
Review

Reviewed Work(s): Anti-Semitism and Its Metaphysical Origins by David Patterson

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Book Reviews

Anti-Semitism and Its Metaphysical Origins. By *David Patterson*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 334 pages. \$99.00 (cloth).

This is a work of passionate religious and moral commitment to Judaism and the Jewish people. It is informed by extensive research into very large areas of Jewish and Western history and culture as well as significant aspects of contemporary Islamic history. The book ranges from ancient times through the Enlightenment, the Nazi era, and into the present, addressing modern Jewish self-hatred in its European and American manifestations as well as current jihadist movements in the Middle East. It presents a bold thesis as to the nature and cause of antisemitism in all these periods. It is, for the most part, carefully annotated. Whether the central thesis has been persuasively defended is a matter that will probably give rise to much discussion. I consider this a good thing: it will force everyone—religionists and anti-religionists, historians, writers, psychologists, philosophers, and anyone else interested in understanding antisemitism—to think again. For this reviewer, the thesis of a metaphysical origin of antisemitism rests on some conceptual confusions and is not nearly as carefully articulated as it might have been: there is a

great deal of vehement assertion as opposed to conceptual clarification and nuanced argument. I will begin by laying out the main thesis of the book and then proceed to point out topics and claims that deserved deeper analysis.

Patterson's principal claim is that antisemitism is best understood from the perspective of traditional Judaism. By this he means the approach to, or understanding of, Judaism given by the 20th century French-Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas, in combination with, or underscored by, various Talmudic as well as Hasidic texts. The immediate point to notice is that Patterson's claim means, and he states this explicitly (26), that almost all the work that has been done to date on the nature and causes of antisemitism by historians, social scientists, and cultural philosophers is at best beside the point and at worst complicit in exculpatory efforts of some kind. Such scholars use "strictly ontological parameters" while Patterson intends to show, by contrast, "that anti-Semitism arises both from within and from beyond the human being, from a realm that transcends the contingencies of ethnic, religious, racial or sociological differences." He concludes that in "[h]aving a metaphysical origin, antisemitism lurks in every soul [including the Jew's own soul], whether *in potentia* or *in actu*" (x). In taking such an approach, Patterson believes he is getting to the heart of a matter raised by, among others, Robert Wistrich, who noted a "sacral, quasi-metaphysical quality of anti-Semitism, so singularly absent in other cases" (quoted in Patterson, 5). Rejecting the qualifier "quasi," Patterson insists that "anti-Semitism has metaphysical origins that transcend its ontological manifestations" (5). The defining feature of antisemitism, Patterson continues, is the desire to kill the God of Judaism; it is "an attempt to expel the Divine presence from creation, an attempt to reduce all there is to all there is" (24). It is the most egregious form of idolatry. This desire to kill the God of Judaism arises from the deepest levels of human egoism, an effort to evade responsibility to our fellow human beings; this responsibility, for Patterson, is at the core of Biblical Judaism as well as the philosophy of Levinas. In addition to evading responsibility, antisemites seek to substitute themselves, or their own ideologies, for God.

