Book Reviews

Jewish Virtue Ethics
By Geoffrey D. Claussen (Editor), Alexander Green (Editor), Alan L. Mittleman (Editor).
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The demand for courses in ethics has single-handedly sustained philosophy departments at the contemporary university. The courses are often taught by resolving practical ethical challenges. One way to do this is to suggest a theoretical menu of solutions such as utilitarianism and Kantianism. A third solution, 'virtue ethics', is a relative late-comer to the discussion. As Julie Annas notes in the foreword to *Jewish Virtue Ethics*, this approach only gained currency in philosophy departments rather recently and is perhaps best known in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (cf. vi, 38). Although rooted in ancient philosophy, it is not obvious why virtue ethics would be useful in understanding Jewish thought. The notion of virtue or excellence as an essential part of a flourishing life is decidedly Greek, explained most fully in books such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. As the festival of Hanukah attests, the Greeks hardly seem like a promising point of departure for understanding Jewish thought.

Some of the contributors to this volume are indeed perplexed by the choice of the editors, Geoffrey Claussen, Alexander Green, and Alan Mittleman, to frame the volume in terms of virtue. In the essay on "Biblical Literature", for example, Amanda Beckenstein Mbuvi writes:

> [M]ost biblical literature precedes Plato and Aristotle and derives from a cultural context distinct from theirs.… Biblical literature reflects an earlier way of assigning identity and conceptualizing peoplehood. Accordingly, biblical literature does not exactly engage in what this volume identifies as Jewish virtue ethics… (10).

By trying to impose a Greek philosophical framework on the Bible, do we not risk distorting its meaning? Carlos Levy is even more direct: '[F]or rabbinic Judaism, the attempt to integrate Greek philosophy in the interpretation of the Bible, itself translated into Greek, was an error, tragically demonstrated by the disappearance of the Jewish community of Alexandria, ca. 117 CE' (33).

One contributor, Clifford Orwin, seems genuinely puzzled by the project. In his essay on Josephus (37-100 CE), he writes: 'You had never

thought of Flavius Josephus as a proponent of virtue ethics? Nor, before our editors had prodded me, had I' (38). But, Orwin, goes on to argue, there is a strong, *prima facie* case to be made for understanding and defending the Torah as the best way of life. To make such a case is to confront the account of the best way of life made by thinkers such as 'Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and Theophrastus' (39). The defense of the Jewish Tradition, for Josephus, means the defense of Jewish Law as producing the highest and best—the most virtuous human beings as well as the best communities. It may be the case that such an account of human flourishing is available only from 'a revelatory encounter with the divine', as Eitan Fishbane suggests in his essay on the Zohar (139). However, we might also wonder if we can defend the Torah by examining other accounts of virtue, especially those, like Aristotle's, which argue that such virtue can be acquired as the result of habituation. Its basis is in the nature of the soul, which is receptive to such habituation.

The strongest case for the integrating of virtue ethics into Judaism comes from perhaps the greatest Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), in his work "The Eight Chapters", a section from his *Commentary on the Mishnah.* There, Maimonides makes the case that Jewish law has a particular character that can be best grasped through the lens of Aristotle's *Ethics*. The idea of borrowing from Aristotle is hardly a problem since the truth established by reason cannot contradict the truth expressed by Scripture. As Kenneth Seeskin notes, this is 'an assumption that few modern scholars would share' (100). This assumption is problematic, however, if the truth is bound by history and culture: 'The central problem Maimonides faced is that Jewish law and Aristotelian virtue ethics emerged out of vastly different cultures. Aristotle reflects the ideals of an aristocratic culture that values people who occupy high places in society, lead armies into battle, or decide weighty matters of state' (100). Such objections, rooted perhaps in a commitment to democracy, raise the question of whether the Torah prefers a particular sort of regime, such as aristocracy ruled by its wisest and most learned scholars. As Maimonides writes in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, 'It behooves the governor of a city … [to acquire virtuous habits] so that these actions may proceed from him according to a determined measure and according to the desserts of the people who are affected by them and not merely because of his following a passion' (106-7). Maimonides's suggestion seems to be that the highest form of virtue is intellectual, and that moral virtue follows from intellectual perfection. Seeskin suggests that this is a problematic view, not only in terms of its consistency with Jewish law, but also because of its 'exclusivity'. By this he means that intellectual virtue as the highest form of imitating God excludes most of the community which is simply following the law out of habit or fear.

