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## How Does One Become a Jewish Philosopher? Reflections on a Canonical Status<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract:

Many recent journal articles and monographs by students of Jewish philosophy have been dedicated to the question of definition: what is Jewish philosophy, and how can it be distinguished from its others, such as Jewish thought, non-philosophical Judaism, and non-Jewish philosophy, philosophical theory of religion, etc. In this essay, I take a somewhat playful alternative approach by asking about philosophers rather than philosophies. The first parts compares the status of philosophers in different cultures. In comparison with the high regard for philosophy and philosophers, philosophers were not regarded highly by the Jews, at least not since the rabbinic tradition made Hellenism appear contemptible. Conversely, Hellenizing Greeks and Jews considered Judaism not just compatible with the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle but itself a philosophy and regarded the Jews as a "race of philosophers" (Theophrastus). The canon of Jewish philosophers wavers between none and all, depending on who establishes such a canon. In the final section, I follow the intuitions of Gillian Rose, whose death-bed conversion may, to some, put her beyond the pale of Jewish philosophers and who contributes a useful mode of decanonization to the discussion of who is a Jewish philosopher.

To the hurried reader of the title of this paper:

The hurried reader of the title of this paper may expect me to provide academic job counselling or, worse, to reflect on the unlikely attainment of someone like myself to the canonical status of a Jewish philosopher. My intention is neither to provide career advice, nor to speak about myself. Rather, as the subtitle indicates, I approach the main question of Jewish philosophy (namely, whether there is a thing that goes by this name) by reflecting on the criteria historiographers and lexicographers of Jewish philosophy advance or presuppose when they decide whom to include in their canon of Jewish philosophers. Students of the history of Jewish philosophy must have recourse to a rule of inclusion and exclusion unless they despair of a definition. Shirking the problem of an essence or substance of Jewish philosophy, the purpose of my reflections is to shed some indirect light on this question by looking at attempts at establishing canons of Jewish philosophers.<sup>2</sup>

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I begin with a few sociological observations on the status of philosophy and philosophers in different societies. These observations, while unscientific and purely anecdotal, nevertheless highlight the fact that the value of a professional guild, including the philosophical profession, is always relative. Setting up modern French, German, and American societies as my control groups, I briefly review the history of philosophical writing among the Jews. I then turn to recent attempts at comprehensive accounts of Jewish philosophy and the canonical reasoning that must have gone into their making. I conclude with reflections on problems entailed in defining the canon of Jewish philosophers.

## 1. On the status of philosophy and philosophers among Jews and others

Unlike the French and the Germans, Americans and Jews tend not to hold philosophers in the highest esteem.

In France, philosophers maintain the intellectual tradition of rationalism on which the republic was founded in 1789. Philosophy is here part of good citizenship and a protection against the ever-present threat of religion to the laïcistic state. In this sense, the philosophers, notwithstanding the disagreements among them, are part of the political system, and their debates, no matter how acrimonious, testify to the vitality of public life in France.

In Germany, philosophers provide relief from the tedium of politics, and their public intellectual musings are an antidote to the erosion of interest in political participation, or what the Germans call *Politikverdrossenheit*. To be sure, the reading public is a small elite but, at least in their own mind, an elite that regards itself as guardians of an essentially patriarchal society where philosophers provide the decisive interpretation of all cultural phenomena, from history and politics to the arts and the internet. Where in France to philosophize is to participate in political debate, in Germany to philosophize is to interpret history and culture, a pursuit without which, to be sure, society would fail to understand whence it comes and whither it is going. In an image, in France philosophy is the songbird of the morning, whereas in Germany it is still the owl taking flight at dusk.

While certainly hospitable to philosophers, neither the French, nor the Germans have been politically the wiser or economically the more successful for their love of philosophy. More importantly, what renders their love of philosophy of doubtful value is the trust they put in intellectuals instead of in the judgment of ordinary citizens. The respect for philosophy and philosophers has provided a stage for public intellectualism that seems unmerited by what philosophers are able to do for the public. The expectation that philosophers ought to be able to provide wisdom in a world in which it is folly that mostly prevails has served to seduce entire communities of educated people to subscribe to the ideologies that repeatedly drew the European masses into their orbit and their states into ruin. Philosophers, academics, and intellectuals have not just been part of the solution, but part of the problem. It may suffice to name the greatest 20th century philosopher to illustrate this point, namely, Martin Heidegger.

