

# <sup>1</sup>What is Jewish Philosophy?

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## Introduction

There are two senses in which we can ask this question. One sense is to ask if such a thing as Jewish philosophy actually exists, and if there is not rather a contradiction between and holding apart these two spiritual disciplines, Judaism and philosophy. If this is so, it would mean that regardless of a Jew's erudition, high intelligence and logical skills, as a Jew affirming Judaism, the Jew cannot at the same time claim to a philosopher; just as it would also mean, from the side of philosophy, that no matter how personally sympathetic or tolerant a philosopher may be or want to be, a philosopher cannot at once be a philosopher and a Jew, cannot affirm philosophy and Judaism at the same time. One thinks here of the Jew Benedict Spinoza, who was born Jewish and never converted to another religion, and hence from a traditional Jewish point of view remained all his life a Jew, but whose philosophy, which was antithetical to Judaism and indeed misrepresented and attacked Judaism, was in no way consistent with Judaism. So according to the first sense of our question, Spinoza would be a philosopher, but not a Jew, except in name only.

The other sense of the question affirms that there is such a thing as Jewish philosophy and asks what is it, what are its defining characteristics, who are its representatives and what did they think. So Moses Mendelssohn, for instance, contemporary and friend of Immanuel Kant, and contrary to Spinoza an apologist of Judaism and Enlightenment thinking, was, according to this view, both a philosopher and a Jew at the same time.

We shall see, I hope, that both of these senses make sense. Accordingly, the present paper is divided into two sections. The first raises the question of the possibility, or rather the impossibility of Jewish philosophy. The second examines the actuality of Jewish philosophy.

Both sections are overly abbreviated, and neither covers its terrain fully. So I look forward to your questions afterwards.

Even before turning to these two sections, I want first to present a certain spiritual-chronological framework within which, because it is broad enough, we can better understand both the impossibility and the actuality of Jewish philosophy.

### **Historical-Philosophical Excursus**

When we speak of “philosophy” in a precise sense, we are referring to a spiritual development of the West which began with the ancient Greeks in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. No doubt the rest of the world follows various spiritual paths, and some of those paths include elements of philosophy, but philosophy in the precise sense began in ancient Greece. It began and continues as a discipline of Reason. It distinguishes knowledge, truth and science from opinion, belief and mythology. On this basis it distinguishes between the real, which is rational, and mere appearance, which is not. And, importantly, it makes these distinctions based in reasoning, argumentation, deduction, logic, and based in evidence. The true world, in other words, is the world of scientific knowledge, not the world of mythology, Olympian gods, inspiring Homeric narratives, or common sense and wishful thinking. The essence of ancient Greek philosophy, and of all philosophy, is the quest for truth through knowledge, i.e., propositions validated by reason and/or evidence. In a word, it is science.

You are no doubt familiar with some philosophical-chronological periodizations of the West. Usually three periods are distinguished: the ancient Greco-Roman period; the medieval Christian period; and the modern period of modern science, Enlightenment and industrialization. Philosophers, seeking the truth, try to find the deeper reasons or logic of these historical differences. Martin Heidegger, for instance, saw shifts in the *essence* of entire worldviews: being for the ancients, God for the medievals, and humanity for us moderns. Ontology, theology and humanism. The philosopher Hegel saw the dialectical self-development of Reason, from consciousness to self-consciousness to absolute truth. Today I want you to consider another less known chronological-spiritual periodization of the West. It

was proposed by the scholar Henry Austryn Wolfson (1887-1974), who was a Professor of History at Harvard University and founder there of the first Jewish Studies center in the United States.

For Wolfson the development of the West manifests the basic encounter and conflict between the *Reason* of the Greeks, i.e., the freedom of scientific knowing, “Athens,” on the one side, and the *Revelation* of the Jews, i.e., ritual and ethical obedience to biblical prophecy, “Jerusalem,” on the other. So, from this perspective, the ancient period is defined not by being or consciousness, as with Heidegger and Hegel, but by the apartness of Athens and Jerusalem, two civilizations unaware of one another, each developing according to its own telos, one toward scientific freedom the other toward ethical obedience. The medieval period begins when these separate worldviews are brought into harmony, which for Wolfson occurs first with the Jew Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 – 50CE). Philo accepted both Greek reason and Jewish revelation and brought them into harmony by means of *allegory*: the Bible, so he argued, is an allegory of Reason. Philo was a follower of Plato, a Neo-Platonist, but eventually, when translations became available, later medieval thinkers came to accept Aristotle as the greatest of the Greek philosophers. Thus the culmination of the medieval period, spiritually, arrives for Muslims with Averroes (1126-1198), for Jews with Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), and for Christians with Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), because each of these religious thinkers created brilliant systems of thought which integrated the philosophy of Aristotle with their respective religious traditions. Finally, for Wolfson the modern period of the West begins with Benedictus Spinoza (1632-1677), who destroys the medieval harmony in the name of modern mathematical science, science as the whole truth, rejecting religion as ignorance and falsehood. So, for Wolfson: ancient world, science and religion separate; medieval world, harmonization; and modern world, science and only science.

