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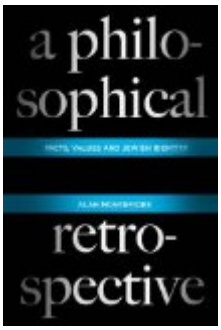

Alan Montefiore. *A Philosophical Retrospective: Facts, Values, and Jewish Identity.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 216 pp. $29.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-15300-3.

Reviewed by Mitchell Silver

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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Alan Montefiore has spent a lifetime brooding over his family's view that he ought to be a good Jewish boy. In *A Philosophical Retrospective*, Montefiore deploys all of the heavy machinery of analytic philosophy to better understand his family's sense of his obligations, as well as his grounds for resisting their view. A scion of one of Britain's most prominent Jewish families (Moses Montefiore was an ancestor and the author's grandfather, Claude Montefiore, was a founder and intellectual leader of Liberal Judaism in Britain), as a young man Alan Montefiore apparently refused either to be harnessed to the yoke of communal leadership or even to inhabit the forms of Liberal Jewish observance. I say apparently because, although in some ways this book is a very personal memoir, for the most part it leaves out concrete personal details. It is an intellectual memoir, and the specifics of the family conflict and the human drama that surely accompanied it, which is meant to serve as both the illustration of a set of philosophical perplexities and the motive for unraveling them, are left undescribed. Instead the conflict is translated into the concerns and language of analytic philosophy.

Most prominent among these concerns is the relationship between facts and values. A central tenet of recent analytic philosophy, with origins usually traced to the work of David Hume, is that facts are one sort of thing, values another sort of thing, and that the former never determine the latter. Montefiore never did dispute the facts of his biological, social, cultural, religious, and historical placement, but he did wonder how those facts, which seemed to embed him in a Jewish moral tradition, could ever give rise to any duties he had, for he felt more drawn to the philosophical orthodoxy that places its faith in the autonomy of moral choice. The fact/value distinction becomes crucial here: if no set of social facts dictate one's obligations and values, then the autonomous self, conceptually understood as free from any social or factual compulsion, is the only source of duty, and indeed the only source of meaning.

At least that is how Montefiore saw things, but his family, which he characterizes as intelligent and rational people of goodwill, did not take the same view. This suggests to Montefiore that they were speaking past each other, using the same words to speak what amounted to a different language. Explaining how this might be so, Montefiore touches on the philosophical work which argues that our language reflects a way of life, and our language in turn creates our understanding of the world in which we pursue that way of life. In particular, one's language, which is a social creation, creates one's personal identity. He and the family had a different idea of who he was, because they spoke a different language and lived in different worlds.

This line of inquiry leads to the second major philosophical theme of the book: the nature of self-identity, and in particular the relationship between one's social identity(ies) and one's individual identity. Here Montefiore's discussion often strays into esoteric and technical issues: which attributes of a self are essential and which peripheral, how are selves individuated, what role does self-awareness play in the formation of the self, what role does memory play, and a host of other puzzles about personal identity that philosophers from John Locke to Derek Parfit have labored over.

Certainly all of these issues regarding self-identity have a bearing on Montefiore's concerns, but they are of no immediate relevance to the question at hand: brought up as a Jew, descended from Jews, and identified by others as a Jew, is Montefiore required to consider himself a Jew and do certain Jewish things? In his youth he thought the answer was "no" and his family thought the answer was "yes." Now, after a lifetime of philosophical toil and reflection, Montefiore's answer, highly hedged and tentatively offered, is that while there is no well mapped-out road from social facts to personal obligations, the distinction between the two realms is not nearly as sharp as some analytic philosophers would have it. Certain social facts cannot be described without the values that flow from them, and the conceptual resources that enable one to embrace moral autonomy are themselves social facts. If Montefiore is in a position to reject aspects of his Jewish heritage, he believes that it is only because of his Enlightenment heritage. The ability to value autonomy too is a historically created social fact.

My reading of this answer, which is admittedly far from anything that Montefiore explicitly says, is that he does feel that his history requires him to be a Jew, but his particular history--English, Enlightened, and Liberal Jewish--allows him to be a Jew whose most Jewish characteristic is his devotion to autonomous choice. He is worried, however, that this form of Judaism, like all forms of secular Judaism, may be parasitic on the continued existence of religiously based communities of Jewish identity. This is a well-founded concern, and I think Montefiore is correct in believing that we will just have to wait and see if there is such a dependency.

The book suffers from its origins in Montefiore's diverse earlier writings. As a result, it is often repetitive and sometimes digressive, and it contains a mixture of philosophical and prose styles, not all of which are appealing. Montefiore is certainly capable of writing well, witness, "I have already made it clear that I am no Kantian scholar in the ways in which serious Kantian scholars are seriously scholarly" (p. 156). But too often the philosophical urge to generality, along with the analytic school tendency to achieve exhaustion, makes for unnecessarily tough going. Indeed, there are times when the demands of neither generality nor thoroughness justifies the slack writing: "Traditions differ also in that there are those accepting that individuals whom it has hitherto recognized to be among its members may, by their own unilateral decision, validly and acceptably regard themselves as being, from that moment on, either wholly or partially without it

and thus is no longer bound by its norms and obligations. However, this is clearly not the case for all traditions" (p. 28). In other words, some traditions let you quit and some do not.

As a survey of analytic philosophy's insights into a nest of issues surrounding the fact/value distinction and personal identity, Montefiore's book is too condensed and scattered to be very useful. As a reflection on the intellectual conundrums and personal complexities of contemporary Jewish identity, the book is learned, provocative, and insightful. But its virtue as a reflection on Jewish identity gives rise to a philosophical value that Montefiore only touches on toward the end of his book. In the course of using the tools of philosophy to grapple with his Jewish identity, Montefiore ends up wrestling with his philosophical identity. The complexities of Jewish history; the diversity of Jewish traditions and self-understandings; the farrago of political, religious, ethnic, and historical dimensions to the idea of Jewishness, all of which constitute a tangled thread with no clear beginning or end, make the quest for precise answers regarding what it is to be Jewish and what being Jewish may or may not demand of one, if not a hopeless errand, at least an endless one. Montefiore is at pains to state that he thinks clear thinking is useful even in the area of Jewish identity. Nonetheless we should not expect even the clearest and the most rigorous thought to provide definitive conclusions.

It turns out that the elusive characteristic of Jewish identity is also true of philosophical truth, and for much the same reasons. Fundamental philosophical issues are interconnected, ideas evolve, circularity proves unavoidable, and concepts are irremediably vague and heavily context dependent. While Montefiore does not explicitly despair of the philosophical analyst's capacity to illuminate an issue, he no longer seems to have any faith that we will arrive at stable conclusions. Montefiore is fond of the quip that Jews are like everybody else only more so. He might well have added that philosophers are like Jews, only more so.

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