Modern Jewish thought’s canon is in trouble, and rightly so. Recent scholarship in the field has drawn attention to the ways that its all-male, virtually all-German canon fails to live up to its ethical aspirations. Andrea Dara Cooper’s book, *Gendering Modern Jewish Thought*, offers a compelling account of how modern Jewish thought got into its current state of trouble, and presents its readers with a range of tools for navigating a path through it.

Cooper’s central claim is that key texts in modern Jewish thought—especially Franz Rosenzweig’s *Star of Redemption* (1921) and Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (1961)—rely on a problematically gendered concept of fraternity. Cooper argues that this concept is more than simply a generic notion of political or ethical solidarity; Rosenzweig’s and Levinas’s reliance on a gendered concept of “fraternity” leads them to ignore other forms of kinship. Cooper then goes on to argue that supplementing “fraternity” with concepts of “maternity” and “sorority” stands to enrich the ethical and political conversation in which these texts, and their readers, participate.

Cooper’s argument proceeds in three main steps: First, in chapters 1 and 2, Cooper offers a gendered reading of kinship concepts in Rosenzweig and Levinas. Next, in chapters 3 and 4, Cooper explores how reading these canonical texts alongside a wider range of interlocutors can offer a richer understanding of how gendered kinship is for both thinkers. Finally, in chapter 5 and the epilogue, Cooper considers alternative models of kinship, drawn from both Rosenzweig and Levinas themselves as well as a diverse range of other sources.

Cooper’s reading of the gendered concept of fraternity deployed in Rosenzweig’s *Star* is both carefully constructed and convincing. Focusing on Rosenzweig’s reading of Song of Songs at the beginning of part 2 of the *Star*, Cooper argues that Rosenzweig understands romantic relationships as preliminary to more public, “fraternal” relationships. “Ultimately, in [Rosenzweig’s] reading,” Cooper writes, “the hetererotic sibling-spouses become neighborly blood brothers” (p. 25). The elision of gendered difference in this arena yields objectification in another: “In Rosenzweig’s genealogy, blood is the sticky stuff that adheres fathers to grandsons in the Jewish community by passing through the bodies of Jewish women” (p. 42). In this way, Rosenzweig’s picture of “brotherhood” and “blood community” relies on the subjection of Jewish women. Rosenzweig scholarship has rarely
acknowledged the ways that Rosenzweig’s thought is deeply enmeshed in problematic conceptions of “Jewish continuity,” which, as Lila Corwin Berman has shown, substantively shape American Jewish life and politics. Cooper’s accounting of the ways that readings of Rosenzweig have influenced American Jewish life is already a significant step toward making Jewish thought actually address the ethical concerns it has long claimed to explicate. Cooper’s reading of Levinas’s treatment of male “fecundity” over and against maternity is equally trenchant. For Levinas too, an ethical community characterized by “fraternity” is defined over and against femininity.

In chapters 3 and 4, Cooper builds on her analysis by rereading Levinas and Rosenzweig alongside a wider range of materials, in order to clarify what we stand to lose when we ignore the other forms of kinship. This is the crucial step in Cooper’s argument, since it offers an account of what previous readings of the modern Jewish thought canon (including those that explicitly attend to gender but do not focus on “fraternity” specifically) have missed. Cooper characterizes the problem as follows: “While ‘brotherhood’ may seem to be an admirable aim ... I argue, it comes at a high price, since it requires dissolving the particularities of any nonmale identity” (p. 102). Cooper’s proposed cure mirrors her diagnosis; if the problem is that we have excluded nonmale identities, then we can correct our course through an intersectional approach. She writes, “Feminist approaches in Jewish philosophy that account for difference can contribute to the field of intersectionality studies, which considers how individuals and societies are mutually constituted by structures of power including race, class, sexuality, gender, and ability” (p. 118). A gendered reading of canonical texts can do much of this work, but, Cooper argues, it needs to be supplemented by reading these texts alongside others which highlight different identities and kinship structures.

