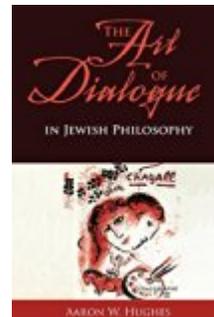


Aaron W. Hughes. *The Art of Dialogue in Jewish Philosophy*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. 234 pp \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-21944-2.



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At the beginning of his important new book, *The Art of Dialogue in Jewish Philosophy*, Aaron Hughes notes that the academic study of Jewish philosophy has traditionally centered “on great men ... and their great texts” (p. 2). Hughes’s work, by contrast, is part of a recent trend in scholarship that seeks to broaden these traditional parameters by examining “less important” or “epigonic” thinkers, as well as a wide variety of “secondary forms,” such as biblical commentaries, sermons, encyclopedias, and polemical works. Thus, Hughes’s book takes for its subject the rather neglected genre of the Jewish philosophical dialogue, in which context he looks not only at such major figures as the twelfth-century Spanish poet and critic of philosophy Judah Halevi, the sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance humanist Judah Abravanel, and the eighteenth-century German Enlightenment thinker Moses Mendelssohn, but also at such “lesser” figures as Shem Tov ibn Falaquera and Isaac Polleqar, both staunch exponents and defenders of the medieval Jewish rationalist tradition active in Spain, the

former in the thirteenth century, the latter in the fourteenth. Hughes’s focus on the genre of the dialogue leads him to take note of the interplay between the literary features of such works and their more strictly philosophic argumentation, again in contrast to the traditional approach of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* that placed “prime emphasis on ideas, often divorced from specific textual contexts” (p. 2). Finally, his emphasis with regard to these dialogues on the subtle exchanges and interactions, sometimes collegial, sometimes adversarial, between their various characters enables Hughes to bring to light not just these dialogues’ literary dimensions, but also their oftentimes polemical aspects and their engagement with the burning religious, cultural, and intellectual issues of their day. Hughes’s book thus bridges the divide separating the history of philosophy from intellectual history.

The Art of Dialogue in Jewish Philosophy is framed by an introductory chapter, “Expanding the Canon of Jewish Philosophy,” in which Hughes sets forth the book’s main goals (briefly discussed

in our opening paragraph) and outlines its contents, and an epilogue, “From Dialogue to Dialogic,” in which he briefly traces and attempts to account for the uncertain and rather modest fortunes of the Jewish philosophical dialogue in modern times. The body of the book consists of five chapters, each devoted to examining a dialogue—in one case two dialogues—from the five above-mentioned philosophers, beginning with Halevi’s *Kuzari* (1140), then moving on to Falaquera’s *Epistle of Debate* (c. 1250) and *Book of the Seeker* (1263 [?]), Polleqar’s *Ezer ha-Dat* (c.1350), Abravanel’s *Dialoghi d’amore* (1511-1512 [?]), and concluding with Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon* (1767). In each chapter Hughes follows a similar structure, first “situating a particular dialogue in its historical, social and intellectual environments,” then proceeding to “situate the author of each dialogue against this backdrop,” and finally moving to an examination of “the particular text in question” (p. 24).

Hughes’s presentation is clear, thoughtful, and learned, and readers will learn much from it. On the whole, the book is successful in achieving its goals. Certainly Hughes convincingly shows the importance of the Jewish literary dialogue for any comprehensive study of the history of medieval and early modern Jewish philosophy. His analyses of the polemical functions of Falaquera’s *Epistle of Debate* and Polleqar’s *Ezer ha-Dat* are particularly strong, and he skillfully locates these works in the ongoing controversy over the role of philosophy in Judaism in the wake of the writings of Maimonides, with Falaquera representing an earlier stage of the debate, defending philosophy against the criticisms of traditional Talmudists, while Polleqar represents a later stage, defending philosophy against the two-pronged attack of Kabbalists and astrologers. Hughes also makes good on his claim that paying closer attention to the interplay between the literary features of a dialogue and its more strictly philosophic argumentation will lead to a deeper and more accurate philosophic understanding of the work. Thus, in his