With Wolfson’s periodization in mind, I think you can see how I can answer our original question in two different ways. Jewish philosophy is impossible if one is a modern, since scientific knowledge excludes religious ignorance. Jewish philosophy is actual, however, if one is a medieval, because the two can be harmonized. But we are not medievals, we have accepted modern science. So, how are we moderns able to endorse the existence of Jewish

philosophy without mutilating both Judaism and philosophy? This is the question of our first section.

### **The Possibility of Jewish Philosophy**

Let us ask more closely why we moderns think there is an incompatibility between “Jewish” and “philosophy”? The answer lies in the Enlightenment, in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). In his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant once and for all refuted all possible “rational” proofs for the existence of God. To believe in God after Kant would only be possible based in faith, not reason. The medievals, who had not read Kant, still believed they could rationally prove God’s existence. Kant shows they were wrong. His refutations alone make a philosopher’s commitment to rationality and a Jew’s commitment to Judaism incompatible. A reasonable person, a philosopher, has no reason to believe God exists. There is no logic or evidence supporting such a belief. So, if one believes in God, as presumably a Jew must, one can no longer also declare oneself reasonable, i.e., a philosopher.

But there is more at work, something much larger, in the destruction of the medieval harmony between religion and philosophy than Kant’s refutation of all the rational proofs for God’s existence. Modern science is a very different science than classical and medieval science. In a certain sense, from the perspective of modern science classical and medieval sciences are no really sciences at all. The difference revolves around the idea of *telos*, purpose, aim. Classical and ancient science did not know rationally, did not know the cause of things, unless it knew them in terms of a multilayered notion of causality. To know something meant to know its *efficient*, its *formal*, its *material* and its *final* cause. Let us look only at efficient and final causality.

*Efficient* causality means knowing the prior cause, the impetus. One billiard ball moves because another has hit it. The sound we hear comes from the trumpet. The trumpet makes the sound because air is being blown through it. Etc. Final cause, in contrast, means knowing something purpose, its end, its *telos*. I know what an acorn is when I realize that its purpose is to produce an oak tree. The oak tree, tall and stately, is the end, purpose, goal of the acorn.

Etc. The difference between modern science and pre-modern science is that modern science eliminates knowledge of final causes from what it takes to be scientific knowledge. All I need to know about the acorn is that it is part of the life-cycle another party of which is a fully grown oak tree, no more, no less. The fully grown oak tree is not the aim of the acorn, nor is the acorn the aim of the oak tree; they are simply part of line of efficient causality, prior causes caused by prior causes and so on. Modern science, in a word, does not tell you the why of things; it tells you the how, how this or that came about, how something can be produced or constructed. And this limitation to efficient causality has made modern science – quantitative, analytical science - far more powerful than pre-modern qualitative science, as the production of atomic bombs and the promise of genetic engineering have made abundantly clear.

What, you may be asking, has any of this to do with our question about the possibility of Jewish philosophy? It has everything to do with it. If, as pre-modern science believed, the universe itself is direct by final causes, that is to say, if the universe by itself has aims, purposes, goals, then it can easily be made compatible with a religious consciousness which also affirms aims, purposes, goals, and does so in the name of God, in the name of God's will, His Providence. Now we can see why the greatest medieval philosophers, Muslim, Jewish and Christian, were so enamored of Aristotle, and were able so seamlessly, as it were, to harmonize religion and science. Both believe in final causes. One calls them natural, the other calls them divine. So harmonizing the two is a relatively simple matter, as Philo saw from the start, of saying that the divine purposes are nothing other than the natural purposes. So when Aristotle declares the purpose of the universe to be "thought thinking itself," as he does, then Muslim, Jewish and Christian philosophers have no trouble declaring their agreement, declaring, that is to say, that "thought thinking itself," the final purpose of the universe, is nothing other than the mind of God. This is exactly what they all said, and exactly what enabled them to say it as religious persons and as scientists, without incompatibility, without contradiction.

