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Law, Reason, and Morality in Medieval Jewish Philosophy. Saadya Gaon, Bahya ibn Pakuda, Moses Maimonides.

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The book offers a thorough and profound analysis of medieval Jewish philosophical ethics. The author has selected three authors whose work reflects the three main schools of medieval Jewish thought: Saadya, belonging to the rational theologians (*kalām*), Maimonides, the Aristotelian thinker, and Bahya Ibn Paquda, representative of the Neoplatonic tradition.

The book as a whole considers and convincingly argues three main points: 1. Medieval Jewish thought is highly relevant in our age, since it is similar to contemporary thought in the sense that both have resulted from the conscious integration of diverse philosophical traditions (12); 2. One specific characteristic of Jewish thought is the way in which creation, revelation, and rationality mutually explain and in a way reflect one another; 3. While reading medieval authors, we have to attempt to put ourselves into the epistemic position of the authors and avoid the anachronistic usage of post-enlightenment categories.

Jacobs does an excellent job when it comes to methodology. In seven chapters, seven key topics of medieval ethics are treated and compared with what Latin scholastic (Aquinas, Scotus) and modern (Hume, Kant) thinkers have had to say about them. Contemporary readings of medieval Jewish texts (Marvin Fox, David Novak) are also carefully read, analyzed, and criticized.

The first chapter (Athens, Jerusalem, and Jewish Moral Thought) is eye-opening in the sense that instead of giving a general introduction to the history of medieval Jewish thought, it outlines a general picture in which the main role of philosophy appears to be that “it explicates religion” (13), since the intellect is God’s image in us and “tradition transmits an ever-increasing understanding of itself” (9).

After a calibration of the role of philosophy, the second chapter is dedicated to that facet of human existence which makes covenant, the commandments, reward, and punishment in the afterlife meaningful and possible: the freedom of the will. The treatment of this topic is justified inasmuch as—similarly to the intellect—free will represents a likeness of God in humans (75).

The third chapter on Moral Psychology, Revelation, and Virtue offers a comparison between Jewish authors and Aristotle. Here, a difference between Greek and Jewish thought that is of utmost importance is outlined. In the course of analyzing the background of the key terms of repentance and forgiveness (76), Jacobs demonstrates that Bahya, saying that “the more we think of God, the more vividly we are struck by our imperfections” (79) and Maimonides, accentuating the meekness of Moses (84), are in contradiction with the Aristotelian view according to which pride is the “crown of the virtues” (84).

The moral basis of the virtues is further analyzed and Aristotle's *phronimos*, the "measure of correct judgment", is set in opposition with the statement that for Jews, the Torah is the measure (91). The Torah as something to be studied offers a place for self-correction (*teshuvah*) while, based on the notion of that law is something to be enforced (92), repentance for Aristotle proves to be impossible (93).

In the fourth section, on Jewish Moral Thought and Practical Wisdom, Aristotle's *phronimos*: "a state grasping the truth, involving reason, concerned with action about what is good or bad for a human being" is further analyzed. As opposed to the practicality of the commandments of Judaism, it can be labeled as highly theoretical (111).

Very convincingly, the author draws a parallel between Saadya's distinction between the laws of reason vs. the laws of revelation in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* and the differentiation in Maimonides between *mishpat*, or 'ordinances', and *hukkim*, or 'statutes'.

The aim of Maimonides and Saadya seem to be one and the same, that of bringing matters closer to reason (121). At this point, two questions arise: is the human intellect similar to, or—to put the matter in Aristotelian philosophical terms—is it of the same species as the divine intellect? And if the two are similar, does the notion of intellect have the same meaning for the two thinkers? The point is minor, but here a difference ignored by the author needs to be highlighted—a difference between Saadya and Maimonides, that is to say, or rather, the two traditions to which they belong. Saadya as a *mutakallim* (rational theologian) claims that the human intellect is a weaker, imperfect version of the Divine intellect and that although it is able to speculate about the reason of the commandments, it will never capture certain reasons, given the fact that we are supposed to follow them by *belief*. Maimonides, by contrast, who walks in the footsteps of Aristotle and Avicenna, claims that a temporary union between the Divine and the human intellect is possible (e.g., in the cases of prophecy and philosophy).

