

Book Review

Rethinking Jewish Philosophy: Beyond Particularism and Universalism.

By Aaron W. Hughes.

Oxford. Oxford University Press, 2014.

pp. 170. ISBN 978-0-19-935681-2 Hardcover \$62.90.

**A Review By
Theptawee Chokvasin**

School of General Education, Institute of Social Technology, Suranaree University of Technology

According to information from University of Rochester (2014), Aaron W. Hughes is a Philip S. Bernstein professor in Jewish Studies, and Chair of Center for Jewish Studies in the Department of Religion and Classics at the University of Rochester. Although he is not just the one who asks questions concerning philosophy in an outstanding Jewish academic tradition, in his present book he really is. Is it possible or not for us to hear from a voice of Jewish people on ‘how to do philosophy in Jewish’s own way’? , Hughes’ answer at the end of his book is not only positive but also in a newly manner.

Before reading Hughes’ book, the first thought that came to my mind aside from what the title referred to was about the long-term argument in metaphysics of properties whether they were particular or universal. But after reading it, I found that it was entirely not the same point. Hughes was not worried that much about what should be prioritized in the philosophy of properties between the particular and the universal, but instead about how uniqueness of Jewish philosophy could be explicated in term of its dominant characteristic of playing with the duality of particularism and universalism. In other words, Hughes’ concern is to present us his interpretation on the particularistic tradition of Jewish philosophy and its inner oxymoronic universal/particular character.

Hughes claims that Jewish philosophy has always confronted with its paradox of what to do philosophy in its own Jewish way (p.28). To do philosophy sounds not a reserved activity that one

* Corresponding author +66 4422 4346
E-mail Address: thankgod@sut.ac.th

would do in his/her own particular nationalistic sentiment because it has a universal characteristic shared by philosophers throughout the world. But if Jewish philosophy is possible, there is still a problem about how 'the-chosen-one' Jewish particularism be compatible with the universalistic character of philosophy (pp.32-33). Hughes argues that it is useless to question which camp Jewish philosophy is exactly in (p.32), those two conceptions are already reflected in each other (p.30).

According to Hughes' interpretation on Jewish philosophers from medieval period to Levinas, the tension stretching between particularism and universalism has somehow influenced their engagement in doing philosophy. Moses Maimonides, the acclaimed medieval Jewish philosopher, is depicted a rationalist who retrieves the idea of God's oneness in Jewish particularism from Aristotle's philosophy (p.76). Moses Mendelssohn, an 18th-century German Jewish philosopher, is considered by Hughes a sincere Jewish philosopher who keeps his Jewishness in its religious characteristic in his reflection on philosophy. One can find a successful way to theorize about the universal truth on the very same way of philosophizing it in Jewish tradition (pp.36-40). In modern period, Hughes is interested in Jewish philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig. Chapter 5 of the book is in its entirety devoted to a critique of this philosopher. The tension between particularism and universalism, or between Judaism and philosophy, is, according to Hughes' interpretation, the central theme of Rosenzweig's philosophizing about Jewish peoplehood. Rosenzweig looks to Jewish tradition of education. To educate about philosophy in the best way is to do it in the traditional Jewish way. However, this is explained by Hughes that Rosenzweig is still occupied in the theme of particularism and universalism, because Rosenzweig creates the identity of Jewishness as opposed to other non-Jewish (pp.101-107). Emmanuel Levinas, the twentieth century philosopher, sets ethics as the first priority of looking at philosophy. This is because what is good should be good for all, then what is good for Jewish people must be universally good for all. Again, the relationship between the particular and the universal is here echoed in Levinas' philosophy (p.45-47).

How to step beyond the opposition of particularism and universalism in Jewish philosophy, Hughes claims that there is a way out if we interpret from Jacques Derrida's deconstruction. If we are to 'reconstruct' the identity of Jewish philosophy, we may have to accept that it has always been a hybrid of rivals 'between' universalism and particularism. Something in 'between' *à la Derrida* is in the state of 'indeterminacy' (Hughes' word). That is the way of doing Jewish philosophy (pp.108-126).

The question ‘*Is there a Jewish philosophy?*’ is a question that is a challenge to today Jewish philosophers. We have recently seen the challenge taken up in Roth (1999) with a positive answer of residing it essentially in Jewish monotheist ethics. Hughes’ former writing *The Invention of Jewish Identity* (2011) already told us that the source of Jewish philosophy’s identity could be analyzed from Bible translation. But from Hughes’ *Rethinking*, it may be considered that we can once again find some other positive answer to the question.

After reading this book, I find myself that I am enriched with more knowledge and perspectives on Jewish philosophers. However, some question arises simultaneously, ‘Are they the same Jewish philosophers as I once knew?’ It can be well understood that a scholar can interpret what he/she wants from reading texts. So, it is fair enough for Hughes to depict Jewish philosophers to suit his main point about the binary opposition between particularism and universalism. But to some readers who are not well prepared may be perplexed when reading their philosophers in Hughes’ book. Hughes’ interest in his theme, in my opinion, can get along well with Levinas’ or Derrida’s philosophy. But to Maimonides or the other medieval Jewish philosophers, as I have known this far, it is not the main point they share their interest with Hughes. Not only medieval Jewish philosophers but also medieval Islamic ones are not that much into the topic of those binary oppositions. It seems that they are more interested in how to develop their philosophical theologies by using Aristotle’s or Neoplatonist’s philosophy.

Another point where I disagree with Hughes is that there is a point in page 81 that I think Hughes makes a reckless and hasty interpretation. It is still a problem of how we are to validate the assumption that when something necessarily exists in its own, then that thing must be essentially ‘one’. What ‘one’ here means is not clear whether it be a numerical one or a thing that is essentially one. Hughes does not give any attention to this problem of interpretation, because he interprets that it is a monotheist conception of God in Judaism and ‘Necessary Existent in philosophy’ (p.81). Here, I think, is a hasty explanation from Hughes. He owes us some further explanation about why the necessary existent must be one as monotheists claim. Moreover, which one is the meaning of the ‘Necessary Existent’ in that context, numerically one or essentially one? And what is the point of it in arguing about the binary opposition between particularism and universalism?

The conclusion chapter is not as promising as the title chapter ‘*Beyond*’ refers although his argument is good that it is not redundant with others’ contributions. I think that it is not his point to tell us what it *ought* to be for future Jewish philosophy, so he concludes his book rather in a ‘that’s-the-way-it-is’ style. Although he tells us that doing Jewish philosophy should be in

‘an anti-identitarian possibility’ (*p.123*), I think it is just only a paraphrase of what he has told us right from the first page that it is the possibility in which Jewish philosophy has been. This is rather not a promising argument to show us about the ‘ought’ of Jewish philosophy.

However, the main argument in this book is totally new. It depicts Hughes a creative one who can set a new direction in Jewish philosophy. Hence, this book will surely be considered indispensable for Jewish philosophy and Jewish Studies in the near future.

References

- Hughes, Aaron W. (2011). **The Invention of Jewish Identity: Bible, Philosophy, and the Art of Translation.** Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Roth, Leon. (1999). **Is There a Jewish Philosophy? : Rethinking Fundamentals.** Littman Library of Jewish Civilization Series. London – Portland, Oregon: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization.
- University of Rochester. (2014, Mar. 28th). **People: Aaron Hughes.** Accessed May 14th 2014, [Online]: http://www.rochester.edu/college/rel/people/faculty/hughes_aaron/index.html