The first task in assessing Patterson's thesis is to look more closely at what he means by "metaphysics." It seems to me that his use of this term is quite idiosyncratic, if not self-contradictory, as is his notion of "ontological parameters." In the history of Western philosophy, ontology is a sub-field of metaphysics concerned with the investigation of being and existence as such, or to put it another way, the most basic entities and features of reality. Other sub-fields are the study of causation, freedom and determinism, and the relation of mind and body. Any science—such as physics or sociology—may be said to make certain claims about the most basic features of reality. From a philosophical point of view, these are ontological claims (e.g., the fundamental components of physical reality are sub-atomic particles, or the fundamental features of social life are social classes, "races," and the circulation of capital) and do indeed operate within "ontological parameters"—as do religion and theology, of whatever kind (e.g., the ontology of traditional Judaism includes Covenant, exile, Israel, God, Torah). In the discipline of metaphysics itself, the ontological vocabulary mainly revolves around entities, properties and relations, possible worlds, and dispositions, but here too ontological claims vary greatly. In each sphere of thought, whether it is a Jewish religious one, such as Kabbalah, or a scientific one, there is discussion and analysis of how the essential components relate to one another, and so on. Of course, a religious believer will insist that while there are sub-atomic particles, etc., the *most* real or fundamental type of entity is a transcendent divine one, and the properties and relations either inhering in, or emanating from (or having some other relation to), him or it. Accepting this quite standard philosophical view, there is no escaping "ontological parameters" into some other realm of explanation or being, nor is ontology separate from metaphysics in the way that Patterson seems to assume. "If many of the explanations of the cause of anti-Semitism are themselves, to varying degrees, anti-Semitic, it is because they seek an ontological cause, and not a metaphysical origin. [They] adopt a mode of thought that is antithetical to the categories that shape Torah-based Jewish thought" (54). But Torah-based Judaism does not go beyond

“ontological parameters.” Rather, it prefers one type of ontology (a religious one) over others.

This brings us to Patterson’s treatment of some of the key figures in the history of philosophy. He seeks to show, relying heavily on the work of another scholar, Michael Mack, that there has been considerable “inner” antisemitism in Western philosophy (Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew: The Inner Anti-Semitism of Philosophy and German Jewish Responses* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003]). What does this mean, exactly? It might mean that antisemitism or anti-Judaism is somehow built in to the main categories of metaphysics and other philosophical disciplines, such as epistemology, or that there has been, on the part of philosophers, a more general intellectual prejudice and contempt for Judaism as a religion or system of ideas. I would argue that these are two quite different things, and that while there is no evidence of the former, there is considerable evidence of the latter. Let us examine these two claims more closely by looking briefly at the work of Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger, key figures in philosophical antisemitism as understood by both Patterson and Mack.

Regarding the first claim: Can we find an example of “built-in” antisemitism in Kant’s metaphysical theories? Kant was engaged in a critique of the very possibility of metaphysics, an intellectual enterprise originating in Greece around 400 BCE. Greek metaphysics frequently merged in complicated ways and by complicated routes with various religious ideas in Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Philo, Maimonides, and Yehuda Halevi are among the most important Jewish thinkers who explored philosophical topics in relation to Judaism. As a critique of metaphysics and traditional epistemology, Kant’s writings are not likely to lend much philosophical support to certain ideas central to Judaism such as the living God who appeared to the Jews at Mount Sinai. But it is also true that Kant asks: “Thus all speculation depends, in substance, on the transcendental concept [derived from reason]. But if we posit that it is not correct, would we then have to give up the knowledge of God?” And he replies to his own query with: “Not at all. For then we would only lack the *scientific* knowledge that God exists. But

a great field would still remain to us, and this would be the belief of faith that God exists” (Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978], 39. Emphasis mine.). Kant goes on to insist that this faith must be supported by rational theology, revelation by itself being inadequate: “Even if God were to make an immediate appearance, I would still need rational theology as a presupposition. For how am I to be certain that it is God himself who has appeared to me, or only another powerful being?” (*Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, 161). While this runs completely counter to any Jewish conception of revelation, none of these passages is directed, either implicitly or explicitly, at Judaism more than any other religion. No specific religion is mentioned at all. Kant’s critique of metaphysics is, like all metaphysics, extremely general; that is the whole point, to operate at the most general or even universal level of analysis.