discussion of Book 2 of *Ezer ha-Dat*, consisting of a debate between a young, rather radical exponent of philosophy who argues that only philosophy is the source of truth, and an older anti-philosophical, Kabbalistically inclined traditionalist who argues that only religion is the source of truth, Hughes notes that the eminent historian of Jewish philosophy Shlomo Pines sees the young philosopher as a stand-in for the author (p. 193, n. 86), as a result of which Pines ends up attributing radical proto-Spinozistic views to Polleqar. In truth, Hughes points out, a literary analysis of the book indicates that Polleqar sides neither with the young philosopher nor with the old traditionalist, but with the king who appears on the scene to arbitrate the dispute and seeks to harmonize the views of the two antagonists.

The book, however, is not free from weaknesses, and Hughes at times presses his arguments too far. Thus while, as noted above, Hughes skillfully limns the polemical functions of Falaquera’s *Epistle of Debate* and Polleqar’s *Ezer ha-Dat*, his claims regarding the polemical functions of Abravanel’s *Dialoghi* and Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon* carry less conviction. Hughes shows that in the *Dialoghi* Abravanel develops a Jewish version of the popular Renaissance “literary genre known as the *tratatto d’amore* (treatise on love)” (p. 115), while in the *Phaedon* Mendelssohn “articulate[s] the soul’s immortality in ways that were completely divorced from contemporaneous theological (i.e., Christian perspectives)” (p. 154). He is on shakier ground, however, when he proceeds to argue that the *Dialoghi* is a “Jewish response to some of the decidedly Christocentric features of Renaissance humanism” (p. 132) and similarly that the *Phaedon* is a “polemical work designed to demonstrate to a primarily Christian audience that Christianity is not a prerequisite to felicity of the soul after corporeal death” (p. 140). Here Hughes places too much weight on what, when all is said and done, are arguments from silence.

Even more problematic is Hughes's claim that the *Kuzari* should be seen as a polemic against the spiritualist Muslim movement known as Isma'ilism. Hughes correctly points out that the *Kuzari* argues for the superiority of 'amal (action) over *niyya* (intention), and goes on to maintain that the Isma'ilis argue for a reverse evaluation. Similarly, he correctly points out that Isma'ili texts argue for the superiority of the *batin*, the inner, esoteric core of religion over its *zahir*, its outer, exoteric form, and goes on to maintain that the *Kuzari* argues for a reverse evaluation. But in none of the Isma'ili texts that Hughes cites are the terms 'amal and *niyya* so juxtaposed, and in none of the texts from the *Kuzari* that Hughes cites are the terms *batin* and *zahir* so juxtaposed. Indeed, in the *Kuzari* 3:73, the rabbinic sage, here clearly a spokesman for Halevi, in discussing problematic rabbinic Aggadot states that they are impossible only according to their *zahir*, their external sense. By implication they should be understood according to their *batin*! Here Halevi uses the *zahir/batin* distinction in an Isma'ili-like manner, though he limits the distinction to problematic rabbinic Aggadot, while the Isma'ilis apply it to religion as a whole. In any event, the matter is more complex than would appear from Hughes's discussion.

Moreover, in places Hughes's literary analysis requires further refinement. Thus, to return to the previous example, while Hughes is correct in asserting that in Book 2 of *Ezer ha-Dat*, Polleqar sides neither with the young philosopher nor with the old traditionalist, but with the king who appears on the scene and seeks to harmonize the views of the two antagonists, he is incorrect in asserting that the king "attempts to harmonize the truths of philosophy and religion" (p. 96: emphasis mine). Rather, the king states that philosophy is the source of true knowledge, while religion "seeks to straighten [our] deeds, and direct our attention toward good and beautiful works." The clear implication is that religion itself is *not* a source of truth. In this regard the king sides with

the young philosopher. Polleqar appears here to be carefully covering his tracks, giving the impression that the king splits the difference between the young philosopher and the old traditionalist, when in truth he is considerably closer the former. Perhaps, then, Polleqar's position is not that far removed from Spinoza after all! (One difference might be that Polleqar, unlike Spinoza, does not seem to admit the possibility of a purely philosophical ethics, even for philosophers themselves.)