In contrast to the French and the Germans, Americans trust a scientist before they trust a philosopher. They are in fact much less likely to mistake one for the other because they use different words when they refer to their respective pursuits. In

German, one speaks of *philosophische Wissenschaft* or of *Philosophie als Wissenschaft*, just as in French one speaks of *sciences morales*. Literally translated into English these expressions amount to mere puzzles, and the corresponding idiomatic terms do without reference to the word “science,” as if to distinguish what the German and French taxonomies tend to conflate. The English language separates science, or rigorous knowledge of the causal nexus between natural phenomena, from the disciplines of philosophical study and ethics. Americans, esp. college students, are extremely confident that anything philosophically worthwhile can be understood without requiring the acquisition of a foreign language and they are likely to give up on philosophical literature that fails to satisfy the conditions of simplicity and accessibility. After all, the great philosophical themes of the true, the good, and the beautiful are the common property of all members of society and therefore accessible to all. It violates the democratic instinct that is so ingrained in the American mind when philosophers go beyond ordinary language to discuss what everyone should be able to comprehend. At most, philosophers are suffered to become precise and therefore pedantic in their mode of expression, but a philosophy that uses any sort of specialized jargon appears as a kind of Jesuitry, a surreptitious way of returning us to the slavery of dogmatism. Unless it can make itself clear to everyone, philosophy seems merely another pious fraud and a way of reestablishing the priesthood of the few over the many.

Notwithstanding these differences, one can meaningfully and without much ado refer to French philosophers, German philosophers, and, yes, American philosophers. We can even refer to French, German, and American philosophies. Is Jewish philosophy on a par with these types of philosophies? How does it compare? And should “Jewish” not rather be matched with something like “Christian” and “Islamic” rather than with “American,” “French,” or “German,” in other words, am I not altogether barking up the wrong tree? In order to get a preliminary and merely quantitative impression as to how to compare Jewish philosophy with other philosophies, I undertook a websearch.

Websearch “American, French, German, and Jewish philosophies” conducted Tuesday Oct. 9, 2007, ca. 12:00pm EST:

www.google.com

74,500,000 for american philosophy.

54,400,000 for french philosophy.

23,400,000 for german philosophy.

2,530,000 for Jewish philosophy.

www.google.de:

2.160.000 für deutsche philosophie.

2.020.000 für französische Philosophie.

1.020.000 für amerikanische Philosophie.

588.000 für jüdische Philosophie.

www.google.fr:

2 300 000 pour philosophie francaise.

2 190 000 pour philosophie allemande.

1 950 000 pour philosophie americaine.

956 000 pour philosophie juive.

Search for Jewish, Christian, and Islamic philosophies

www.google.fr:

2 100 000 pour philosophie islamique.

1 280 000 pour philosophie chretienne.

956 000 pour philosophie juive.

www.google.de:

2.060.000 für islamische philosophie.

823.000 für christliche philosophie.

588.000 für jüdische Philosophie.

www.google.com:

12,700,000 for christian philosophy.

2,530,000 for Jewish philosophy.

2,230,000 for islamic philosophy.

With the exception of the Northamerican search (google.com), where Jewish philosophy is slightly more frequently found than Islamic philosophy, Jewish philosophy is usually the term with the least “hits.” Although it comes out last, it is hardly an infrequently mentioned term. What we can learn from this instant algorithmic canon of search engine “hits” is that Jewish philosophy, whether considered in comparison with the philosophies of nations or whether considered in comparison with the philosophies of communities of faith, is actually its considerable popularity among internet users. Of the world’s population, there are currently approximately 2.5 billion Christians, followed by approximately 1.5 billion Muslims. In comparison, there only about 14 million Jews. The considerable popularity of Jewish philosophy among internet users in the Western hemisphere indicates either that Jews are particularly active internet users and interested in Jewish philosophy or, more likely, that Jewish philosophy is widely popular, especially among Christians, especially in France and Germany.

Generally speaking, it is probably safe to say that Jews have not been enamored with philosophy or philosophers. In the canon of Judaic studies, Jewish philosophy is a marginal subject, eclipsed by historical-philological and sociological disciplines. Sometimes and in some places the academic study of Jewish philosophy is even considered an indicator of an attenuation of Judaism rather than a sign of the strength of the tradition. In such cases, it is taken as a sign of alienation, of a loss of authenticity, a selling out to the Gentiles, or, at best, of apologetic value. It reeks of Jewish disloyalty or religious unbelief, rather than of an affirmation of Jewish vitality, or it is feared to carry alien fire before the altar of Torah. To my knowledge, there are currently only two “departments” of Jewish philosophy, namely, at Yeshiva University in New York (an institution whose commitment to orthodoxy is not in doubt) and at Tel Aviv University in Israel (an institution whose heterodoxy is not in doubt). Elsewhere, e.g., at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem or at Ben Gurion University in Beer Sheva, the corresponding unit refers to its subject matter as the “thought of Israel” (*mahshevet yisrael*) and usually translates as “Department of Jewish Thought.”

