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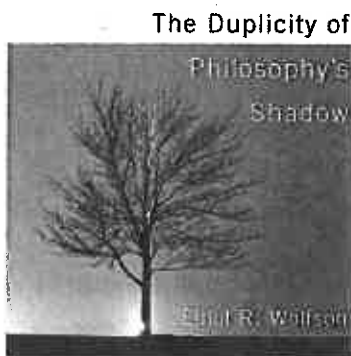


Heidegger and the Holocaust

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Re-Thinking Martin Heidegger, the Jews, and Judaism: Shaul Magid on Elliot Wolfson's *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other*

HEIDEGGER,
NAZISM,
AND THE
JEWISH OTHER



Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other*, Columbia University Press, 2018, 336pp., \$30

Martin Heidegger. Even for many unfamiliar with philosophy, the name conjures up everything from unrepentant antisemite to philosopher of Nazism. The problem many philosophers, including many Jews, have with these assertions is that this seemingly diabolical figure happens to be the greatest philosophical mind of the twentieth century. Emmanuel Levinas, who studied with Heidegger and was responsible from bringing Heidegger to Jean Paul Sartre's attention, noted as much in his interview with Philippe Nemo, published in *Ethics and Infinity*. Levinas claimed Heidegger's actions were "unforgivable," and while he disagreed with his philosophical project, he could not but acknowledge his intellectual genius. Perhaps even more pointed is Leo Strauss's assertion, "Only a great thinker could help us in our intellectual plight. But here is the trouble: the only great thinker in our time is Heidegger." The story is much more complicated than that. But you get the point.

The question of Heidegger's antisemitism is not focused as much on his membership in the Nazi party, a membership that began in May 1933 after his election to Rector of the University of Freiburg (he resigned his Rectorship a year later and stopped attending any party meetings but remained a member of the party) but rather on his unwillingness to admit his error in a famous interview in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1966. The question regained new relevance with the recent publication of his *Black Notebooks*, previously unpublished volumes of thoughts and jottings where antisemitic comments are scattered throughout the thousands of entries. As Peter Eli Gordon noted in his review of the notebooks in *The New York Review of Books*, it is now all but impossible to suggest that Heidegger did not exhibit sustained antisemitic attitudes. The question then is: what do we do with Heidegger?

Many of his students, colleagues, and philosophical progeny from Ernst Cassirer, Karl Jaspers, Hans Jonas, Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Arendt and Jacques Derrida, among many others, debated the nature of Heidegger's antisemitism and its relationships to his philosophy. In the past few decades a veritable cottage industry has emerged with scholarly articles on how Heidegger's antisemitism is implicated in his philosophy and whether one can extricate his system from its antisemitic foundations, a problem that challenges us to defend why Heidegger should matter at all in a way that Levinas and Strauss could not have imagined. They both lived in the paradoxical world that contemporary thinkers seem unwilling to inhabit, a world where evil and greatness can co-exist.

In *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow*, Elliot Wolfson enters this debate with a series of fresh questions and an intricate knowledge of the Jewish tradition, and especially its kabbalistic iteration, that most who write on Heidegger do not possess. Wolfson begins with the following admission. "The space we must inhabit, as uncomfortable as it might be, is one in which we acknowledge that Heidegger was both a Nazi given to anti-Semitic jargon and an incisive philosopher whose thinking not only was responding to the urgencies of his epoch but also contains the potential to unravel a thorny knot of politics relevant for the present as much as the past ... Heidegger is thus neither defensible nor disposable; his thinking – and this includes above all, his philosophical scapegoating of Jews under the rubric of *das Judentum* – demands reflective analysis and critical questioning. This injunction is not fulfilled by refutation." Wolfson thus inhabits the paradox with Levinas and Strauss but, unlike them, he offers an intricate analysis as to the affinities and differences between Heidegger and *das Judentum*, the latter of which Heidegger excludes from his philosophy of *Dasein*.

Wolfson attempts to break the logjam between those who claim Heidegger's antisemitism is distinct from his philosophical project, or at least not integral to it, and others such as Richard Wolin and Victor Farías who claim that it is endemic to it. "Heidegger's indiscretions and lapses in judgment were deliberate and reflect poorly on him, no matter how sublime his thinking. I would contend nonetheless it is equally misguided to say either that Heidegger's anti-Semitic tendencies have nothing to do with his philosophy or that they are at its core."

