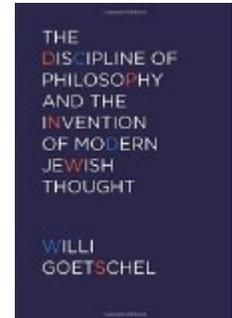




**Willi Goetschel.** *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2013. x + 270 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8232-4496-6.



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In *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought*, Willi Goetschel argues that Jewish philosophy is more than a mere subset of a larger philosophical project. It brings into question the universalizing tendencies of philosophy itself, highlighting the interplay of the universal and the particular. In making his case, Goetschel analyzes a range of works from Baruch de Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Margarete Susman, Hermann Leven Goldschmidt, and (though not a philosopher per se) Heinrich Heine. According to Goetschel's central thesis: "these philosophers see their philosophic projects as a challenge to rethink the terms of philosophy" (p. 5).

Rather than using a fixed structure or methodology throughout, Goetschel's analysis is wide-ranging and interdisciplinary. His second chapter, for example, analyzes the literature of Heine as if it were a philosophical text, arguing that Heine's artistic approach allows him the freedom to leave certain tensions unresolved. In

Goetschel's view, Heine's work points to the contradictions inherent in the universalizing assumptions within philosophy.

Later chapters, on the other hand, alternate between philosophical analysis and intellectual history. In the important third chapter, for example, Goetschel deepens his argument from the introduction, outlining the demarcation lines of who is and who is not a "Jewish" philosopher, citing Spinoza as the paradigmatic test case. If Jewish philosophy reflects on philosophy's "blind spots," then identifying the roster of Jewish philosophers also defines the contours of philosophy itself. That is, "Jewish philosophy reclaims the very impulse philosophy set out to realize but jeopardizes in its attempts to suppress and eliminate" (p. 57).

The fourth chapter evaluates the relationship of three thinkers to the German university system. In his evaluation of Cohen, Goetschel rightly identifies the tensions that Cohen faced as the chair of the philosophy department at Marburg

and as its “token” Jew. I am not convinced, however, when he argues that Cohen’s project “is grounded in a reliance on a nation-state that was becoming increasingly problematic” (p. 66). Goetschel does not elaborate on this point, so it is unclear as to what he means by “grounded in a reliance on a nation-state.” My own impression is that the emotional dissonance between the harmony of Cohen’s idealism and the brutality of German nationalism has caused a minor theme in Cohen’s work to be overemphasized. A desiderata would be an elaboration on these themes in a much longer work.

Goetschel also traces the development of the discipline of Jewish studies, from Mendelssohn’s *Bildung* through the *Lehrhaus* and beyond, evaluating Susman’s reconsideration of Job and Goldschmidt’s reassessment of Cohen in the wake of the Holocaust. According to Goetschel, each of these moments represents an attempt to reformulate the relationship between philosophy and Jewish philosophy. For example, he argues, the purpose of Goldschmidt’s dialogic approach is “to release and give voice to the liberating potential of contradiction that made and continues to make any tradition viable in the first place” (p. 132). The comparisons to Hegel here prove to be particularly illuminating.

The eighth chapter reintroduces the question of Spinoza’s legacy. Spinoza’s work has served as a litmus test: “The history of Spinoza’s reception,” Goetschel writes, “stands as an illuminating reminder that interpretation cannot be separated from, but is crucially shaped by, the ethics and politics that inform it” (p. 134). But, he argues, this interdependence creates a “vicious circle” in its wake.

In responding to the problems posed by this “vicious circle,” Goetschel focuses his attention on Spinoza’s metaphor of a “smart worm.” Specifically, he writes, Spinoza imagines a worm that seeks to understand the system of which it itself is also part. “Rather than privileging any form of ab-

stract universalism, Spinoza’s smart worm—in accordance with the approach fleshed out in Spinoza’s theory of knowledge—signals the epistemological necessity of particularity as a constitutive requirement for thinking the universal” (p. 139). Thus, in Goetschel’s reading, Spinoza’s philosophy anticipates the work of later thinkers, such as Rosenzweig’s insistence on a sense of “first name, last name” particularity that is rooted in the individual’s experience. However, I would caution against the quick comparison to Maimonides that is presented here. Maimonides’ relationship to the text is far from straightforward, and his exegetical strategy is both subtle and cunning. A comparison of their exegetical approaches, in fact, would be welcome addition alongside Joshua Parens’s full-length study of their respective positions regarding human nature.[1]

In the next few chapters, Goetschel offers new insights into the relationship between Spinoza’s thought and Mendelssohn’s. In chapter 9, Goetschel teases out the political implications of Spinoza’s philosophy: “Ontologically speaking,” he writes, Spinoza’s argument is that “the very nature of power or its structural place makes it impossible to use it in metaphorically naïve form in political contexts” (p. 167). In chapter 10, Goetschel suggests that Mendelssohn identifies a “blind spot of modern political thought” when he highlights “the problem of the ‘indigenous colony’ as a critical reminder of the limits of the authority of the ‘mother nation’” (p. 186). Goetschel then analyzes in political terms Mendelssohn’s unusual approach to contract theory: Mendelssohn does not presuppose a need for a state to enforce the contract; a contract can be executed by two parties absent the state’s coercive powers. As Goetschel writes, “Mendelssohn defines the state as the interface rather than the foundation for the interplay of political forces” (p. 195). It is that sense, Goetschel argues, that Mendelssohn continues in the tradition of Spinoza’s political thought.

In the final chapter, Goetschel analyzes Mendelssohn's response to the question, "What is Enlightenment?" alongside the answer of his contemporary, Immanuel Kant; this comparison is then followed by a short coda on related themes. In both places, the argument is made that the Jewish perspective provides a needed correction of the universal claims of philosophy: "The question of whether and, if so, in which way philosophy accommodates, includes, or can be seen as being continuous with the sensibilities of Jewish philosophers is not only a question about the terms of the exclusions that define philosophy," he writes. "More importantly, it is also a question about whether the challenge and examination of these terms does not represent an indispensable step toward the realization of philosophy's own claims" (p. 231). In that sense, philosophy is in need of an "other" as a challenge to its claim of universalism.

To summarize his position, then, let me frame it in the following manner: Hermann Cohen argues that a person becomes an ethical being in the context of the I-Thou encounter. Only in recognizing that "this person, who is not me, still is able to feel pain just like I do" will a person become a moral agent. Similarly, it would seem, in Goetschel's keen analysis, that philosophy needs the reflection of the "other"--here in the form of a particularist philosophical tradition--to recognize the limits of philosophizing. Only by acknowledging the violence that is caused in suppressing the voice of the other will philosophy embrace the universalism that it seeks.

Finally, one last remark: Goetschel's opening line bears repeating, on account of its clever punning allusion. "Jewish philosophy?" he asks. "If the question might sound Greek to you, this is no coincidence" (p. vii). I highly recommend Goetschel's lucid and compelling answer.

Note

[1]. Josuha Parens, *Maimonides and Spinoza: Their Conflicting Views of Human Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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