Beyond these reservations regarding the larger issues of Hughes's analyses of the polemical functions of these dialogues and the interplay between their literary features and their more strictly philosophic argumentation, I have some reservations regarding more specific points. Thus, Hughes maintains that Abravanel in the *Dialoghi* "celebrates sensual love as the gateway to cosmic or spiritual love" (p. 130). But in the passage that Hughes cites in support of this claim Abravanel celebrates not sensual love, but physical beauty. And while I agree with Hughes that Mendelssohn's synthesis of Judaism and Enlightenment values is fragile, I do not agree with his contention that the *Phaedon* is a good example of that fragility. Hughes offers two arguments in support of this view. First he notes that in his Hebrew version of the *Phaedon*, the *Sefer ha-Nefesh*, Mendelssohn cites liberally from biblical proof-texts. Such citations attest, Hughes goes on to claim, that in that work "Mendelssohn ... does not hesitate to make appeals to revelation to buttress his claims, something he did not do in the *Phaedon*" (p. 164). Setting to the side the fact that it would obviously be absurd for "Socrates" in the *Phaedon* to cite biblical proof-texts, can Mendelssohn's citations of such texts in the *Sefer ha-Nefesh* be described as "appeals to revelation"? Here I would point to a passage in *Jerusalem* where Mendelssohn states that while scripture certainly contains "an inexhaustible treasure of rational truths and religious doctrines," these "excellent propositions," in addition to their being

purely rational, “are presented to us for our consideration without being forced upon our belief.” In light of this passage, the biblical prooftexts attesting to the immortality of the soul, cited by Mendelssohn in the *Sefer ha-Nefesh*, rather than constituting “appeals to revelation” “forced upon our belief,” are just examples of scripture’s “inexhaustible treasure of rational truths ... presented to us for our consideration.” Second, Hughes cites an excerpt from a letter to Hartwig Wessely “in which Mendelssohn seems to apologize for ever having written *Phaedon*” (p. 165).

One would never know from Hughes’s description that this letter was written to Wessely *thanking* him for expressing an interest in translating the *Phaedon* into Hebrew. In the excerpt cited by Hughes Mendelssohn is describing what he had *initially* assumed would be the likely reaction of Wessely to the *Phaedon*. Mendelssohn knew that Wessely was not very philosophically inclined, and he had feared that Wessely might not approve of his having written the *Phaedon*, deeming the philosophic demonstration of such a fundamental principle “of our holy faith” as that of the immortality of the soul to be unnecessary, perhaps even dangerous. But in truth, as Mendelssohn goes on to write in a passage not cited by Hughes, in light of Wessely’s interest in translating the *Phaedon* into Hebrew, he *now* sees that Wessely approves of those “who engage in philosophic inquiry,” providing they “‘give heed to the works of the Lord’ (cf. Ps. 28:5) in sincerity.” Thus, far from “apologizing for ever having written *Phaedon*,” Mendelssohn took comfort in the fact that the non-philosophical Wessely, who was well known and highly regarded as an outstanding Hebraist, appeared to approve of the *Phaedon*. This was an encouraging sign, confirming, in Mendelssohn’s view, the solidity—not the fragility—of his synthesis.

It need not be said that the reservations I have raised require further discussion and analysis and that this is not the place for such an un-

dertaking. It also need not be said that none is intended to detract from the importance of Hughes’s book, a work which consistently enlightens and informs, even if it does not always convince.

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