It is not just in neoconservative Zionist circles that Jewish philosophy is held in low esteem.<sup>3</sup> With less pathos and more of a skeptical note, the Yiddish word *filosof* refers to someone who engages in futile speculation instead of *tacheles*, the concrete and real. In modern Hebrew, perhaps because of an enduring German Jewish influence on

Israeli cultural and educational institutions, the person engaging in futile speculation is no longer known as a *filosof* but as an *astronaut*.

With this I turn to history.

## 2. On the origins of Jewish philosophy and the history of Jewish philosophical writing

The ill repute of philosophy among the Jews dates back to the talmudic rabbis who refer to it as *hokhmat yavvan*, the wisdom of Greece. Thus identified as an “alien wisdom” (Momigliano), Greek philosophy is excreted, so to say, from the range of permissible subjects of the rabbinic curriculum. Moreover, the rabbis condemn Jewish fathers who teach their sons the language of Greece. To be sure, such a condemnation would have been pointless unless Greek was widely spoken among the Jews, as it was indeed not only in Alexandria in Egypt, which was the hub of Hellenistic Judaism, but also in Jewish Palestine, as Saul Lieberman has shown in a number of studies.<sup>4</sup>

It was the Greeks themselves, more precisely certain Greek ethnographers who, travelling in the wake of the armies of the Macedonian king Alexander, first called attention to the Jews whom they called “a race of philosophers.” This expression was used by no lesser than Theophrastus, whom Diogenes Laertius called “the most distinguished” among the students of Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> The question is what Theophrastus and his contemporaries, such as Hecataeus of Abdera, had in mind when they canonized the entire Jewish people as “philosophers?” What distinguished the Jews to deserve what, in Theophrastus’ view, could not but amount to extraordinary praise? To answer these questions it is helpful to consider the genre of literature in which these Greeks reported on Jews, Egyptians, and other nations they encountered in the wake of Alexander’s conquests.

Felix Jacoby, editor of an important edition of Greek historiographic fragments, calls the late 4th to early 3rd century ethnographic works of Greek historians, which are our main external sources of early Jewish history, “ethnographic utopias.” This genre of literature flourished after the “culmination of Greek theory of nature, culture, and the state in Plato and Democritus” and is “boosted by the great discoveries of the time of Alexander and his successors.” It “does not describe a people for its own sake but uses the historical-ethnographic material as a substrate in order to develop the ideal of a state or another philosophical theory in a fictitious or real people und thus in order to exert a practical-political influence, if possible.” According to Jacoby, this had already been the intention of Xenophon’s *Cyropedia*.<sup>6</sup> In this work, Xenophon describes the reorganization of the Persian armies under Cyrus on the model of Lacedaimonian (Spartan) society. Whether it is the Persians or the Jews, then, who are praised in Greek literature, it amounts to part and parcel of a rhetoric aiming at putting Athenian society to shame. If we remember the degree to which the philosophical movement associated with the names of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle was at odds with Athenian society, then we realize that praising these barbarians as philosophers was a polemical statement more than a genuine report on Jewish, Persian, or Egyptian practices. It conformed with the assumption, then common among Greek philosophical authors, that true knowledge was embedded in the constitutions of the most ancient societies and that it was necessary for the Athenians to learn from them.

When it comes to the ancient Jews themselves, Greek *paideia* seemed to offer them a way to participate in the new social and political order because it provided them with a legitimate reason for holding on to what had hitherto separated them from others, namely their rejection of polytheism. It allowed them to attribute continued relevance and meaning to their sacred traditions and practices, while at the same time integrating them into a larger world that shared many of their concerns. Greek philosophy confirmed rather than denigrated Jewish monotheism, a fact that was full of potential for a spiritual and political alliance. This may explain why Greek language and Hellenistic philosophy penetrated the Jewish community so quickly. To be sure, setting aside the translation of the Mosaic law, the first wave of Jewish Hellenistic writings seems to have been limited to an assertion of the antiquity of the Jews and of the congeniality between their laws and the primordial knowledge attributed to them by the Greek philosophical ethnographers. The major literary effort among 3rd century Hellenized Jews (e.g., Demetrius, Eupolemos, Aristobulos, and others cited by Eusebius in his *Preparatio Evangelica* and by other fathers of the church) was to prove from the antiquity of their own history that the Greeks must have learned philosophy from the ancient Jews.<sup>7</sup>

