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WITTGENSTEIN AND JUDAISM

A review of *Wittgenstein and Judaism. A Triumph of Concealment*, by Ranjit Chatterjee. Germany: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005. x + 207 pp.

Wittgenstein hinted that his work had a mirroring function (C&V: 18). Held to one's face, a mirror can be used for ethical self-scrutiny, or for vanity's sake. *Held at an angle, it can reflect practically anything*. We have here in summary form all the problems and possibilities in interpreting Wittgenstein. (8, Italics mine.)

According to Ranjit Chatterjee, in *Wittgenstein and Judaism: A Triumph of Concealment*, the key to unlocking Wittgenstein's thinking is an awareness that he was actually a Jewish thinker who concealed this identity in the very interests of his intellectual aims. The evidence Chatterjee offers for this thesis is a broad assortment of quotations and innuendos, sometimes from Wittgenstein's main philosophical texts, but primarily from the non-canonical published works and remarks made to friends which were subsequently published in memoirs. Chatterjee does not argue that this is an obvious interpretation of Wittgenstein, or that there is wealth of plain evidence for such a thesis, but rather that Wittgenstein intentionally concealed his Jewish intentions so that his work would act as a pointer to that which could not be said but only shown. And based on this exact reasoning, the value of Chatterjee's own thesis about Wittgenstein is highly questionable.

Among the evidence for Wittgenstein's Jewishness, Chatterjee notes the following: a calling for prophecy that Wittgenstein received in a dream during the 1910's and his subsequent lifelong prophetic self-image; his continued interest in persons who wrote about Jewish themes, including Weininger, Spengler, "implicit allusions to Maimonides" (ix), etc.; his antipathy for Greek thought as the dominant strand of thought in Western philosophy; his refutation of Augustine's theory of language; his familiarity with the Bible; his disdain for idolatry; the "Talmudic-Rabbinic traits" (114) of his thought, in that his words never close up on themselves but always call for more and more interpretation; implicit references to the Kabbalah in his repeated uses of key images from that tradition, including the face, clothing, and dreams. While this is only a partial list of the key points from Chatterjee's

book, it is sufficient to provide a definite flavor of the book's argument. On some points, for instance the suggestion that Wittgenstein's thought has deep similarities with the highly developed interpretative tradition in Judaism, Chatterjee's position is rather compelling. On other points, for instance Wittgenstein's relationship to Greek thought, Chatterjee shows the limitations of his understanding of the issue of which he speaks. And on still other points, like those that suggest a covert Jewish mission as the defining feature of Wittgenstein's thought, Chatterjee stretches his thin evidence beyond credulity.

With regard to the philosophical dimension of Chatterjee's argument, one of the claims that he makes, which has now been made many times over during the last fifteen years of Wittgenstein scholarship, is that there is a strong continuity between early and late Wittgenstein. In fact, Chatterjee argues that Wittgenstein arrived at his fundamental insight early in his intellectual development, and then spent the remainder of his life attempting to communicate that insight. What was that insight? That "the most important things cannot be said, that if something could directly be said it would not touch his ethical concerns, these things would escape such a reader" (22). The problem with the *Tractatus*, then, is that it was misread by those who failed to understand its real meaning, as a text which attempts to point beyond itself. When the logical positivists (along with others) appropriated the *Tractatus* as an argument that denied the value of all religion, ethics, and metaphysics (and not just the rational coherency of philosophical articulations in such topics), Wittgenstein then recognized that he had erred rhetorically. According to Chatterjee, Wittgenstein then changed his rhetorical strategy to better affect his ends. In order to make this claim, Chatterjee depends on a rigorous substance-style distinction.

He [Wittgenstein] regarded the *Tractatus* as having erred in terms of style, not substance. The style was not fathomed by his readers; its substance was not wrong, but unapproachable. (31)

The implications are of a *rhetorical or stylistic misjudgment* in the *Tractatus* sought to be corrected by a *rhetorical or stylistic change* in the *Investigations*. (34)