This last point raises the tension between moral and intellectual virtue. Several of the subsequent Jewish thinkers covered in this volume respond to Maimonides's attempt to harmonise reason and revelation. Gersonides (1288-

1344) advocated 'for a form of Aristotelian Judaism, a position that he took further than any of his predecessors' (149). According to Alexander Green, 'the justification to read the Torah as a vehicle for becoming trained in the Aristotelian moral virtues had already become central to the Jewish philosophical curriculum through many of Maimonides's works. Gersonides continues the tradition of virtue ethics derived from both Aristotle and Maimonides…' (150). In contrast to Maimonides (and in anticipation of Spinoza), Gersonides identifies *chesed* [loving-kindness] as the fundamental virtue that humanity shares with God. Moreover, 'the primary way for people to imitate God's loving-kindness is by teaching those who know less to help increase [their] intellectual perfection' (154). Gersonides emphasises that the pursuit of justice is one of deepest forms of such imitation. In the case of Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410), as Roslyn Weiss observes, the problem is not Maimonides's quest to explain the purpose of the individual *mitzvot* or the final end of the Torah itself. Crescas insists instead that 'the Torah leads *all* those who hold fast to it—whether they are perfected or deficient—to human happiness and the "yearned-for end"' (168). For Crescas, the purpose of Torah, and, indeed, of human beings more generally, is not the perfection of the intellect but rather 'the love of God and the true fear of Him' (171).

These rich veins of thought and speculation were carefully mined by Baruch Spinoza (1632-77), who in turn used them—even as he broke from them—to found modernity. As Heidi Ravven notes, Spinoza 'was particularly influenced by Maimonides, Gersonides, Crescas, and Hebreo Leone (Abravanel). The influence of Maimonides and Judaeo-Arabic scientific naturalism is evident throughout Spinoza's works, especially in his assessment of the relation, even identity, of the knowledge of God and the love of God' (214). Spinoza presents a set of virtues for liberal democracy in his *Theological-Political Treatise*, 'a blueprint for how both ought to be made the guiding principles of all modern liberal, nondenominational states' (214). The citizens of such a state need only possess *chesed* (or *caritas*), which is best expressed by the practice of toleration for the religious opinions of others. For those select, not to say rare, readers seeking an intellectual set of virtues, Spinoza writes his formidable *Ethics*, which in turn discloses the difficult path to understanding God. In one sense, the *Ethics* is the culmination of Maimonides's effort to harmonise Aristotle's ethics with Torah; however, after writing the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza makes little effort to preserve either Torah or Aristotle as the foundation of his thought. The culmination of his ethical life is freedom, including freedom from the authoritative claims of past traditions. The *Ethics* 'begins with metaphysics and God and Nature and it ends with spiritual transformation, the human approach to God. So either everything is ethics in some Spinozistic sense, or ethics has come to be something else in the course of the book than what we thought it was at the beginning' (215). Spinoza's formula of 'God and Nature' is a repudiation of a supernatural God who creates and stands apart from

nature or gives a perfect law through revelation. Nature has no purpose or aim, but simply unfolds according to fully determined, eternal laws that can be grasped by our reason. We can, out of nostalgia, attempt to preserve the theological vocabulary of the tradition and 'put new wine in old bottles'. But such efforts should not blind us to the radical break that Spinoza initiates.

As for the tension between moral and intellectual virtue, Spinoza dissolves it once and for all. In a section of her essay subtitled "All Virtue is Intellectual Virtue", Ravven explains how, for Spinoza, our salvation is entirely a matter of understanding the infinite natural causes of our behaviour. Understanding the world is ultimately a matter of using a rigorously scientific method to uncover the workings of nature. Ethics is simply a branch of science applied to human beings: 'What distinguished the search as ethical rather than narrowly scientific is the application of broad theoretical natural causal explanations to the self—mind as well as body—that is, the inclusion of the self within the universal framework of natural causes' (217). While such intellectual virtue is available only to a few, Spinoza envisions a society whose citizens are sufficiently tolerant of others to permit and even embrace the few individuals who have achieved such intellectual virtue. In short, Spinoza goes to the end of the road with Maimonides and beyond:

> Spinoza's theory of intellectual virtue both naturalizes and psychologizes Maimonides's vision while also breaking new ground. For Spinoza points us toward modernity in his ideal of independence of mind, of achieving personal freedom from narrow aspects of one's past and provincial origins appropriate to citizenship in a pluralist cosmopolitan polity, and of finding joy and peace and beneficence towards all, virtue, through a psychotherapeutic praxis of deep and honest self-reflection upon the specificities of memory when brought into the broader universe of understanding (223).

