

1. Levinas's Jewish Thought Between Jerusalem and Athens, Jerusalem: Magnes, 2008.

Review of Claire Katz, in *Shofar*, April 2011:

In spite of, or maybe because of, those scholars who continue to keep Levinas's writings unproductively segregated into two categories—writings on Judaism and philosophical writings—there has been a proliferation of work attempting to stitch the categories together. Most recently, Ephraim Meir's book, *Levinas's Jewish Thought: Between Jerusalem and Athens*, joins this group with the stated objective to “[discuss] Levinas's Jewish thinking and [discuss] the relationship between his philosophical and his Jewish thinking” (p. 3). The question which guides this discussion—“In what way is Levinas's philosophical discourse on a non-eudaimonic ethics related to his Jewish writings?”—was formulated at the 2006 Levinas Congress held in Jerusalem, where a substantial number of the attendees were in fact willing to entertain the productive relationship between these bodies of writing. As a result, Meir uses the tension that typically characterizes the discussions of Athens and Jerusalem as a productive starting point for his own examination.

The book is divided into an introduction, five main chapters, and a conclusion. Meir begins with a discussion in the first chapter, “Between Professional and Confessional Writings,” that draws the two sets of writings closer together. He moves from this chapter, which successfully blurs or removes the boundary between these bodies of writing, to Chapters Two and Three, which examine the ways that “the Greek” and “the Hebrew” each play off each other. By addressing this relationship in two chapters rather than one, and by inverting the relationship in each chapter, Meir demonstrates that each is dependent on the other, without privileging one over the other or subordinating one to the other. Finally, in Chapter Five, Meir turns specifically to Levinas's Jewish thought and considers a selection of themes that permeate Levinas's thought from his conception of revelation, a term deployed in both his philosophical (professional) writings and his writings on Judaism (confessional writings) to the State of Israel.

Meir opens his conclusion with the following puzzlement: “It is strange that Levinas's philosophical thought draws so much attention, whereas he devoted so much of time to writing on Judaism, which scholars hardly discuss. This is even stranger since the positions adopted by Levinas and many terms used overlap in both kinds of writing” (p. 255). It is strange indeed. Meir's line that Levinas was not schizophrenic, while humorous, is also a propos. Quite literally, Levinas did not have a split mind, and indeed, as scholars, we should be more concerned if these two sets of writings were completely unrelated. What kind of mind could accomplish such a task? We would have to say literally that one side did not know what the other side was doing or to the extent that there was overlap or influence, these were not significant. But I worry, as Meir does, that this reading says more about the reader than about the truth of the relationship between these two bodies of work.

One concern to note is the word choice Meir uses to label these differing categories of work. He uses “confessional” writings to refer to writings that a philosopher, or author, produces that expose something about him or herself. Confessional writings typically may resemble diary entries and potentially expose hidden or dark motivations. Levinas’s writings on Judaism do not necessarily, and certainly not uniformly, read like confessional writings. They are not necessarily philosophical insofar as they lack the traditional structure of a philosophical argument, and they might even be polemical and provocative. But they do not read like entries in a diary, even if they reveal a deep concern that Levinas holds about, for example, the current state of French Jewry, Israel, or Jewish education.

In this particular instance, the word choices are neither accurate nor helpful. My concern, however, is that the rhetoric we use to describe what Levinas is doing has a significant impact on how others receive these discussions. To say that these writings are “confessional” is very different from saying they are simply writings on Judaism. Additionally, his use of the term “professional” as opposed to “philosophical,” the latter of which has become standard, is puzzling. Indeed, it is not clear to me what “professional” signifies in this context. In spite of my concern about Meir’s language choice, his argument is compelling, and the tack he takes to make his argument is effective.

Meir’s book is a lovely reading of Levinas’s work, and it is admirable in its attempt not to discount the philosophy in favor of the writings on Judaism, but to think about the two sets of writings together. I found most interesting his effective use of Levinas’s essays in Jewish education and his general references to education, which, like his writings on Judaism in general, are rarely read or cited, even though Levinas devoted a considerable amount of his life to the education of Jewish youth. Meir’s reference to education runs throughout his book, from beginning to end, revealing the significance this theme had for Levinas. Although Meir does not make this point himself, one can see how education becomes a point of intersection between these various bodies of writing.

I highly recommend this book for anyone who remains skeptical about this relationship in Levinas’s work, and I recommend it for anyone working on the Jewish sources who is looking for a novel way to think about the themes that permeate all of Levinas’s writings. *Levinas’s Jewish Thought* is a wonderful contribution to the literature on Levinas.

Claire Katz

Texas A&M University

Review in *Jewish book world* (Fall, 2009):

"Meir skillfully summarizes Levinas' views on a range of topics that are on the interface of his philosophical (i.e., "Greek" mode of thought) and Jewish ("Hebrew" mode of thought) writings. Meir does us a service in summarizing, comparing, and contrasting Levinas' views in relation to Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, among other Jewish thinkers."