So, contrariwise, when modern science eliminates final causality from science, and declares it sheer ignorance, the harmonization of religion and science which prevailed throughout the medieval period, and made Islamic philosophy, Jewish philosophy, and Christian philosophy possible, comes to an end. Spinoza knew this built his entire philosophy upon it.

Henceforth the religious worldview, whereby the universe is following and fulfilling God's command, a view basically teleological, is now completely ridiculous from a scientific, philosophic point of view, which has eliminated teleology from genuine knowledge. So, Jewish philosophy is no longer possible, and really never was.

Let us now look at the same question of the possibility of Jewish philosophy from a slightly different angle, one which will prove, as we shall see, less hostile to it.

Philosophy, as we know, is a basic commitment to reason. Etymologically the word "philosophy" comes from a combination of two Greek words, "love" or "friendship" (*philia*) and "wisdom" (*sophia*) – it is a "love of wisdom." The wisdom it loves, however, because it is attached to reasoning, is nothing esoteric or mystical but rather is universal and open to all inquirers. No doubt here lies the reason that philosophy from the start conceived itself as equivalent to scientific knowing, knowledge based in argument and evidence. In this way, according to this self-definition, it was strikingly able to oppose the arbitrariness of myth, the deceptions of rhetoric, and the ignorance of mere opinion. These are powerful benefits of construing philosophical wisdom as scientific knowledge. Nonetheless, even if knowledge is a part of wisdom, wisdom, for its part, is not unequivocally the same or equal to knowledge. From out of this gap, as we shall see, there might emerge the resources for a rapprochement between Judaism and philosophy.

Judaism is not simply a philosophy, nor is it exactly a religion, if by religion one means an obligatory adherence to a set of beliefs or dogmas. It is a way of life, the way Jews live. Though as soon as it encountered philosophy it has been in dialogue with philosophy, it has never, unlike philosophy, reduced itself to knowledge, scientific or otherwise. We can say that Jewish life is particular and philosophy is universal, but this tells us very little, especially if the life of Jews, or the essential character of the life of Jews, is one that others too can live. Nonetheless, it does seem that a Jew living the Jewish way of life affirms, in thought and action, particular ways of being that philosophy, as a path of universality has no similar obligation to affirm. Traditional Jews do not eat pork. Philosophers have no dietary restrictions. They would consider the prohibition of pork to be arbitrary. And of course it is arbitrary, but it is also, or was traditionally, an inescapable part of the Jewish way of life. So, there again we come to the

problem with even the possibility of Jewish philosophy: philosophical or scientific knowledge applies to everyone, Judaism only applies to Jews. No doubt parts of Judaism apply to everyone, for instance, prohibitions against murder, theft, or lying. But other parts, for instance observance of Saturday as a Sabbath, or the complicated kosher dietary restrictions; these make sense and are obligatory only if one is Jewish. They are not, not even from the Jewish perspective, universal truths. Jews, for instance, as I have said, don't eat pork, but they have no problem with non-Jews eating pork. There is nothing wrong with eating pork, unless one is a Jew. So there is the problem: philosophy is for everyone, while Judaism is for Jews, a particular way of life, not a set of true propositions.

Jews are like Indians or Japanese in this regard. If you were to ask what the religion of the Japanese is, there is no good answer. The best answer, as far as I have been able to figure it out, is not "Shinto," a word one still finds in World Religions textbooks, but rather the way of life of the Japanese, just as Judaism is the way of life of Jews. I am not being facetious, nor, I hope, circular either. The spirituality of Jews, Japanese, Indians, Chinese, and many other peoples, is not reducible to definitions, a set of rituals or beliefs, adherence to a theology, or even to "spirituality," for that matter, that is to say, to whatever it is that Christians have called "religion," but really having only their Christianity in mind.

