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Enlightened Prejudices: Anti-Jewish Tropes in Modern Philosophy

In November 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a young artillery officer of Jewish descent, was convicted for military treason against the French state. When in 1896 evidence came to light that proved Dreyfus innocent, high-ranking officials in the military tried to suppress the new information. The event evolved into a major political scandal which divided French society into Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. Thanks to the involvement of a number of leading liberal intellectuals, all the accusations were finally shown to be false and Dreyfus was exonerated and reinstated in the French army.

In history books in Europe, the Dreyfus Affair is presented as one of the defining moments of the Enlightenment legacy: a prime example of how rationality, tolerance, and universal ideals of justice finally conquered prejudice, intolerance, and nationalist sectarianism. Indeed, this portrait of the Dreyfus Affair is a portrait of how, in one particular case, modern liberal ideals prevailed against ideological prejudice. It is also, however, part of a larger ideological narrative which recounts how modern Europe came into being through a process of successive universalization of ideals such as freedom, equality, and fraternity.

In the wake of the atrocities of the twentieth century, this standard account of the Enlightenment, as a warranty of universal idealsof rationality and morality, has been challenged from a number of different angles. As long ago as 1947, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer advanced the bold thesis that fascist and Nazi barbarity was,in fact, the dialectical other of the Enlightenment project.[1] Even the "Dreyfusards" – the defenders of tolerance and justice – had subtly perpetuated prejudices that had paved the way for modern anti-Semitism and other forms of ideological prejudice. The malign logic of this dialectic ultimately concerns the way in which a seemingly universal Enlightenment idea tends to obfuscate its own particular conditions, thereby excluding ideals and identities which these conditions implicitly challenge or contradict.

In this article, I want to highlight this dialectic further by demonstrating how, to a significant extent, two of the greatest philosophers of reason, Kant and Hegel, underpin their universal principles with prejudiced stereotypes about Jews and Judaism. More particularly, I will

illuminate the way that both Kant and Hegel secularize and politicize a number of age-old anti-Jewish tropes which are deeply rooted in the Christian tradition; tropes which serve to reinforce their notions of freedom and enlightenment. Clearly, these tropes take on a different meaning once they are removed from their original theological context. The target of the stereotyping is no longer the individual Jew but, rather, Jewishness as a particular identity which stands in the way of universal ideals of freedom and rationality and which must be overcome in order for Jews to become free individuals. Even so, the same dialectics, between the universal and the particular, is at work – and particular Jewish individuals are still affected by the prejudices of a seemingly formal universalism.

In the last section of the article, I will draw attention to the recurrence of this troubling dialectic in still more subtle fashion, namely, when the universalist heritage of Christianity is invoked as a resource in contemporary philosophical debate. I am thinking in particular here of the efforts by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižekto formulate a new political universalism. What is striking about their efforts is how "Jewishness" is once more invoked as a signifier of particularity. However, it should be clarified immediately that "Jewishness", less even than for Kant and Hegel, here refers to particular Jewish individuals. Rather, it is used as a rhetorical marker which is interchangeable with any particular predicate that obstructs a truly universalist political order. Nevertheless, it is a good question as to whether the use of these longstanding anti-Jewish tropes does not reveal the lasting tensions generated by a universalist legacy that is dialectically reliant upon eliminating conflicting claims on definitions of the universal.

The Idealistic Body Politic

In his celebrated work *The Stillborn God*, Mark Lilla lucidly illustrates the "great separation" between religion and politics that took place in early Western modernity. With the Enlightenment, religion was severed from both politics and philosophyin an unprecedented fashion, and new ideals – focusing exclusively on human nature and human needs – replaced theological speculations about society, morality, and knowledge.[2]

Lilla's narrative of the subordination of religion by political philosophy forms part of the standard account of the Enlightenment alluded to earlier. What makes his work original, however, is that he does not end the story there but goes on to illustrate how the process toward secularization was partly reversed when the Enlightenment reached German soil. In

contrast to most English, Scottish, and French Enlightenment thinkers – who opposed religion in the name of reason – the major proponents of the German *Aufklärung* sought to reconcile religion with reason by incorporating religious truths into their rational discourses.

