religious Jew is one who 'pursues the goal of attaining or maintaining a certain kind of good relation with a certain kind of God in a certain kind of way'(393). Being 'traditional' presupposes that the person espouses a traditional understanding of the main three notions of that goal: God, the good relation, and the way in which that relation is attained and maintained. From a traditional prospective, God is the 'Supreme Being' that uniquely enjoys certain metaphysical traits, such as being uncreated, eternal and self-sufficient. That Being is also the 'Supreme person,' in the sense of being intelligent and free (395). A good relation with God is an 'interpersonal relation,' one that is characterized by 'mutual recognition' and 'love' and which reaches fullness on the communal level (396). Traditionally, the revelation of the Torah to the community of Israel is conceived of as the most vivid expression of such a relation. And thus the 'way' a traditional Jew attains and maintains the relation with God is by observing the Torah.

All this presumes the commitment of the traditional religious Jew to at least two basic beliefs. However, whilst in the processes of pursuing the designated goal, belief could legitimately vary in its degree of confidence. A traditional religious Jew, as Golding argues, 'is rationally committed to believe there is a (at least) a live possibility' 1) that 'God exists' (402), and 2) that 'God has given the Torah to the Jewish people and the Torah applies to all Jews throughout generations' (402). Moreover, a traditional religious Jew is 'rationally committed to having a belief in the live possibility of any propositions' that logically follow from these propositions (404).

On these criteria, Golding proceeds to argue for the rational defensibility of being a traditional Jew. In this connection, he importantly stresses the distinction between saying that a position is 'rationally compelling,' that is, 'any rational being can adopt' it, and that it is 'rationally defensible'(405). To rationally defend a position is to provide a supportive argument for it and/or rebut a criticism on it, occasionally by appealing to experiences that are not accessible to all people and assumptions that are 'intuitively plausible to some people but not to others' (405). It is the target of Golding then to argue that for some it is rationally defensible to be a traditional religious Jew, a target that he carries out by demonstrating the coherence of the foregoing concepts, employing both cognitive and pragmatic arguments (Golding extends this approach to other theistic religions, see Golding 2003).

The authors of the foregoing selection of articles offer profound insights into questions and problems that have occupied Jewish philosophers throughout history. I have selected the articles with a view to covering different intellectual periods and a variety of topics in Jewish philosophy from back and recent issues of the journal of *Religious Studies*. Other *Religious Studies* articles on Jewish philosophy are worthy of special attention: Joseph Stern's 'Modes of Reference in the Rituals of Judaism' (1987), Charles W. Kegley's 'Martin Buber's Ethics and the Problem of Norms' (1969), Samuel Lebens's 'God and His Imaginary Friends: a Hassidic Metaphysics' (2015), and Jung H. Lee's 'Abraham in a Different Voice: Rereading Fear and Trembling with care' (2001).

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