Now if we take another step and ask what it is to live as a Jew, what is the Jewish way of life, our answer is far thicker, far more complex, for messier, than what has been called "religion." Here there are no definitions, but at best family resemblances, a certain style of being, a distinctive more or less subtle manner of bringing together all that makes for a fully human life. So being-Japanese means some or all of the following: a shared history, the Japanese language, calligraphy, ways of dressing, ways of preparing and eating food, tatami mats, Kabuki, tea, Geishas, Samurai, Cherry blossoms, bowing, simplicity, and not some "spirituality" reducible to home shrines, ancestor worship, demonology, and the like which resemble what Christians generally means by "religion." The same applies to Judaism and Jewry, to the Jewish life of Jews. They are constituted not by theology, rituals, beliefs, and the like, but include a long history beginning with the Bible, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Exodus from Egypt, prophets, kings, the Sanhedrin and two Temples in Jerusalem,

subjection by Rome, diaspora, Talmud, Ghettos, Holocaust, modern State of Israel, Hebrew, Aramaic, Ladino, Yiddish languages, Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud, the list goes on and on, and little more than a list, listing, is adequate here. Judaism is not a philosophy, not a set of ideas, and not a set of rituals and beliefs, not a religion. As with the Japanese, Indians, Chinese, Persian/Iranians, Jews are part of a distinctive civilization, with all its layers of social, political, cultural, intellectual and spiritual life colored Jewishly.

Now from this point of view, Jewish philosophy is at once impossible and necessary. On the one hand, it is impossible because philosophy as scientific knowing is universal, while Judaism as civilization is particular. Knowledge and science cannot be limited by such particularity. So as a scientist, as a philosopher, one cannot also be a Jew. On the other hand, insofar as Judaism is a civilization, then of course there must be Jewish philosophers, because civilization includes philosophy, includes science, even if they are not deeply colored, or colored at all by the particularity of Judaism. Still, there is something acutely dissatisfying about this “solution.” This is because while it seems to make Jewish philosophers necessary, insofar as civilization includes philosophy, it still leaves open whether such philosophers are able to integrate the Jewish way of being with philosophy. Surely a civilization must also include knowledge of mathematics, physics, chemistry, but that does not make mathematics, physics or chemistry somehow nationalist, Jewish, or Chinese, or Indian. So our solution is only an apparent one, really little more than a play on words.

But there is something more, something decisive, about philosophy that we have yet to make explicit, though I have hinted at it. I have already said that while knowledge is part of wisdom, wisdom is not reducible to knowledge. Because of its attachment to reason, to argument and evidence, one can see why historically philosophy has overwhelmingly favored defining itself exclusively in terms of scientific knowledge. But there is no inner necessity for this. Wisdom could be something else. Two alternatives have proposed themselves from the very start of philosophy. One is *aesthetics*, that reality is best grasped as imaginative creativity, and therefore that the aesthetic is deeper, more real, or more beautiful, and the true source of scientific knowledge. Precisely this reading of philosophy has been affirmed by certain ancient Greek sophists and in the modern period by Schelling, Bergson, Nietzsche and Heidegger, to



name only the most prominent names. The other reading of wisdom broader than knowledge is the *ethical*, the claim that the “better than being” has priority over being and knowledge, that philosophic wisdom deals first and most deeply with the imperatives of good and evil, of justice and injustice. Such a view was in fact affirmed by Socrates among the ancient Greek, and in the modern period by Kant and Emmanuel Levinas.

Considered from this point of view, freed of the interpretation of wisdom which reduces it to knowledge, we should be able to see how our question can be answered in favor of Jewish philosophy. If philosophy is basically an ethics, as Socrates, Kant and Levinas all affirm, then there is no reason why it cannot be harmonized with Judaism, which also makes ethics central to all its life and teachings. For that matter, if philosophy is basically aesthetic, as Shiller, Schelling, Bergson, Nietzsche and Heidegger affirm, then there is no reason why it cannot be harmonize with being Japanese, which is a style of life and thought that also, so it seems to me along with many commenters, to make aesthetics in its life and thought. Therefore, if philosophical wisdom is basically ethical, a moral responsibility for others, or basically aesthetic, a care for beauty, then there is no reason why there cannot be a Jewish philosophy or a Japanese philosophy.

To be sure, if philosophy is scientific knowledge, or, perhaps we should say this more accurately: to the extent that philosophy is scientific knowledge, then to that extent there can be no Jewish or Japanese philosophy. But to the extent that knowledge, like everything else, derives from the primacy of the good or of beauty, and that ethics or aesthetics are first philosophy, then there can.

For today, I hope that enough has been said about the possibility of Jewish philosophy. Let us turn now, then, to the actuality of Jewish philosophy, because in fact there have been many great Jewish thinkers who whether or not they were ultimately philosophers were deeply engaged by and with philosophy.

### **The Actuality of Jewish Philosophy**

I apologize right away that this section will consist simply of a list of eight Jewish thinkers accompanied by some brief and inadequate comments about each. Each deserves far more. Perhaps my real aim in bringing them to your attention is less to instruct than to tempt you into further research. Of the host of Jewish thinkers, scholars, sages, intellectuals, from which I could choose, I have tried to select those whose deep engagement with philosophy is also of interest, as it seems to me, outside of Jewish studies.