Here he quotes Richard Rorty for support that “the cogency of a philosophy is not compromised by the moral deprivation of the philosopher, but it is not satisfactory to say that a thinker’s thoughts do not, at least in part, both spring from and have an impact on the era in which she lives.” Wolfson will not easily let us out of this knotty paradox, seemingly abandoned by contemporary scholars. It is not just to say, as Levinas did, that Heidegger was an antisemite but we owe him a philosophical debt. Wolfson wants to interrogate the metaphysics that underlie Heidegger’s antisemitism to see how structures of inclusion and exclusion that inform his antisemitism are not only not unique to him but bubble beneath the surface of many aspects of the “Judeo-Christian” tradition that can emerge, given the proper conditions, in a variety of places. And even if they would not yield Nazism in all its darkness, they plague our thinking and complicate our politics.

So a reader could, and should, ask the question: What exactly does Wolfson want? In Wolfson’s own words, “How ... do we think Nazism in the shadow of Heidegger rather than fixate on how his Nazism cast a shadow on Heidegger?” Heidegger made certain metaphysical assumptions about Jewishness, or *das Judentum*, that excluded Jews from the orbit of authentic Being (*Dasein*) to which all human civilization takes part. While antisemitism is usually about Jews, *das Judentum*, which could also be “Judaism,” is better read in my view as Jewishness in Heidegger, the inevitable embodied state of Judaism in the Jew. This, by itself, does not give birth to Nazism; there are numerous Christian theologies that make similar claims, some of which Heidegger certainly utilized. And, so the argument goes, the exclusion of the Jews is done for the sake of mapping the terrain of authentic being in language, land, and worldliness (all of which Heidegger claimed Jewishness lacked, both physically and ontologically, that is, both empirically and metaphysically). But Wolfson is also making another, more innovative intervention. He is suggesting that Heidegger’s claims about *das Judentum* that produced his law of exclusion of the Jewish other are actually in part the result of his ignorance of Judaism; once we engage Heidegger’s claims about Judaism with a deep knowledge of the Jewish tradition, especially its mystical iteration (Heidegger had his own infatuation with certain mystical figures such as the thirteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhardt) we can see not only that Heidegger’s metaphysical assumptions about *das Judentum*, and thus Jews, are mistaken, but that the Jewish tradition itself holds certain views that cohere with various dimensions of Heidegger’s critique of *das Judentum*. That is, Judaism as Wolfson understands it, is not as distant from Heidegger’s own philosophical project as Heidegger or many of his readers thought. This is not meant as an indictment of Judaism *per se*. In the final chapter, Wolfson argues that Heidegger’s law of exclusion is a distortion of his own philosophical commitments. It is to say, rather, that some of the genius in Heidegger’s thinking is embedded in the kabbalistic imagination and, as such, that imagination can be vulnerable to the same distortion that led Heidegger to exclude the Jews, that is, the “other,” from the orbit of *Dasein*.

What is new here is that most scholars who work on the question of Heidegger and the Jews are not well-versed enough in the intricacies of the tradition to engage in such an examination. And most who have the requisite skills in the tradition are not interested, or prepared, to engage in the details of Heidegger's claims about Jewishness. In fact, while the subject of this work is about Heidegger and the Jews, it is more accurately about Heidegger and *Jewishness*. How does Heidegger's assessment of *das Judentum* inform his assessment of actual Jews? And in what ways is his error more complicated than simply excluding a people from his philosophical project, or viewing them as a kind of secularized anti-Christ or *Prinzip der Zerstörung* (literally the principle of destruction, the excluded other that prevents authentic being from its fulfillment). Rather, he intends to show how a deep rendering of the Jewish tradition show the faults in Heidegger's metaphysical assumptions. More pointedly, how does the Jewish tradition at times seem to support the very assumptions that Heidegger makes to exclude them? The critique then, is not solely about Heidegger but, in some way, about certain components of Judaism itself.

In order to take this ride one must suspend one's judgment about the inextricability of Heidegger's antisemitism. Wolfson makes it quite clear throughout the book that he is not contesting Heidegger's antisemitism, not during the war and not afterward. But, he argues, there is still much to learn from him, much that we *need* to learn from him not only in what he contributed to Western thought but how his errors are themselves not unique to him. The potential for the deviance of Heidegger's metaphysics inhabit a dark side of Western metaphysics that interacts with, and also contests, monotheistic faith.