This process is perhaps nowhere more clearly manifested than in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Unlike Hobbes, Locke, or the French *encyclopédistes*, who saw in religion nothing but man's stubborn ignorance and emotional flight from pain, Kant recognized religion as a permanent human need and even a precondition for man's moral improvement. He did so, however, only by placing its doctrines well "within the boundaries of reason," as the title of his most famous work on religion indicates.[3] Kant's basic idea concerning religion is that it exclusively deals with the practical aspects of human life. Religion offers no valid contribution to rational knowledge; its only contribution is to the history of morality. As Yirmiyahu Yovel has observed, Kant borrowed this idea from his Jewish friend and colleague, Moses Mendelssohn.[4]

In locating the essence of religion solelyin practical commands, Mendelssohn endeavored to demonstrate that the particular creeds of the religion of his fathers need not stand in conflict with the Enlightenment ideal of universal reason. Unlike Mendelssohn, however, Kant was not particularly interested in seeking harmony between a specific religious tradition and universal reason. Rather, he made use of Mendelssohn's argument only in order to reinforce his own conviction that religion*per se*, being a purely practical affair, offers no rational grounds for morality or knowledge. The only legitimate ground for morality, Kant famously proposed, lies in the purity of the human will (as opposed to blind obedience to an external law). Nonetheless, positive religion *can* be a source to morality, precisely to the extent that it mirrors the moral law which issues from free human reason. The task of the moral philosopher is thus to reveal the kernel of morality that lies beneath the creeds, ceremonies, and historical narratives of each religion.

Kant's argument also has a historical aspect. Like many subsequent philosophers and anthropologists in the nineteenth century, Kant placed the historical religions on an evolutionary scale. The more a religion expressed the universal kernel of morality, the higher its place on the historical scale. At the bottom, Kant placed Judaism, distinguished by its legalistic and "statutory" traits; then, in turn, came Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, Protestantism, and, finally, the universal religion of reason embodied in the philosopher's

own system.[5] However, if we look closer at the fate of Judaism in Kant's philosophy of religion, we find that not only does it lie at the lower end of the scale, it is, strictly speaking, not a religion at all. Unlike the other religions, which in varying degrees give expression to what would ultimately develop into the pure religion of reason, "[the] Jewish religion stood out for Kant as having no moral content at all; it was merely legalistic, a *political* constitution only."[6]

This denial of Judaism's moral and spiritual value notwithstanding, Kant willingly admitted that particular Jewish individuals, like his friend Mendelssohn, were able to develop moral minds. But such magnanimity was extended to them precisely as *individuals*, i.e. as members of universal humanity, not as *Jews*. This apparent conflict between particular Jewish identity and the universal ideals of reason is perhaps most famously – or, rather, infamously – expressed in Kant's late work *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). Kant here argues that the Jews ought to adopt the "religion of Jesus" and interpret the Bible in the spirit of the Enlightenment. In this way, he concluded, the Jews would finally be assimilated into European culture and be relieved of their archaic religious tradition. Kant termed this process "the euthanasia of Judaism."[7]

As Michael Mack has suggested, Kant's argument about the euthanasia of Judaism can be seen in the light of an elaborate pseudo-theological body politic. "Pseudo-theological" here refers to the way in which Kant develops his social theory using Christian theological imagery that he secularizes and politicizes. For instance, Kant draws, implicitly and explicitly, on Paul's theological anthropology centered on notions of flesh and spirit – the old Adam, and the new. Paul's idea is that the "old Adam," i.e. the fallen human being, must become dead to the sinful temptations of this world in order to prepare for the new, resurrected life in Christ. Kant is not interested in the heavenly salvation for which Paul hopes; his interest lies in the construction of a perfected body politic in the here and now. Nonetheless, he repeats the structure of Paul's argument, as seen most clearly in his definition of autonomy as liberation from the desire to rely upon the empirical world (in which he employs the phrase "to die away from the world," alluding on Christ's rejection, symbolized by the cross, of the happiness of the sensuous).[8]

