LENN E. GOODMAN: AN INTELLECTUAL PORTRAIT

Alan Mittleman

Lenn Goodman is an American Jewish philosopher, currently serving as Professor of Philosophy and as the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. Goodman's additional appointment to a chair of Humanities reflects the breadth of his interests, erudition, and work. Trained in medieval Arabic and Hebrew philosophy and intellectual history, he is also a scholar of ancient philosophy and—most importantly for our purposes—a prolific constructive philosopher in his own right. One of Goodman's distinctions is his ability to bring not just Plato and Aristotle but Saadia, Maimonides, Bahya ibn Pakuda, not to mention Avicenna and al-Ghazali, among others, into a contemporary conversation. Goodman draws not only on classical and medieval thinkers in his constructive work but from the same sources which nourished his medieval philosophical predecessors: Bible and midrash, mishnah and Talmud, Quran and hadith. Against the conventional academic style of our time ("analytic philosophy"), Goodman describes himself as a "synthetic philosopher." No one should imagine, however, that synthesis entails inattention to analysis, rigorous argument, or deep, critical engagement with contemporary analytic philosophy and its central problems. Goodman's work is no less technical or fundamental than the work of a Quine, a Nelson Goodman, a John Rawls, a Christine Korsgaard, or a Thomas Nagel. But it is incomparably more richly textured, more historically capacious. To read books or essays by Lenn Goodman, such as the ones comprising this volume, is a demanding but deeply rewarding experience. The intrepid reader who has never encountered his work before is in for an experience of unparalleled intellectual stimulation.

Biography and Career

Goodman was born in 1944 in Detroit, and raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Putney, Vermont, before his family settled in Los Angeles. He is the son of the late Calvin Goodman, a Harvard-educated World War II veteran, whose career path led him to being an arts consultant, and Florence Goodman, a poet and professor of English. His frequent
references to art, his focus on the theme of human creativity, and the peculiar artistry and power of his prose no doubt may be traced to these early influences. He was educated, like his father, at Harvard, where he pursued Arabic language and literature, as well as philosophy, graduating in 1965, summa cum laude. His work in Arabic actually preceded his undergraduate career, as he had begun a study of the language at UCLA when he was still in high school. His undergraduate thesis was a translation of Ibn Tufayl’s philosophical novel, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. Remarkably, Goodman was able to publish the translation and study of Ibn Tufayl in 1972; it remains in print, expanded and updated, with the University of Chicago Press. It is doubtful that many undergraduate theses have such a distinguished afterlife.

Goodman won a Marshall Scholarship in 1965 and journeyed to Oxford for doctoral work. Once there, he continued his medieval and Arabic studies with Richard Walzer and Samuel Stern, read modern Islamic thinkers with Albert Hourani, and deepened his study of philosophy with J. O. Urmson, Isaiah Berlin, Gilbert Ryle, A. N. Prior, and others. He earned his doctorate in 1968, writing on the Muslim theologian al-Ghazali. His dissertation focused on al-Ghazali’s arguments for the creation (as opposed to the Aristotelian eternity) of the world and “his critique of the rationalist/intellectualist notion that causality is a matter of logical necessity.” The interest in creation as a concept that supports an empirically encountered, contingent world discoverable through experience and inductive reason is, as we shall see below, ongoing and basic to Goodman’s mature views.

Before arriving at Vanderbilt University in 1994, he taught at UCLA (1968–1969) and at the University of Hawaii (1969–1994) in the Department of Philosophy. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Baumgardt Memorial Award of the American Philosophical Association, the Gratz Centennial Prize, and the Earl Sutherland Prize, Vanderbilt University’s top research award. Most notably, he was a Gifford Lecturer at the University of Glasgow in 2005. Goodman was a Littman Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, a Humanities Fellow at the East-West Center, an Arts and Humanities Faculty Fellow of the University of Hawaii, and a fellow of the Center for the Study of Religion and Culture at Vanderbilt University. In 1995, he was at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He is the recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Matchette Foundation.

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1 Personal communication with Prof. Goodman.