Philo of Alexandria (c.20-50CE)

We have already spoken of him. Ignored by traditional rabbinic scholars, and previously ignored by modern academic scholars as well, Philo came into prominence in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, owing to Wolfson's book, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947). There, as we have seen, Philo is presented as the founder of medieval thought, for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for having been the first to harmonize philosophy and religion by means of allegory.

Judah Halevi (1075-1141)

Spanish doctor, Hebrew language poet of love, liturgy and of Zion (Israel), and Arabic language philosopher, Halevi's important philosophical work, finished c. 1140, written in Arabic, is *The Kuzari: The Book of Refutation and Proof in Support of the Abased Religion*. Presented as the dramatic narrative of an argument between a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim, and a rabbi, each defending his own, it is really an apology for Judaism against the others. Philosophy is criticized for indecision and empty speculation about things which can only be revealed and not proven. Halevi defends the validity of the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai because, unlike other alleged "miracles," it was witnessed by millions of Jews. He defends Judaism's efficaciousness in engendering goodness, about which philosophers, for all their reasoning, can reach no agreement. For everything truly important, tradition supplies better epistemological grounds than rational argumentation. He attacks Aristotelian cosmology and metaphysics, but accepts his theory of form and content, hylo-morphism. Many commentaries were written on the *Kuzari*, and many translations made, including many English translations.

Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)

Also born in Spain, Maimonides appropriated Aristotelian philosophy for Judaism. Considered the greatest of all medieval Jewish scholar-sages, and a major influence on Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), in his lifetime he was recognized as spiritual leader of the worldwide Jewish community. His most philosophical work is *The Guide for the Perplexed* (1190), written in Arabic, is complex and compact, not easily summarized. It is Aristotelian to the extent that it can be. That is to say, like Aristotle it accepts the evidence of sense perception and the argumentation of deductive logic, when these are appropriate. But when they are not, for instance to decide whether the world was created *ex nihilo* or has always existed, he defers to the authority of Jewish tradition, which in this case affirms the world's creation.

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1787)

Mendelssohn was a contemporary and acquaintance of Kant. Mendelssohn adhered to both the Enlightenment and traditional Judaism, which makes his philosophical works often confusing. No doubt this is why they are little read today, with the exception of his theological-political work, *Jerusalem: On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783), in which he defends separation of Church and State, as well as the inviolability of Judaism. Mendelssohn was also celebrated for his friendship with the German dramatist, writer and critic Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, brought together, despite the anti-Jewish prejudices of the time, by their shared Enlightenment sympathies and ideas, notwithstanding their different religious affiliations.

Elijah Benamozegh (1823-1900)

Benamozegh, a 19<sup>th</sup> century rabbi living in Livorno, Italy, authored a remarkably enlightened and informed philosophical book on traditional Judaism, *Israel and Humanity*, written in French and published posthumously in 1914. On the authority of both Talmud and Kabbalah, and in conversation with philosophy and in opposition to certain Christian misconstruals, Benamozegh argues with clarity and precision for the religious cosmopolitanism of halachic Judaism and the universality of its ethics.

Martin Buber (1878-1965)

In his world-famous little book of 1923, *I and Thou*, Buber elegantly highlights the intimacy of “I-thou” relation in contrast to the objectivity of “I-it” relations, locating the source of meaning in the depths of the intimate encounter of its “between” or “dialogue.” Elsewhere, Buber criticizes the religious immediacy advocated by Kierkegaard, and provides one of the first and most trenchant criticisms of Heidegger’s existential turn to mortality and historical being.

Harry Austryn Wolfson (1887-1974)

In addition to his book on Philo (and in addition to several of his other works), Wolfson has also written an important two-volume book on *The Philosophy of Spinoza* (1934), thereby providing penetrating studies of the two turning points of his spiritual-chronology of Western spirit.

Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995)

Levinas introduced the French speaking world to the phenomenologies of Husserl and Heidegger, and then produced his own original, comprehensive and revolutionary ethical philosophy. His has two masterworks, *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974). In them, and in his many shorter writings, he argues that contrary to philosophy’s long prejudice favoring knowledge and science, it is rather ethics – moral responsibility, putting the other person first, to establish a just world – that constitutes first philosophy. Read in this way, for Levinas there is no basic conflict between Judaism and philosophy, for both promulgate ethics.