Heidegger views the trajectory of authentic Being fulfilled in the lineage from the Greeks to the Germans, and thus in one sense the entire Judeo-Christian tradition is excluded (except as it has been absorbed into the Greco-German orbit). But the Jews are particularly problematic as Heidegger's *Dasein* is manifest only where it occupies a place in the world, and that place, for him, requires the two components of land and language. The Jews, and *das Judentum*, for Heidegger, are *geschichtslos*, they have no geographical space and no language that can secure them a place that would allow them "a genuine sense of living in time." The diasporic nature of the Jews and even their trans-historical ontology which, as Wolfson shows, Franz Rosenzweig viewed as their embodiment of eternity, is for Heidegger, the very source of their exclusion. There is no place in history for a people that transcends history.

There is no way to overestimate the centrality of soil in Heidegger's philosophy of Being, soil being more than dirt on the ground but a rootedness in the world that requires both dwelling and language. This is expressed most vividly in Heidegger's 1960 lecture "*Sprache und Heimat*," where he concretizes the notion that language is "the most intensely granted inculcation of the homeland." Hence, according to Wolfson, "we should no longer speak of 'language and homeland' but rather 'language as homeland.'" According to Heidegger, "The Jew has no home, no language, no world, no historical destiny." The trans-national nature of

the Jewish diasporic experience as “wandering,” venerated by some Jews as “outside, or beyond, history,” sets in place part of its messianic promise that draws a sharp distinction between Athens and Jerusalem. This unworldliness becomes for Heidegger a metaphysical trope of exclusion from *Dasein*. Thus for Heidegger the Jew is always foreign, even in the place she calls home.

Wolfson notes that this exclusion is not solely about the Jews but in many cases, and sometimes more systematically, about Christianity and the West more generally, especially in regards to technology. Wolfson notes that “the animus toward Jews is pitched in more socioeconomic [rather] than theological terms, whereas the degrading of Christianity reflects, in all probability, Heidegger’s existential struggle with and yet philosophical indebtedness to his Catholic upbringing ... Heidegger views Christianity as the embodiment of the ontological obscuration of being.” Vying for a new Nietzschean “paganism” of sorts that was the lost tradition of the Greeks, Heidegger reaches back before the Socratic, and later Christian, West to search for the authentic expression of *Dasein*. The irony of course is that the tradition, Christianity, that persecuted the Jews and that claims (in spite of the Jews) to be the carriers of monotheism and the true messianic promise, is now both thrown in with the Jews as the “obscuration of being” and yet also the vehicle Nazism used to convince Germany that the Jews needs to be eradicated.

The point of the messianic that Heidegger uses to separate Judaism from Christianity is one place where Wolfson argues Heidegger falls victim to his very limited knowledge of Judaism. In fact, Wolfson claims, the messianic in Judaism is not an eschatological moment when the future enters to rupture the present, to upend the world, a consequence of historical development, but rather, “the corollary of an expectation that is realized as an expectation of what cannot be realized.” That is, redemption as Wolfson reads it – and here one can find this more developed in his book *Open Secret* on the messianic vision of Menachem Mendel Schneerson of Lubavitch – “is not to be assessed from the standpoint of an achievable objective but from the standpoint of the activity that the waiting for that objective incites.” There is no transposal of the temporal order, no flight from the world, only the continued life in the present. In short, Heidegger simply gets *das Judentum* wrong and thus his judgment is founded on a mistaken premise. The socioeconomic and political consequences in the Nazi street may not be altered, and here Wolfson’s indictment of Heidegger stands firm. But metaphysically, Wolfson argues that Heidegger’s position is far less incongruous with *das Judentum* than he thought.

This brings us to Wolfson’s intervention, which is truly novel and will unnerve many of his readers. Wolfson’s interpretation of Heidegger’s critique of the Jews and *das Judentum* is the result in part of Heidegger’s ignorance of Judaism, which, had he actually known the tradition, would have forced him to see that at least some of it coheres with his critique of the West. Again, this is not to exonerate Heidegger in any way but to illustrate two things. First,

Heidegger's own philosophy consists of metaphysical moves not necessarily foreign to Judaism itself, albeit manifest in very different ways. And second, that the dangers of Heidegger's metaphysics, dangers that Wolfson fully acknowledges, exist in potential in the belly of Judaism if not resisted by countervailing trends in the tradition.

To illustrate this, Wolfson offers a kabbalistic reading of the prophetic biblical arch-villain Balaam. The Bible tells us that, "Never again did there arise a prophet in Israel like Moses" (Deut. 34:10), to which the rabbis respond, "In Israel none arose, but in the nations of the world there arose, and who was it? Balaam." This rabbinic gloss on one word in the Bible "in Israel" (*b'Yisrael*) becomes, in the kabbalistic literature of the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah, a leitmotif to exemplify their notion of "the left contained in the right" or the dialectical intermingling of good and evil such that each by definition contains elements of its opposite. Balaam thus becomes a figure from the nations whose evil and nefarious character contains lofty sparks of holiness that are shared with the Bible's quintessential hero, Moses.