As a literary genre, Greek philosophical enthusiasm for the lifestyle of the Jewish priests was a short-lived phenomenon. As Arnaldo Momigliano points out in a study on “the limits of Hellenization,” the Greeks never took notice of the Greek translation of the Torah that, for the Jews of Alexandria, contained the philosophy of Moses. Initial praise gave way to a rather vicious literature of contempt, beginning with the Egyptian priest Manetho, who described the Jews as descended from an Egyptian colony of lepers led by a renegade priest from Heliopolis who taught them to follow laws that were the very opposite of everything the Egyptians considered sacred. In this and similar pagan works from late antiquity, the tenor of writing about the Jews is that they are a people of atheists and misanthropes.<sup>8</sup>

The idea of a fundamental harmony between Plato, Stoa, and Moses lived on among the Hellenized Jews and became an important tool in the defense of the Jews and Judaism under the Romans.<sup>9</sup> But it would be wrong to consider the philosophical literature of Hellenistic Judaism as a mere phenomenon of Jewish apologetics. That Greek wisdom entered the curriculum of the Jews of Alexandria and other cities under Greek rule leads to one of the great epoch-making moments in Western history. Greek philosophy formed Western thought not through the immediate agency of the works of the Greek philosophicers themselves, many of which were in fact lost, but through the mediation of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers, all of whom were indebted to the decision of the Jews of Alexandria to translate the Torah into Greek and to interpret it in light of Greek wisdom.<sup>10</sup>

I believe we miss the significance of Philo of Alexandria’s contribution to the history of Western thought if we consider him merely an anxious community leader who provides his parishioners with reasons not to abandon the Jewish way of life. Harry A. Wolfson was probably correct when he argued that the synthesis of Jewish belief and Greek wisdom accomplished by Philo by means of an allegorical interpretation established the foundation of Western thought until the time of Spinoza who was the first to consider this type of philosophical exegesis of Scripture fraudulent and detrimental to Scripture, philosophy, and the political community alike.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria is insufficiently comprehended if he is merely considered the first, and ultimately apologetic, Jewish philosopher and not also the inaugurator of the peculiar Western synthesis of Greek wisdom and biblical faith that by and

large prevailed among Jews, Christians, and Muslims throughout the Middle Ages and in some ways and contexts continues to prevail until today.

We note the historiographic and lexicographic complications entailed in these observations. Philo, Josephus, and the entire literature of Hellenistic Judaism, while obviously Jewish, became a fundamental part of the Christian and Western canon of philosophical thought but they were expurgated from the Jewish curriculum and they remained unknown or unacknowledged among the Jews for many centuries. After the destruction of the second temple and perhaps more decisively with the decline of the land of Israel as a center of Jewish economic and cultural productivity in the 5th century CE, philosophy or the wisdom of Greece loses traction among the Jews for almost half a millenium until it is revived under the Abbasids in the Baghdad renaissance of the 9th century.

This is not the time to recount the history of medieval philosophy. Suffice it to say that Jews participated in the revival of Greek wisdom among the Muslims. They wrote philosophical works in Arabic that were informed and inspired by the works of their Muslim peers, including theological defenses of the reasonableness of Jewish beliefs and practices and Aristotelian and neo-Platonic writings on the entire range of subjects covered by their Greek masters (to the degree that they were extant). Some of the works written by the Jewish philosophers rejected philosophy altogether and defended the biblical faith as superior, a literary stance also found among Muslims and Christians. Others attained classical status in their ability to establish strategies of reconciling the obvious tensions between the claims of the philosophers and the anthropomorphic language of scripture. Jewish philosophy survives the decline of the Abbasid caliphate in the east, and of the Umayyad caliphate in the west, by virtue of the activity of the great translators of the 12th and 13th century who recreated the works of the Judeo-Arab authors in Hebrew and created a philosophical terminology in this language that provided the foundation for a continuation of Jewish philosophical thought in the Roman-Catholic realm. Here, however, Jewish Aristotelianism and neo-Platonism competes with a strong mystical trend and the Maimonidean controversy in Southern France sets the stage for a decline of philosophical study among the Jews that was not reverted until the modern age.