Kant's construction of rational autonomy, Mack continues, parallels his attempt not only to do away with the Jewish foundations of Christianity but also, more importantly, to exclude

Jewishness from his body politics. If Christianity paved the way for universal rational and moral freedom, Kant "targeted the Jews as the empirical obstacle to the establishment of a rational order in which heteronomy would be overcome."[9] Historically as well as in the present, Jews remained oriented towards the material world, immutably bound to their God and their particular way of living. As such, they were unable to transcend their empirical conditions and, in consequence, inevitably excluded from any idealist model of the body politic.

The Spirit of Judaism

One thinker who was profoundly influenced by Kant's late writings on religion was the young Friedrich Hegel. From his earliest writings, Hegel shared the older philosopher's conviction that the goal of humanity was not to be found in an other-worldly divine kingdom, but consisted, rather, in rational and moral freedom in this world. Like Kant, Hegel believed that religion, in part, posed an obstacle to realizing this freedom. Religion, in its manifest form, thus needed to be re-interpreted and rendered compatible with philosophical reason. Only in this way could its rational and moral kernel be uncovered.[10]

Hegel's early affiliation with Kant's philosophy soon came to an end, however, and this is perhaps nowhere more detectable than in his views on religion in general, and on Christianity in particular. Whereas Hegel in his earliest writings had shared Kant's criticism of historical religion, he began in the late 1790s to reconcile himself with at least one religion in its positive form, namely Christianity. In opposition to Kant, who denied that any religion offered reconciliation between human needs and moral duty, Hegel now started to discern in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount a "religion of love" which made it possible to live a moral life while also experiencing existential plenitude. This shift in emphasis foreshadowed what would become a fundamental conviction in Hegel's mature philosophy – that both rational and moral freedom must be embodied in specific communities and institutions.[11]

Despite abandoning Kant's condescending view of historical religion, Hegel did not reject Kant's offensive portrayal of Jews and Judaism. On the contrary, his newfound esteem for Christianity only hardened his antipathy towards Judaism. In "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate" (written in 1797), Hegel managed, in John Caputo's words, "to say the most hateful things about the Jews in the course of defining Christianity as the religion of love."[12] At the same time, we need to remind ourselves that Jews were routinely described in disparaging

terms in everyday cultural discourse of the eighteenth century. This contextualization notwithstanding, "The Spirit of Christianity" stands out as one of the most disparaging texts in modern philosophy ever written on Judaism.

As a contrast to his elaboration of the spirit of Christianity, Hegel in the beginning of this work offers an account of the "spirit of Judaism," which he traces back to the patriarch Abraham. Although the word "alienation" had not yet fully entered Hegel's philosophical vocabulary, Abraham seems to perfectly embody what he would come to understand by this term. Abraham, the restless wanderer, is a "stranger on earth, a stranger to the soil and to man alike."[13] Abraham cuts himself off from the world in order to obtain freedom but instead ends up utterly dependent upon an immense God before whom he is nothing. The Jewish spirit, symbolized by the patriarch, is thus characterized by a *double* alienation – from nature and from God.

Despite distancing himself from Kant, Hegel thus shares the other's view of the Jewish people as the very acme of heteronomy. Even the Exodus, one of the most powerful epics of liberty in human history, is turned into its opposite in Hegel's account. Having depicted the flight from Egypt as the act of cowards profiting from other people's agony, Hegel concludes: "It is no wonder that this nation, which in its emancipation bore the most slavelike demeanor, regretted leaving Egypt, wished to return there again whenever difficulty or danger came upon it in the sequel, and thus showed how in its liberation it had been without the soul and the spontaneous need of freedom."[14]