Thankfully, through the work of Cooper and others, the support beams of the field of modern Jewish thought, as it is currently constructed, are beginning to weaken, if not to be hacked down. But, I wonder whether the diagnosis for the field’s canonical texts (and their associated methodologies) ought to be more dire. Later in the book, Cooper writes that for Levinas (once he has moved from focusing on fecundity to maternity, a shift Cooper traces in chapter 5), “the importance of substituting and sacrificing oneself for the other becomes epitomized in the phenomenology of the maternal body” (p. 179). The problem with Levinas’s argument here is not that it takes up too few forms of kinship as “exemplary,” but rather the very fact that it makes a single, embodied person into something that “epitomizes” the ethical. This approach renders bodies with different experiences—infertile bodies, disabled bodies, childfree bodies—as ethically deficient. The solution to Levinas’s persistent use of gendered ethical paradigms is not to add more exemplars but instead to more fundamentally restructure our ethical thinking. This may require a larger shift away from phenomenology and, in turn, a more fundamental break with Levinas and his ways of reading and thinking. The “cure” for this more dire diagnosis would not be to read Rosenzweig and Levinas alongside interlocutors who prioritize feminine as well as masculine models of kinship and sacrifice, but instead to rethink how we move from particularized, embodied experiences to philosophical and ethical thinking about them.

In the final step of her argument, Cooper explores alternative models of kinship that might be possible once we see the limits of those presented in both Rosenzweig and Levinas. In both chapter 5 and the epilogue, Cooper vacillates between a need to move beyond the canon of modern Jewish thought—Cooper considers other theorists’ pictures of motherhood and sisterhood (Julia Kristeva and Bonnie Honig), to popular culture (Game of Thrones, Frozen, and the video game The Binding of Isaac)—and a desire to retrieve some
usable insight from Rosenzweig and Levinas themselves. Cooper writes that her goal is to “demonstrate ... that a gendered reading of modern Jewish philosophers can expose their limitations in a way that simultaneously makes their approaches available as we seek a way forward” (p. 169). To do this, Cooper turns to a rereading of maternal and sororal sacrifice. “Imaging and accounting for sororal agency,” Cooper writes, “can allow us to extricate ourselves from sedimented interpretations and to develop the neglected dimension of sorority in our reading” (p. 194). The precise nature of this “neglected dimension of sorority” is never fully explicated—Cooper gestures toward ways that sororal sacrifice might be different from fraternal or maternal sacrifice, at times implying that it is more freely given. However, this need not be a distinctive feature of sororal sacrifice, nor are all forms of sororal sacrifice freely given. In addition, this account of the characteristic features of “sororal sacrifice” has the odd effect of revalorizing something akin to a liberal (and, in important ways, male) picture of what it means to “sacrifice freely.” At other points in the book, Cooper implies that the very fact that women are the ones doing the sacrificing and are the ones being sacrificed for, makes sororal sacrifice distinctive. She writes that “refocusing on the sisters of the narrative similarly allows readers to shift from the philosophical preoccupation with death to the valorization of life” (p. 194). This conclusion seems dangerously close to a binary gender essentialism where women, because of their ability to bear children, are assumed to be more directly associated with “life.” But of course, nonwomen bear children, and childbearing experiences are often as punctuated by death and loss as by life and creation. This range of experiences falls outside the parameters of Cooper’s analysis, suggesting that the categories of “maternity” and “sorority” are not capacious enough to address the problems Cooper identified in her analysis of Rosenzweig’s and Levinas’s concepts of fraternity. In this way, Cooper’s book leaves the reader unsure of what it would look like to fully account for sorority, while also being attentive to the ways that the modern Jewish thought tradition has understood kinship.

However, this uncertainty, or tentativeness, about where a gendered reading of modern Jewish thought leaves us offers the reader an opportunity not usually available to her in scholarship on canonical figures in modern Jewish thought. For many years, readings of Rosenzweig and Levinas (and we might add, Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, and Martin Buber) have been driven by a desire to find a way that these thinkers “contribute” to “broader ethical questions” of interest to a reader unconcerned with the subfield of modern Jewish thought. These readings always risk a form of apologetics, both for Judaism as a whole and for modern Jewish thought in particular. Cooper’s book, in contrast, leaves the reader trying to figure out what to do with these texts, rather than being told how useful they must obviously be. Perhaps the greatest gift that Cooper gives her readers, then, is to allow them to explore the possibility that these texts are not as useful as their most prominent readers have argued, while simultaneously accounting for the debt many of us in modern Jewish thought feel toward them.
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