### 3. Reflections on the canon of Jewish philosophers

The *Metzler Lexikon jüdischer Philosophen*, edited by Andreas Kilcher and Otfried Fraisse and published in 2003, is one of the most recent attempts to provide a comprehensive synopsis of philosophical thinkers among the Jews.<sup>12</sup> The range of thinkers included can illustrate some of the problems entailed in establishing a canon of Jewish philosophers. For my purposes this lexicon is particularly helpful in that it chooses a different approach to Jewish philosophy than some of the well known histories of Jewish philosophy, such as Julius Guttman's famous and still fundamental work, *Philosophies of Judaism. A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig*, and the more recent Routledge *History of Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman. The original title of Guttman's book was *Die Philosophie des Judentums*. For Guttman, who was the son of a historian of medieval Jewish philosophy and one of the last pillars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, never articulates what he considers the "essence" of Judaism, but it is clear that the center of gravity of the philoso-

phy of Judaism is in its religion, which in turn is founded on the ethical monotheism of the biblical prophets. Whether or not it is philosophy in the Greek sense is not the prevailing or important question. But to this neo-Kantian, it is clear that the essence of religion, in the Jewish sense, is belief in God, and belief in God is ultimately belief in the moral obligation of man. The first edition of Guttman's book traces this ethical monotheism from its biblical origins to the thought of Hermann Cohen. The revised and enlarged Hebrew edition on which the American translation is based changes the title to the plural ("philosophies" instead of "philosophy") and allows for this set of traditions to culminate in the thought of Franz Rosenzweig without altering its fundamental concern with "religion" as the center of gravity of the philosophy of Judaism. As Leo Strauss pointed out in a famous critique of the first edition of Guttman's book, Guttman considers the modern understanding of religion and hence of the philosophy of religion superior to the medieval interpretation of Jewish law in that it provides a deeper appreciation of biblical religion in its ethical focus. In contrast, Strauss argues that the modern philosophical understanding of religion is no longer philosophically sound because it has secularized the religious idea of the good and hence entered into a synthesis with religion that corrupts both philosophy and religion. In contrast, so Strauss, Maimonides remained true to the Platonic theory of law, as articulated in the *Nomoi*, and hence refrained from synthesizing what cannot and ought not to be synthesized, namely, philosophy and law. With one stroke, Strauss dismisses virtually the entire modern canon from the list of Jewishly or philosophically relevant writings.

In contrast to Guttman, the editors and contributors to the Routledge *History of Jewish Philosophy* do not suggest that there is an ascertainable or tacitly assumed "essence" of Judaism, nor are they beholden to a schema of historical progress. Instead, they hope to restore the Jewish participants and Jewish participation in the plural conversation on philosophy over the ages and thus to contribute to a less "imperialistic" view of Western cultural history. This intention articulates an absence of clearly defined boundaries of Jewish philosophy and the result is an oddly bloodless set of chapters that cover the same range of thinkers that are familiar from Guttman's account without providing any further going justification for this canon. The presuppositions of Guttman's account are reduced to a historical episode ("Nineteenth century German Reform philosophy"), the institutional framework that tied Guttman's original work to a larger system of disciplines is reduced to an ideology ("The Ideology of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*"), and more recent developments are merely grouped as "Contemporary Jewish Philosophy," whereby the singular of the chapter heading belies the lack of any attempt at inner cohesion. The result is a disengaging sequence of chapters that one might turn to for basic information but that provides no definition or argument of a larger sort about the specific qualities of Jewish philosophy or Jewish philosophers.

Returning to Kilcher and Fraisse's *Lexikon*, the main editor, Andreas Kilcher, indicates in his introduction that the editors prefer to make "Jewish philosophy" a matter of interpretation rather than definition (p. XVI). The history of the historiography of Jewish philosophy and thus of the canonification of certain thinkers as Jewish philosophers begins, according to Kilcher, with bishop Guillaume d'Auvergne's 13th-century classification of certain authors as *Hebraei philosophi* (p. VIII). To be sure, Kilcher emphasizes that this concerns merely the history of the concept, and not of the philosophical pursuit itself. It seems significant, however, that until the 19th-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement with its efforts to elevate the study of Jewish history and literature to the level of an academic discipline, interest in the Hebrew or Jewish philosophers was