Nor is it accurate to claim broadly, as Patterson does, that “Kant’s autonomy denotes refusal of the self to engage with others” and leads to dehumanization (117). The autonomy referred to here is the freedom of the individual to reason his or her own way to a moral decision in any given instance, that is, to apply what Kant calls the categorical imperative. While the individual’s right to moral decision-making, as Kant conceives it, contrasts with the more collective understanding of moral responsibility in Judaism, not to mention the Sinaitic revelation, it is vastly overstating the case to say that this amounts to intrinsic antisemitism. Any more communitarian conception (such as Aristotle’s or that of Catholicism) that contrasts with Kant’s individualism would also be open to the claim about dehumanization. Kant’s philosophy is very much concerned with the construction of a more perfect humanity, with respect and concern for the individual (the opposite of dehumanization), and with public knowledge and universal goods (that is, goods and values relating to others). One may disagree profoundly with Kant’s views on religion, morality, and rationality, but Patterson moves far too smoothly from Kant’s largely epistemological critique of metaphysics to the so-called politics of metaphysics, seeking to show how Kant’s metaphysics “preconditioned [his] exclusion of the

Jews from his definition of an ‘ideal’ body politic” (Mack, *German Idealism and the Jew*, 26).

On the other hand, when we look at Kant’s more historical essays on religion, the case for a strain of Christian supersessionism, Orientalist prejudice and ignorance, and old-style religious anti-Judaism is strong. In his well-known work of 1793, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, for example, Kant writes: “The Jewish faith, as originally established, was only a collection of merely statutory laws supporting a political state.... Strictly speaking Judaism is not a religion at all but simply the union of a number of individuals.... Judaism was rather meant to be a purely secular state” (Wood and Giovanni, eds., *Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 154).

The problem of the over-rapid transition from metaphysics to claims of antisemitism occurs also in Patterson’s account of Hegelian philosophy. Patterson maintains that for Hegel, “the self has to guard itself against being swayed by the arbitrariness of otherness. In short, it has to protect its posited sameness against the external world of ‘matter,’ of ‘heteronomy,’ that is, the world of the Jew” (118). And he concludes: “Here we see more clearly that theological and philosophical manifestations of anti-Semitism have a common metaphysical origin in the ego’s longing for apotheosis” (118). These sentences are barely intelligible, let alone recognizable as a summation of Hegel’s thought.

In the case of Hegel, philosophical theses and historical interpretations of religion and culture are much more closely intertwined than in Kant. But even here the supposed “inner antisemitism” of philosophy is not clearly evident. In his main metaphysical work, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel does not even mention Judaism, still less manifest antisemitism in the direct way that Patterson seems to discern. But in his lectures on the philosophy of history and of religion, Hegel did categorize ancient and Oriental religions as inferior in certain intellectual, moral, and political respects. They were either too abstract or too parochial, depending on the case. In these voluminous studies of historically

existing religions, Judaism received very cursory treatment compared to Egyptian, Persian, and Greek thought. Thus we may conclude that the second claim mentioned above is correct: there was in Hegel, and in other more minor figures, an intellectual stance that was dismissive and supersessionist toward Judaism. Hegel scholars disagree on what exactly, for Hegel, superseded the religions of the Orient. Some hold that it was Lutheran Christianity; others insist that it was a purely philosophical theory of Absolute Spirit. Whichever is the case, I would argue that the dismissive stance toward Judaism is not expressed in Hegel's metaphysics (though it may ultimately be grounded in it, along with the stance toward all other religions). Rather, the more strictly metaphysical theories cohere with, and may be brought in to support, broader intellectual and political attitudes and historical interpretations that were deeply intolerant.

Patterson may be on stronger ground in the case of Heidegger. Victor Farias has argued cogently, though controversially, that Heidegger's main philosophical writings, including *Being and Time*, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, and his lectures on "The Fundamental Question of Philosophy" not only cohered with his political beliefs and actions but provided a positive philosophical basis for them (Farias, *Heidegger et le nazisme* [Lagrasse: Editions Verdier, 1987]). Farias refers to passages in *Being and Time* which state that authentic being-with-the-other is constituted by *Kampf* (struggle) and that only certain individuals, not the masses, are capable of discovering truth. A reading of the *Introduction to Metaphysics* supports Farias's thesis insofar as Heidegger speaks there of Germany as the last hope of the West for preserving true Spirit in the face of the "pincer" movement of America and Russia, and of the oppression of technology, materialism, and other characteristics of modernity. Reiner Schuermann argues that Heidegger conflates the project of universal metaphysics with the particularity of the German nation (Schuermann, "Riveted to a Monstrous Site: On Heidegger's *Beitrag zur Philosophie*," in Rockmore and Margolis, eds., *The Heidegger Case: On Philosophy and Politics* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992], 314–315). On