It is not simply that evil supposes good and good supposes evil. It is that evil contains good and good contains evil, the two are inseparable because each is part of its opposite. Moreover, truly understanding Balaam's evil requires excavating the sparks embedded therein, which can only be understood, and thus liberated, through close examination. This idea is expressed in Heidegger in a variety of ways as well. For example, claiming that "illumination consists of exposing the radiance of the shadow in the shadow of the radiance," Wolfson asks us to consider Heidegger as a modern adaptation of the Zohar's depiction of Balaam. "As part of the Balaam complex, Heidegger articulated views that cast a sharp distinction between Jews and non-Jews, sometimes following hackneyed stereotypes that were utilized by the Nazis. But just as the kabbalistic tradition portrayed Balaam as one who achieved in the realm of the blasphemous the same enlightenment as Moses, so we can think of Heidegger as attaining the uppermost level of knowledge by descending to the depths of depravity." The binary of good and evil cannot be sustained in the kabbalistic imagination. As the Lurianic kabbalist Hayyim Vital notes, "when the good of Moses was refined from the evil of Balaam, there necessarily remained in him some good sparks from the root of Moses our master, peace be upon him, and they necessarily will go out and be purified from there by many deaths and reincarnations, as I know." Vital notes elsewhere that the process of Balaam's repentance, obliquely alluded to in scripture, is the very fabric of reconciliation and redemption.

Just as Heidegger's philosophy can be viewed through the lens of Balaam, one can say that Heidegger was not true to his own philosophical assumptions by portraying the Jews as Balaam without the holy, that is, as *geschichtslos*. When we see claims of the uselessness of Heidegger because of his depravity (his antisemitism), we fall into the same trap as Heidegger who saw the uselessness of the Jews because of their homelessness. For Wolfson, Heidegger not only exemplifies this sensibility philosophically but can also be viewed as the embodiment of this very process. The question regarding how such a diabolical figure can be one of the

great philosophical minds of modernity is now not as strange as it sounds; it is not only an element embedded in Heidegger's own thought but one deeply embedded in the zoharic imagination as well.

Wolfson's intervention in the Heidegger controversy thus opens a few new avenues of thinking. Those who argue that Heidegger's antisemitism goes all the way down are often the ones who seek to disqualify his philosophy on those grounds. Wolfson, however, accedes to their basic premise that not only was Heidegger an unrepentant antisemite but the structures of his system, particularly the notion of inclusivity, only manifest through the exclusive – the Jews being the primary objects of exclusion – enable such antisemitism to emerge. But there is more. Wolfson argues that Heidegger's own philosophical project has precedent in the zoharic notion of "the left contained in the right." The demonic is a shell that houses the sparks of holiness, and the shells themselves may be wayward remnants of the holy. All of this enabled the Zohar to view Balaam the diabolical anti-hero as the carrier of a truth that Moses needed yet to find and in doing so found part of himself. And it is only by engaging with Balaam that he can find it.

The lesson of Balaam, and perhaps of Heidegger too – and for Heidegger too – is not to illuminate the errors in his thinking as much as to find the truth out of which those errors emerge in part because Balaam, and Heidegger, are exemplars of such error and rectification.

Wolfson ends his book with the following sentence: "It is never sufficient, and indeed it is potentially dangerous, to cultivate a worldview wherein inclusivity is only included in the demarcation of the exclusive." Now perhaps we are in a time when the Jews have a land and a language, and have "re-entered history," as Emil Fackenheim argued. But one can hear even in this description the resonances of the pitfalls to which Heidegger himself fell victim. The line of authenticity that is universal only in its excluding the other, when the holy is only demarcated by the absence of the unholy, the light that dwells in the dross of the excluded other gets smothered by the hubris of power and might. It is such a strong force, such a raging river, that even the best intentioned can get swept up in its current. What Wolfson has done here offers more than a complex and creative rendering of Heidegger's thought that intervenes in an on-going conversation by changing the very dynamics and contours of a debate taking us back to some of Heidegger's own students, and going further, who could not ignore his genius even as they detested his moral failures. He has offered a warning, and Heidegger, in both his failures and in his successes, serves as the model. Evil lurks in the good, and vice versa. To exclude either is to banish that which is worth knowing. That which *must* be known. We ignore this warning at our own peril.

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