Now if these statements are marked explicitly as heuristic, as distinctions made to correct a particular mis-reading of Wittgenstein, then they might have value. But left to stand on their own, as they are in the text, then they depend on a determinate substance-style distinction that itself participates in the very Greek dualistic, hierarchical thinking that, according to Chatterjee, Wittgenstein deeply opposed with a distinctively "Jewish" manner of thought. What exactly this Jewish manner of thought is is an issue that I will address next. But certainly Chatterjee's

description of Wittgenstein's project—as one that changed in style but not substance—cannot itself participate in the Jewish thinking that Chatterjee apparently locates within Wittgenstein's thought. For if Wittgenstein taught us anything (and perhaps this is a Jewish point?), it is that the manner—or style—in which one speaks cannot be divorced from the content—or substance—of one's speaking. The hierarchical distinction between style and substance—along with its analogues form and content, essence and existence, intellect and sensibility, soul and body, male and female, Christian and Jew etc.—all mark the very Greek dualistic thought that Chatterjee correctly recognizes Wittgenstein as opposing. Actually, it is not that Wittgenstein simply opposed such binaries—for his own thinking necessarily works by calling attention to certain binaries by relying (implicitly or explicitly) on binaries of his own (as language cannot work without these binaries)—but that he sought to call attention to the *danger* such binaries can or have caused within the thinking of individuals and cultures. The danger is one of attachment to particular images of language that then allow one to say and act on statements such as, “substance is important while style is not,” or “the soul is important but the body is not,” or “Christianity is important while Judaism is not.” And while there may be a time and place for such thoughts (although the context for the latter would have to be highly limited), clearly there are real dangers involved in this kind of Greek, dualistic, hierarchical thinking. Chatterjee does hint at these dangers (although more directly with regard to Weininger's demeaning generalizations of Jewishness in *Sex and Character* than with regard to Wittgenstein himself), but does not seem to recognize the complicity of his own descriptions in such dangers. What is remarkable in this argument, then, is the extraordinary lack of self-consciousness about the profound discrepancy between the author's statements *about* Wittgenstein's work and the manner in which Wittgenstein went around *attempting to demonstrate* these very insights. It is as if the author believes that how he communicates the essence—or substance—of Wittgenstein's wisdom has little to do with the form—or style—in which these “truths” are communicated. Or, in plain English, that how one says things matters very little. It is as if one could speak *about* Wittgenstein's work and acquire the wisdom that can *only* be had, according to Wittgenstein himself, by entering into and engaging the work oneself. As such, this book re-creates the rigorous distinction between substance and style that Wittgenstein worked so hard to call into question. At least, however, one cannot fault the author for lack of consistency in this regard.

Returning to the thesis of Wittgenstein's Jewishness more explicitly, one finds difficulties within the consistency of the text. A key piece of evidence for Chatterjee's claim is a remark made by Wittgenstein to his student Drury: “Your religious ideas have always seemed to me more Greek than Biblical. Whereas my thoughts are one hundred percent Hebraic” (103). In attempting to define what this

comment might mean, Chatterjee elucidates one of the key points of his book and Wittgenstein's thinking:

One may construe the "one hundred percent Hebraic" as thinking that looks critically at all other thought and exposes all that it has found to be idolatrous, while substituting nothing that could in turn become the object of idolatry. Thus there is no essential 'Hebraic thought.' (103)

Indeed, if this is Jewishness, then Chatterjee has found an important connection between Wittgenstein and Judaism, for this connects closely with a dominant strand of Wittgenstein's thought, as captured in the one of the best Wittgensteinian aphorisms: "All that philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means not making any new ones—say out of the 'absence of idols' " (100). But there is a deep irony within Chatterjee's assertion that there is no essential Hebraic thought, for it calls into question the very *meaning* and *value* of labeling Wittgenstein a Hebraic/Jewish thinker. Why *label* Wittgenstein a Jew if Jewish thought is purely deconstructive? Note that at many other points in the book, Chatterjee is quite clear about what constitutes a Jew, as he has to be in order to prove his thesis:

The particularities of the Jewish tradition, the life of the people of Israel, have been conditioned from their beginnings by separateness, revelation, covenant, scripture, and commentary. (56)

The Jew behaves differently, eats different food, has a different understanding with God, reads a different book . . . (56)

The Jewish mind, consequently, is a mind that focuses all its powers on commentary, clarification, and analysis of biblical texts—or those "created" by others—at any level from the literal to the mystical and esoteric. (57)

Leaving the validity of such generalizations aside, it remains puzzling how one could square the idea that "there is no essential Jewish/Hebraic thought" with the series of generalizations about Jewishness that Chatterjee relies upon in order to demonstrate that Wittgenstein is, in fact, a Jew. Either the designation Jewish has some positive attributes (in which case there *is* some essential Jewish thought) or the claim is not worth making at all. If the "essence" of Jewish thought is critique, then one is left with two questions: what is the status of the positive generalizations about Jewishness throughout the text?; and what positive thought, then, is Jewish critique parasitic upon? Chatterjee does not address either question, nor acknowledge the internal difficulties of his thesis, which to be fair, are the unavoidable difficulties of all positive theses about supposedly deconstructive traditions, whether it is in regard to Wittgenstein, negative theology, mysticism, or

the like. But it is one thing to be caught between a rock and a hard place, and it is another to be completely unaware of it. Within the very same section as the previous ascriptions of Jewishness, Chatterjee relays the following anecdote, without a trace of irony:

In strongly opposing the attribution of a certain “national character” to the British by Norman Malcolm, Wittgenstein wrote to him: “. . . you made a remark about the ‘national character’ *that shocked me in its primitiveness*. I then thought: what is the use of studying philosophy . . . *if does not make you more conscientious than any journalist in the use of the dangerous phrases such people use for their own ends.*” (54, Italics in Chatterjee).

If Chatterjee can quote Wittgenstein so approvingly about the danger of gross nationalist or ethnic generalizations, it is odd that the irony of labeling Wittgenstein a Jew seems lost on Chatterjee. Further, one wonders what is gained by naming Wittgenstein a Jew, when an entire thrust of Wittgenstein’s thought is dedicated to the dangers of claiming understanding through the superficial *identification* language imposes on a world of complex *differentiation*. So Wittgenstein is a Jew, or a Christian, or a Pygmy—what meaning does any such label have unless it opens new ways for reading and understanding his thinking? Thus what should be the emphasis of any book that claims Wittgenstein is an “X”—revealing how that label sheds light on the serious work Wittgenstein was engaged in—is treated only tangentially by Chatterjee. Where the argument ends—by declaring Wittgenstein a Jew!—is the very point at which a Wittgensteinian treatment of such a claim would have to begin in order to do the work of opening the alternative reading of the material which would justify the initial claim in the first place.

Other connections drawn between Wittgenstein and Judaism by Chatterjee are even more tenuous. In attempting to connect Wittgenstein to Kabbalah, Chatterjee notes that both have a strong interest in dreams:

In a pre-*Tractatus* letter to Engelmann, he [Wittgenstein] observed: “We are asleep [. . .] *Our* life is like a dream. But in our better hours we wake up just enough to realize that we are dreaming [. . .]”. In a modern book on kabbalistic psychology, Edward Hoffman says, “In a very real sense, as the Kabbalah informs us, we go about our daily routines as though half asleep, never fully waking up to the realities around us” (*The Way of Splendor*, 129). If this connection is rightly made, it would once again be evidence of Wittgenstein’s early and continuing use of Jewish sources and modes of thought. (123)

Chatterjee's text is littered with such unconvincing connections between Wittgenstein and Judaism, but where his argument truly strains credulity is when he resorts to psychological explanations to cover his lack of evidence. Although Chatter admits that there is little hard evidence for identifying Wittgenstein as a Jew, he considers this lack of evidence as *more* evidence for the strength of his thesis. Consider the following claims, which seem to increase in audacity as the text progresses:

If plain evidence existed, then there would be no puzzle, and the supposition here is that Wittgenstein wanted to leave behind, like Maimonides, a puzzle of some profundity, whose solution only leads to more puzzles. (ix)

Wittgenstein's later work, along with his feelings of dissembling and cowardice, could have issued from his continuing wish to atone for his failure to be a Jewish (i.e. religious) genius, without being able of course to admit it, except in very attenuated ways – through reiteration of Jewish descent and identification with Jewish tradition, hoping yet that these pointers would lead to his secret purpose being beamed to a select audience, if not broadcast as per the original summons. (90)

Concealing intellectual Jewishness would have been a first-class artistic challenge for Wittgenstein . . . (92).

. . . [A]ttenuated Jewishness at the surface, may turn dialectically into a powerful interior Jewish force, inversely proportionate: the lesser the surface presence of what one may call enthusiastic Jewishness, the greater intellectual clarity and commitment at depth [. . .]. The very possibility of detachment from any state of being Jewish, of a mask of artistic concealment, can liberate intellectual and religious energies into a commitment much deeper than if one had to constantly cope with the most adverse circumstances. (170)

One may speculate that the philosophical writing that began a few years later was atonement for the failure to rise to the mission his dream had called him to. (174)

If one finds such arguments compelling, then one will perhaps be taken by Chatterjee's reading of Wittgenstein, for there is much that one can find in such an interesting and complex thinker if one holds a mirror at just the right angle. Whether what Chatterjee has found is valuable is not a question that I can answer definitely, outside of the context that a particular reader might bring to the text. But for me, the chief value of this book is as another reminder of just how difficult

it is to write a good book about Wittgenstein that does not betray Wittgenstein in the process.

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