Among the anti-Jewish stereotypes present in both Kant's and Hegel's philosophies, we also find a linking of the Jews with materialism. In discussing the receiving of the Torah – in Hegel's reading, yet another expression for the Jewish people's deeply servile character – Hegel alludes to a beautiful image in Deuteronomy (32:11), in which God is likened to an eagle who protects her young and trains them to fly. He then remarks: "Only the Israelites did not complete this fine image; these young never became eagles. In relation to their God they rather afford the image of an eagle which by mistake warmed stones, showed them how to fly and took them on its wings into the clouds, but never raised their weight into flight or fanned their borrowed warmth into the flame of life."[15]

All these instances of derogatory characterization of Jews and Judaism are taken from Hegel's early philosophy. To do justice both to the subject matter and to Hegel, one must, of course, take into account his later philosophy, too. As already indicated, the mature Hegel rejected Enlightenment ideals as too abstract, and, increasingly, recognized that rationality in its highest form is always embodied in particular practices and institutions. What is more, Hegel's view of Judaism became less dismissive in his mature works; as he developed his dialectical notion of history, he attributed the Jewish religion a major role in the evolution of the Spirit. Still, Judaism is not assigned a flattering role; its essential contribution is to prepare the stage for Christianity, while its own historical project is aborted. Like Kant, Hegel was thus unable to find a place for Jews as *Jews* in the ongoing march of history.

Neo-Paulinism and the Recurrence of Anti-Jewish Stereotypes in Philosophy

In the last two decades, European intellectuals have increasingly turned to traditional theological discourses for politico-philosophical insights. This somewhat unexpected development has found its most spectacular expression in the revived interest in the Pauline corpus of the New Testament. Beginning with the publication of Alain Badiou's original work *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*in 1997, fascination for Paul has grown into a major philosophical trend, uniting thinkers as different as the neo-Leninist philosopher Slavoj Žižek and the neo-orthodox theologian John Milbank.[16]

As the subtitle of Badiou's work indicates, Paul's attractiveness to these thinkers on the resurgent radical left-wing of political thought lies in the way in which he offers a foundation of a new political universalism. After decades of fruitless identity politics supported by deconstructivist philosophy, what is needed is an emancipatory politics that interpellates subjects *universally*, i.e. irrespective of ethnic, social, or gender factors. And this is where Paul turns out to be the man. In his famous declaration that there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28), the apostle reveals the framework for a universalism that demands fidelity, not to any particular tradition or identity, but simply to the revolutionary event itself.[17]

In my view, Badiou and Žižek ought to be given credit for raising the question of a new political universalism. At the end of the day, localist pragmatism and identitarian strategies have not always proved to be effective solutions to global (or even just European) problems, and in our increasingly fragmented societies the need for a powerful vision of the common

good has never been more urgent. Yet there is an uncomfortable flip side to Badiou's and Žižek's argument, not unlike the paradoxical aspects of the Enlightenment philosophical legacy mentioned earlier. Accordingly, if universal freedom and rationality in Kant and (early) Hegel presupposes exclusion of our inclinations toward the empirical world, so, too, does "fidelity" to the revolutionary "event" for Badiou and Žižek imply the elimination of any kind of particularity, ethnic or other. Still more remarkable, however, is that both thinkers repeatedly use "Jews" and "Judaism" for rhetorical effect when explaining why this particularity is so problematic for the universalist point of view.

On second glance, however, this situation may not be so remarkable. As some acute historians have observed, Badiou's – and, by extension,Žižek's – reading of the Pauline epistles depends heavily on an exegetical paradigm established in early modernity.[18] Deeply rooted in German idealist philosophy, this paradigm is characterized by a false and implicitly anti-Jewish dialectics that pits law against grace, letter against spirit, Old Testament against New, and so forth. The paradigm was predominant in the so-called Tübingen School and to a significant degree laid the foundation for the modern Protestant image of Paul. Following Hegel's interpretation of God's incarnation as a bridge from the alienated religion of the Jews to the Christian religion of love, these early New Testament scholars based their biblical hermeneutic on a dialectical opposition between a Petrine legalist position and a Pauline universalist position, the former being doomed to obsolescence with the passage of time.[19]