a concern for learned Christians rather than for learned Jews. Christian Hebraism was equally interested in the Jewish neo-Platonists and Aristotelians as in the Kabbalists. In fact, it was a widely shared assumption that Kabbalah represented the esoteric philosophy and the true metaphysical doctrine of the Jews (and hence the inner truth of the Mosaic Torah) while the rationalist and Aristotelian doctrines of Maimonides and others were merely their exoteric form. Guttman and others who were interested in a Jewish philosophy of religion largely dismissed Jewish mysticism as merely mythological and hence sub-philosophical. In this they followed the Kantian dismissal of traditional metaphysics, which had shifted religion to a correlation with ethics. Kilcher and Fraisse, on the other hand, remain true to the Christian historiographical tradition of Jewish philosophy and include in their *Lexikon* not just a considerable number of kabbalistic thinkers, from Isaak the Blind to Isaak Luria, but oddly also propagandists and practical Kabbalists such as Nathan of Gaza and Shabetai Tsevi. The standard for inclusion in their canon of Jewish philosophers becomes particularly opaque in their selection of modern thinkers. Of a total of 193 entries, 118 entries are dedicated to people (mostly men) born between 1700 and 1934. This makes it appear as if the modern period was by far the most productive time for Jewish philosophers to be active. But if even Walter Rathenau is among the Jewish philosophers, why then not also Rosa Luxemburg? Was Israel ben Eliezer a.k.a. the “Besht”, a philosopher? Was Fritz Mauthner preoccupied with the Jewish question, but not Karl Marx? Was Benno Jacob a philosopher, and were Constantin Brunner’s writings a contribution to Jewish philosophy?

The somewhat erratic selection and the preferred inclusion of modern German Jewish intellectuals clearly plays to common sentiments and well established patterns in German popular science publications on Jewish themes. When dealing with the Jewish intellectual achievements of the past, the entries often appeal to the feelings of loss, guilt, and shame putatively held by the intended educated German readers.<sup>13</sup> The *Lexikon* can therefore do without a solid criterion of exclusion. We’ve almost come full circle. Here it suffices to be part of the Jewish people and to have published a few philosophical books in order to qualify as a member of the race of philosophers.

With this rather disconcerting set of symptoms as a backdrop I turn to some observations I found in the writings of Gillian Rose that may have some bearing on how to become a Jewish philosopher if by this we mean inclusion in a canon of Jewish philosophers and if by this approach we hope to shed some light on the peculiar pursuit known (or unknown) as Jewish philosophy. Gillian Rose is not included in Kilcher and Fraisse’s *Lexikon*, most likely because she was born too recently (namely, in 1947) to have qualified but also perhaps because she had herself received into the Anglican Church shortly before she succumbed to ovarian cancer. She died in 1995. It is not easy to determine Gillian Rose’s position. She wrote her dissertation on Theodor W. Adorno (listed in Kilcher and Fraisse) but she did so under the anti-Marxist Leszek Kolakowski.<sup>14</sup> For a while, Rose was a neo-Hegelian philosopher who believed that Hegel could be read in a manner that avoided the pitfalls of the usual split between theological or right-wing and political or left-wing interpretations. In a volume of philosophical essays on *Judaism and Modernity*, published in 1993, she brings her often brilliantly “masked”<sup>15</sup> readings to bear on the question of a Jewish philosophy. In fact, one of her essays has the title, “Is there a Jewish philosophy?” What I find particularly heartening about Gillian Rose’s writing on Jewish philosophy is that she takes on what has by now become a hardened if poorly justified enthusiasm for the postmodern among students of Jewish philosophy.

Here is how she begins her book.

## Preface

A friend has suggested that I preface this book with an *apologia pro vita sua* along the lines in which Franz Rosenzweig tried to explain his return to Judaism in his letter to Friedrich Meinecke declining the offer of a university post. This apology from 1920 seems uncannily to converge with the growing tendency nowadays to present theoretical work with a declaration of one's personal as well as one's academic qualifications and interests: 'I' write 'as a woman', 'as a Jew', and so on. [We are reminded of the introductory apology to the hurried reader of the title of this paper.]

She continues:

My trajectory displays no such logic. If I knew who or what I were, I would not write: I write out of those moments of anguish which are nameless and I am able to write only where the tradition can offer me a discipline, a means, to articulate and explore that anguish. Against the self-image of the age, it has been *within the philosophical tradition*, which for me includes social, political and religious thought, that I have found the resources for the exploration of this identity and lack of identity, this independence and dependence, this power and powerlessness. My difficulty is not addressed in any rejection of that tradition which would settle for only one side of my predicament: lack of identity, dependence, powerlessness, or any account of otherness which theorizes solely exclusion and control.