This union provides the topic of chapter five (Requirements, Ideals, and Moral Motivation). The Aristotelian *imitatio Dei* is apolitical, theoretical, and non-emotional (139); however, when medieval Jewish thinkers talk about 'God-like' human behavior, they mean the imitation of the providential care and loving kindness exhibited by God.

Since in the Jewish understanding of the Divine, love and reason are intertwined, in Judaism there is no difference in between what is legally and morally required (141). The Law is both a social instrument and a counsel of holiness. And since God is conceived as the basis of being, nothing can be conceived to exist utterly and wholly apart from God (145).

At the end of this section, Jacobs clarifies the Jewish concept of intelligibility, by denuding it of any retrospectively applied Aristotelian and Kantian connotations. Jacobs states that for Jewish thinkers, ultimate rationality cannot be conceived as the opposite of law, since they do not have a conception of good that would have any standing on its own metaphysically (151). Thus, the Jewish aim is an "elevating knowledge of the real" (154), a constant approximation to the divine mind without a hope of attaining it.

The last two chapters treat the perennial topic of Judaism and natural law. In chapter six, the notion of natural law is set in a historical context. The Stoic origins of a universal and objective natural law are described, wherein *nomos* mirrors *physis*. In the same way as a non-emotional law system was opposed to *halacha* in chapter three, here the concept of *Stoic* self-mastery as ideal behavior is contrasted with Maimonides' notion of prophecy as a *telos* of human nature (159).

The seventh chapter (The Reason of the Commandments and Natural Law) offers a critical review of contemporary secondary literature concerning the notion of natural law. Here the view of Marvin Fox (according to whom the concept of natural law does not exist in Judaism) is opposed with the opinion of David Novak. The latter defines ethics as general principles of inter-human relations: correspondingly, in his view Jewish ethics equals the theory of Jewish praxis, which is a general normative matrix preceding revelation (200). Thus, covenant according to Novak does not make sense without natural law, which is the human capacity for moral thought (202). Natural law is what makes Jewish moral discourse possible in an intercultural world (209).

Here Jacobs argues very convincingly that the notion of transcendental epistemological conditions did not arise for medieval thinkers in the same way as it did for Kant and his followers (210). On Jacobs's telling, Aquinas (174–8) and Scotus (185) played key roles in the formation of the modern idea of natural law: this means that the concerns of medieval Jewish philosophers did not involve interpreting reason in ways that invite a natural law reading (214). Commandments should be obeyed out of love and not out of duty and holiness is more complex than just obeying the law; covenant is far from being a mere contract, it is a relationship (219).

There is a vitally important role for reason in the study and fulfillment of the Law. Many commandments are *reasonable* ('they make sense') and some are *rational* ('they can be demonstrated'): but in Jacobs's reading, there is no concept of universal natural law such that it would underlie Jewish ethics.

The final conclusion of Jacobs is that "there is a moral epistemology of the commandments that is distinct from that of practical wisdom and of natural law but, nonetheless, a rational epistemology". It would have been useful to analyze further this kind of rational epistemology. Another topic that is somewhat understudied is the compatibility of the particularism of the covenant with its rationality. However, far from criticizing the author here, I am rather suggesting topics for further books.

Although Jacobs's book deals with much-discussed questions of Jewish thought and Greek philosophy, it is much more than a reformulation of their differences. It is wonderful reading for those graduate students, professors, and intellectuals who are challenged by the role of medieval Jewish thought from the perspective of general philosophy and the history of philosophy. It provides information in a logically arranged way, the same time that it challenges and stimulates through questioning the validity of the mainstream positions concerning natural law.

Jacobs has performed an excellent service to scholars of medieval Jewish thought in showing its relevance today, as well as in proposing an authentic way to read the medieval philosophers by trying to avoid the retrospective use of post-Enlightenment categories.

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