Though Badiou and Žižek both seem unaware that they are subscribing to a Protestant paradigm for interpreting Paul's notions of law and grace, they simultaneously inscribe themselves in a broader Christian narrative which throughout history has associated Judaism with particularity and exclusiveness – in sharp contrast to Christianity, which has been presented in terms of universality and openness. To be fair, however, it should be emphasized that both philosophers recognize that Judaism does also include an impulsetowards universality. As Žižek reminds the reader in the opening section of his vast study *In Defense of Lost Causes*, Jews throughout history have represented strongly particularizing currents as well as far-reaching universalizing impulses: "sometimes they stand for the stubborn attachment to their particular life-form which prevents them from becoming full citizens of the state they live in, sometimes they stand for a 'homeless' and rootless universal cosmopolitanism indifferent to all particular ethnic forms."[20]

It is telling, however, that both Badiou and Žižek identify the more constructive impulse – i.e. the universalist one – with figures who in one way or another departed from Judaism: Spinoza, Marx, Freud, and Trotsky. To be a good Jew, it seems, is to be a Jew no longer. This is precisely the idea conveyed by Kant in his lamentable expression "the euthanasia of Judaism." Žižek, with his strong predilection for iconoclastic rhetorical twists, expresses the same idea in the following manner: "the only true solution to the 'Jewish question' is the 'final solution' (their annihilation), because Jews *qua objet a* are the ultimate obstacle to the 'final solution' of History itself, to the overcoming of divisions in all-encompassing unity and flexibility."[21]

Does universality really demand the overcoming of particularity? If we are to show the critical historian's "fidelity" to the "event" proclaimed by Paul, the answer will most likely be no. Paul's aim was never to abolish the particular Jewish covenant; it was to universalize its messianic promise to include all nations. In this sense, Paul merely unfolded the universalist impulse inherent in Jewish messianism since the days of Jeremiah. This impulse – to reach out for universal ideals of justice and wisdom while maintaining fidelity to a particular way of life – has also distinguished subsequent Jewish thought, from Maimonides to Mendelssohn and Emmanuel Levinas. One of the many merits of such "embodied universalism" is that it avoids, in Michael Mack's words, "the prejudicial aspect of a seemingly universal concept of enlightenment that obfuscates its own particularity and thus excludes that against which it defines its identity."[22]

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[1] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[2] Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

[3] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[4] Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Dark Riddle: Hegel, Nietzsche, and the Jews* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 6–7.

[5] Kant, *Religion*, 129–151.

[6] Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 7.

[7] Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 95.

[8] Michael Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 27–35.

[9] Mack, *German Idealism*, 39.

[10] See, above all, G.F.W. Hegel, "The Positivity of the Christian Religion," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 67–181.

[11] Yovel, *Dark Riddle*, 32–33.

[12] John D. Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics: On the Weakness of God and the Theology of the Event," in *After the Death of* God, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press), 80.

[13] G.F.W. Hegel, "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, 186.

[14] Hegel, "Spirit" 190.

[15] Hegel, "Spirit" 199.

[16] See *inter alia* Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), and John Milbank, Slavoj Žižek and Creston Davis, *Paul's New Movement: Continental Philosophy and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2010).

[17] Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 4–15.

[18] See, for example, the contributions of Paula Fredriksen, E.P. Sanders, Dale B. Martin and Daniel Boyarin in John D. Caputo and Linda Martin Alcoff (eds.), *St. Paul among the Philosophers* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).

[19] See further Horton Harris, *The Tübingen School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

[20] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London & New York: Verso, 2008), 6–7. A similar position is articulated by Badiou in *Circonstances, 3. Portées du mot "juif"* (Paris: Éditions Léo Scheer, 2005), 14–15.

[21] Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense*, 5.

[22] Mack, *German Idealism*, 12.