It is this *speculative* account of experience, which persists in acknowledging the predicament of identity and lack of identity, independence and dependence, power and powerlessness, that has led me to Judaism. Or, rather, it is by working through my difficulty in the ratio and the crises of modern philosophy that I discover myself in the middle of the ratio and crises of modern Judaism.

Thus identified in her commitment to both the modern philosophical project and absorbed by the inevitability of engaging with Judaism as a modern phenomenon, Rose names that which she is running up against, against which she asserts her otherwise elusive and uncategorized self:

I have not arrived at Judaism as the sublime Other of modernity – whether as the moment of divine excess from Kant's third Critique, as the living but worldless community from Rosenzweig, as the devastating ethical commandment of Levinas, as trace and writing from deconstruction. Nor have I discovered Judaism waiting at the end of the end of philosophy, Judaism *redivivus* out of the ashes of the Holocaust: as the Jewish return into history for Fackenheim, as the issue of modernity for [Zygmunt] Bauman, and as the terrible essence of the West for Lacoue-Labarthe.

In this list, a list of names that the author unmasks as Jewish or perhaps pseudo-Jewish imperatives that are to be resisted, Rose provides us with an anti-canon of Jewish philosophers that includes Kant, who, while not a Jew, nevertheless served to Cohen, Guttman, and the entire *Wissenschaft des Judentums* as the measure of Jewish ethical monotheism; it includes Rosenzweig, whose works are central to virtually all canons of modern Jewish thinkers and whose "new" or "speech thinking" opened the path also for Levinas and his "radicalization of ethics" (Gibbs);<sup>16</sup> it includes Emil Fackenheim, Zygmunt Bauman, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe who theorized the Holocaust in different ways but all considered it an event that disclosed an essential truth about modernity.

ty, Jewish or otherwise. Rose stands up to resist all of these most widely shared corner posts of modern Jewish philosophizing.

This is how she continues:

No. I write out of the discovery that both recent philosophy, in its turn to what I name new ethics, and modern Jewish philosophy, in its ethical self-representations, are equally uncomfortable with any specific reflection on modern law and the state, which they assimilate to the untempered domination of Western metaphysics. Rome haunts the agon between Athens and Jerusalem, but only the imperial Roman eagle has been admitted, while the Rome which invented private property law, the law of persons, and separated it from citizenship is forgotten because it is so familiar. In the eagerness to eschew the metaphysics of subjectivity, recent philosophy and Jewish philosophy lose the means to discern the structuring of our anxiety, the modern mix of freedom and unfreedom in civil society and the state which continues to contour our subjectivity and which cannot be abjured. Having renounced teleological philosophy of history, general philosophy produces in its place the newly purified polarity of reason and ethics, which Jewish philosophy, scared of the charge of Pharisaical legalism, intensifies with its purified polarity of law and love. Philosophy and Judaism want to proclaim a New Testament which will dispose of the broken promises of modernity.

Permit me to pass over these passages without comment and add just a few more lines before making a few concluding remarks.

I write out of the violence infecting these philosophical purifications which ignore their own preconditions and outcomes. I write out of the feigned innocence of the 'and' in Judaism and Modernity. This is my *apologia pro vita sua*: the only way I can approach my life is by attempting to explore how the difficulties with which I engage may articulate that life. The speculative method of engaging with the new purifications whenever they occur, in order to yield their structuring but unacknowledged third, involves deployment of the resources of reason and of its crisis, of identity and lack of identity. This results in what I call the facetious style – the mix of severity and irony, with many facets and forms, which presents the discipline of the difficulty.

"Is there a Jewish philosophy?" Gillian Rose asks toward the end of her essay by that name (p. 23). "I hope," she continues, "that by now you *no longer know* the answer to this question."

I want to augment this rhetorical move with a passage from Hannah Arendt's *Denktagebuch*. Arendt writes about the Socratic approach to justice: *What is justice? The more I think about it, the less I know the answer, and the more just I become*. The same seems true for Gillian Rose as a Jewish philosopher *and*, we might add, as a philosopher: the more she asks the question, the less she knows the answer, and the more of a Jewish philosopher she becomes, even though, in her death-bed conversion, she attempts to prevent her inclusion in any future canon of Jewish philosophers.

Our question was: How does one become a Jewish philosopher? The simple answer is, by being included in a canon of Jewish philosophers. But, as we saw, canons are problematic and the intentions behind these canons are often alien to what may be legitimately considered philosophical or Jewish. We also found, however, that a Jewish

philosopher appeared to us in her unmaking of a canon of Jewish philosophers. I submit that this criterion may hold not just for Jewish philosophy but may equally apply to other philosophies.