Modern Jewish thought, and Jewish virtue ethics, emerge in the wake of Spinoza's break from the tradition. More cautious than Spinoza, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1806) and his students attempt to preserve the tradition while embracing modern scientific and political thought. The *Haskalah* movement, which Mendelssohn helped to found in Berlin, clearly reflects Spinoza's legacy. No longer do issues such as the relation of philosophy and religion, or the tension between moral and intellectual virtue, remain central. Mendelssohn's instructions for cultivating virtue refer to a new type of virtue that reminds one of Spinoza as much as Maimonides:

> One should learn to consider every human action in connection with the ever-present lawgiver of nature and in relation to eternity. One should get used to having these considerations before one's eyes in every act that one performs. If one does this, a wholesome enthusiasm for virtue will be awakened in us, and each reason motivating us to be virtuous will attain an ethical majesty through which its influence and its effectiveness on the will is strengthened (245-6).

As Elias Sacks notes, Mendelssohn then brings God, the Bible, and *Halacha* forward to support this view. However, since virtue is universal, there are undoubtedly other paths to achieving the same end. This calls for broad toleration of other traditions, which are also effective in producing virtue. The Bible presents a kind of 'poetry [which] lends itself to musical recitation… [just as] the pleasant sentiment arising from fine arts and sciences to influence nonrational faculties and foster virtue' (248).

One of the of most prominent descendants of Mendelssohn's *Haskalah*, Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) was not only tolerated in Germany, but even became a leading professor of philosophy at the University of Marburg. Nor did Cohen flee from Judaism. Rather he used his position to make 'the case that Judaism and its historical texts were not only compatible with morality but even offered unique contributions to philosophical ethics' (338). Cohen's magnum opus, *The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, appears to be the peak and the fulfillment of Mendelssohn's vision. According to Shira Billet, Cohen believed that Judaism could play a central role in building Germany, that 'the moral project of the liberal German nation state' was entirely 'compatible with the moral project of Judaism' (338). Like Spinoza, Cohen saw ethics as primary in order to 'enshrine the concept of humanity as a whole (the unity of humanity) into all human political efforts' (342). Lest we get carried away with Cohen's lofty, idealised version of Judaism, Billet reminds us that Cohen's widow died in a Nazi concentration camp in 1941. This leads to the reader to wonder whether something went wrong with the theological-political project that Spinoza launched.

To their credit, the editors saw fit to include several influential thinkers, such as Israel Salanter (1809-1883), from eastern Europe, where political persecution and ghettoisation continued unabated (cf. 311ff.). Yet, the last several entries on figures such as Hannah Arendt, and themes including 'Jewish Feminism' and 'Jewish Environmentalism', point to the triumph of the Haskalah. Here we see the full flowering of Spinoza's Bible Science as well as his political project. In her essay on Jewish Feminism, for example, Rebecca Epstein-Levi interprets virtue in novel ways that move away from Aristotle and Maimonides. She writes that 'virtue ethics… concerns not just static qualities, but active character formation and commitments to particular ways of being'. The ways of being that she has in mind

> interrogate the ways gender-based oppression works within a family of traditions that share an overwhelming focus on the ways participants live their day-to-day lives and a particular set of attitudes toward shared texts and daily rituals entails reexamining those attitudes and ways of being, asking how they reinforce or subvert gendered hierarchies, and modifying them or replacing them as necessary (471).

As this quote suggests, Judaism needs to move beyond its debt to Aristotle as well as ancient Biblical and Rabbinic textual traditions. Epstein-Levi proposes replacing or 'recanonising' the very texts and authors that comprise this volume (476). She proposes instead selecting texts that '*center* ethnography… and highlight the lives and experiences of women and gender minorities' (477). The confidence in this project of revising the canon and rewriting the liturgy comes not from revelation itself, but rather the hope of promoting greater equality and freedom, the Spinozan formula for creating 'a more just and compassionate world' (479).

This review can hardly do justice to the wide-ranging and superb 38 essays by a diverse range of scholars. Indeed, the virtue of *Jewish Virtue Ethics* is that by setting out the entire tradition in terms of the Bible's confrontation with philosophy and virtue ethics in particular, the collection allows us to observe the sometimes tense but always fertile relation between Jerusalem and Athens. Indeed, by offering a diversity of perspectives on the meaning of Jewish virtue ethics, the book admirably illustrates the persistence of the tension between Torah and philosophy. Confronting this tension, as the authors of these essays make clear, proves most fruitful, if not essential, for extricating ourselves from our contemporary perplexities, not only about virtue, but about the role of religion and philosophy in our changing world.