the other side, important thinkers such as Richard Rorty tried to defend the autonomy or purity of Heidegger's metaphysics by arguing that such political readings of Heidegger fail to "take philosophy seriously" (Rorty, "Taking Philosophy Seriously," *The New Republic*, April 11, 1988). Heidegger believed that his theories relating to Being and existence transcended traditional ontology. Whether or not this is the case, there can be no doubt, as we now know from the relatively recent publication of *The Black Notebooks*, that he remained an antisemite of the most simple-minded and conventional type throughout his life.

Given even these few considerations in regard to the history of philosophy, we may well ask whether it is possible to speak at all, as Patterson does, of metaphysical antisemitism. I have suggested that it would be more accurate to distinguish between the following: 1) strictly metaphysical work, which does not contain an "inner antisemitism"; 2) applications to theology of philosophical concepts, ontotheology or philosophical theology, which are more likely to contain religious antisemitic tropes; 3) a more general intellectual attitude that is on display in philosophical histories of religion and culture such as Hegel's lectures on the history of religion; and, 4) a social and political prejudice against Jews as individuals or as an ethnic and civic minority. Moreover, unlike Patterson, we should note that for many important philosophers in the Western tradition, critique of Judaism was often accompanied by critique of, or hostility to, Christianity and institutionalized religion of any kind.

Patterson provides forceful chapters on both the Nazi era and Islamic Jihadism, showing extraordinary patience in reading relevant texts, such as Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and the writings of Sayyid Qutb. In his analysis of National Socialism, he incorporates interesting reflections from the philosopher Emil Fackenheim. However, here again we run into conceptual difficulties. Seeking to "get to the bottom" of Nazi racism, Patterson argues that "race theorists are more interested in first principles [i.e., metaphysics] than in anthropology, biology, physiology, etc." Therefore, antisemitism "is not a subset of racism"; rather, racism is a subset of antisemitism (130). From this it follows, for Patterson, that for the Nazis and others,

“the extermination of the Jews was an ontological and ideological necessity” (137).

While it may be true to say that racism involves or even rests on metaphysical essentialism—the notion that at the deepest level of human beings there is an invisible, immutable feature or set of features (negative ones) which no amount of education, conversion, assimilation, or civic improvement can remove—in the confused mind of the racist, the biological (especially genetic) and social characteristics of people deemed to constitute a “race” are also extremely important. But isn’t this also the case for groups other than Jews? Extermination of *any* despised “race” or ethnic group might appear to some to be both an “ontological” as well as a biological and social imperative. Here, I would argue, more comparative studies, both theoretical and empirical, are needed to demonstrate, or not, the uniqueness of the Jews.

Throughout the book, Patterson is as much preoccupied with Jews against Judaism, or Jewish self-hatred, as he is with antisemitism on the part of others. To illustrate this, he introduces fresh readings of literary texts, such as Arthur Miller’s *Focus*. He seeks to illuminate the many ways in which ordinary Jews evade solidarity with the Jewish past, contemporary Israel, and the struggle against resurgent antisemitism. But accepting the religious ideas and duties of Jewish identity does not mean that the people that dwells alone must do entirely without philosophy, science, and other fruits of other cultures. Nor, perhaps, should it entirely ignore all the arguments of some of its own sceptics. And while seeking to analyze the “sacral quality” of antisemitism to which Wistrich referred, we should all take care to avoid chasing metaphysical phantoms and give empirical studies their due. That would have done Heidegger, for one, a world of good.

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