## Notes:

1 This paper was originally written for and delivered to the Institute for Philosophy and Religion at Boston University in its 2007-08 series on "The Future of the Philosophy of Religion."

2 I take a more direct approach to the definition of Jewish philosophy in "Zwischen den Stühlen. On the Taxonomic Anxieties of Modern Jewish Philosophy" in *European Journal of Jewish Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1, 2007, pp. 105-134.

3 The most powerful intellectual voice among Zionist neocons today is Yoram Hazoni who, in a book on the "struggle for Israel's soul," identifies Martin Buber and other influential liberal intellectuals as having exerted a damaging influence on the Jewish state, one that must be countered by an equally powerful intellectual movement that Hazoni is trying to spearhead today. See Hazoni, *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul*, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

4 Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (1942), idem, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (2nd ed. 1962), and idem, "How much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" in Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Biblical and Other Studies* (1963).

5 Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, V.(Ch.1)35, ed. R.D.Hicks (Loeb Classical Library), vol. I, p. 485. Cf. Arnaldo Momigliano, *Alien wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization*, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 85. It was Jacob Bernays who reconstructed parts of Theophrastus' book *On Piety* from quotations in Porphyry's treatise *On Abstinence*. See Bernays, *Theophrastus' Schrift über die Frömmigkeit. Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte*, Berlin: Wilhelm Herz, 1866. According to Bernays, information about the Jews may have entered the Greek world as early as the beginning of the 4th century, when merchants also reported on Persian troop movements in Phoenicia. To be sure, early information about the Jews is hampered by the lack of a common language and by the formation of general hypotheses on the basis of insufficient information and false analogies. Thus Theophrastus understood the Jews to be a Syrian tribe that related to the other Syrians as the Brahmins related to the rest of Indian society, namely, as the "philosophical" tribe among them, and he misrepresented some of their sacrificial practices. See Bernays pp. 109-113.

6 See Felix Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker* (F Gr Hist), Dritter Teil: Geschichte von Staedten und Voelkern (Horographie und Ethnographie), a: Kommentar zu Nr. 262-296. Unveränderter Neudruck, Leiden: Brill, 1954, p. 29 (my translation).

7 Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom*, p. 93.

8 On the origins of ancient anti-Jewish sentiments see Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia. Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World*, Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998. Ironically, this bizarre and polemical literature would most likely have been forgotten, had it not been for Josephus whose defense against such authors as Manetho, Apollonius Molon (Julius Caesar's and Marcus Tullius Cicero's teacher of rhetoric), and Apion recorded their opinions and, via the Christian transmission of his works, made them an indelible part of Western literature about the Jews.

9 The works of Philo of Alexandria are the most excellent example of this trend.

10 The Alexandrians considered this Greek wisdom not just congenial with the wisdom of Moses but they considered Moses the teacher of the Greek philosophers. Thus for Philo and Josephus, Moses is not just a philosopher but the chief among all philosophers and, as the most ancient lawgiver, no less than the philosopher-king himself who established a perfect commonwealth, using a constitution that was unknown to the Greek authors who wrote about forms of government. Josephus was the first to call this unique and best form of government a “theocracy.”

11 See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1947, 2 vols.

12 Metzler *Lexikon jüdischer Philosophen: Philosophisches Denken des Judentums von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. Edited by Andreas B. Kilcher and Otfried Fraisse with Yossef Schwartz. Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2003, reviewed in *Religious Studies Review* 30: 2,3 (July 2004), p. 217.

13 Among the consistent exceptions to this shortcoming are the entries by Carlos Fraenkel and Otfried Fraisse, which invariably meet the highest scholarly standards and are a pleasure to read.

14 For this and the following cf. Arnold J. Wolf, “The tragedy of Gillian Rose - Jewish social critic” in *Judaism* (Fall 1997), found at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0411/is\\_n4\\_v46/ai\\_20583585](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is_n4_v46/ai_20583585) (accessed Oct. 9, 2007).

15 See the poignant description in Howard Caygill’s obituary for Gillian Rose in the journal *Radical Philosophy*, at [http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel\\_id=2191&editorial\\_id=9844](http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2191&editorial_id=9844).

16 See my review of Robert Gibbs, *Correlations in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (New Haven/Ct.: Yale University Press, 1992), in *Textual Reasoning. Journal of the Postmodern Jewish Philosophy Network*, volume 4.1 (Febr. 1995) at [http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4\\_1.html](http://etext.virginia.edu/journals/tr/archive/pmjp/pmjp4_1.html).