

WHO THINKS IN THE TALMUD?

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Abstract

This article traces a historical shift, and in particular its erasure from memory on the intellectual map of the West, in concepts of subjectivity across practices of rabbinic thinking in late antiquity, medieval interpretations of the Talmud, and modern talmudic scholarship. I first introduce a comparative perspective that relies on a mutual hermeneutics of philosophical and talmudic traditions. I consequently engage with Alain de Libera's archaeological analysis of the birth of the thinking subject in medieval philosophy and theology. In this light, I analyze the role of the notion of the thinking subject in construing the Talmud from Maimonides to contemporary Talmud criticism. Finally, I explore the implications of de Libera's program of a philosophical archaeology of the thinking subject for mapping the complex relationship of mutual presupposition and exclusion between philosophical, rhetorical, and talmudic traditions of thinking in antiquity, as manifested in the larger scope of these traditions.

Keywords

Subjectivity; Talmud; thinking; philosophical archaeology

This article introduces questions of subjectivity and thinking into scholarship on the Talmud. Conversely, it reclaims the importance of talmudic scholarship in a broader discussion of these questions in late antiquity in comparison with modernity. These questions are pertinent for studying the Talmud, because modern notions of the “thinking subject” (or even the medieval groundwork for these modern notions) make it difficult for us today to get back to an “original” experience of talmudic discourse or the talmudic voice. In turn, once carefully articulated, that difficulty—even before it gets resolved—already enhances an understanding of our modern habits of thinking.

What constituted an original talmudic discourse, or an original experience of thinking in the Talmud, and how can we get back to it? This question can hardly be answered in such a general form.

A more precise formulation requires an interdisciplinary, rather than multidisciplinary, approach.

The disciplines involved form two groups. One includes philosophy and the history of philosophy, broadly construed; the second comprises philological, historical, and more recently cultural scholarship on the Talmud. These groups are very different; the second, historically oriented group uses chronology as the main framework for explaining texts, either by describing a causal relationship between them in terms of “influence,” or by identifying typological relationships in terms of “mapping”—either synchronic, or more recently diachronic. The first, philosophically oriented group decries these kinds of linear explanations as naïve, and instead promotes hermeneutical methods that move from what is clearer in a text to what is more obscure about it, even if chronologically it means moving from later to earlier. Yet, despite this radical disciplinary difference of historical-chronological explanation and philosophical-hermeneutical interpretation, neither group of disciplines can approach thinking in the Talmud without the other. Therefore interdisciplinary dialogue and integration are needed. On the way to such integration, instead of attempting any “direct” restoration of a once existing and later “forgotten” or “distorted” experience of the Talmud, I explore a different venue, which entails the mutual hermeneutics of talmudic and philosophical traditions of thinking. I read the question of the “original” mode of thinking in the Talmud as calling for a program of hermeneutical analysis of talmudic discourse in late antiquity both in light of and despite later receptions and conceptualizations of that discourse. As I will explain, such a program negotiates the demands of both chronological and hermeneutical rigor. A particular focus of this program is the description of changing subject positions in relation to thinking in the text, as we transition between late ancient and modern practices of thinking, rather than on any linear causal explanation of changes.

My argument thus originates from studies in the Talmud and philosophy. Juxtaposed, these traditions provide an opportunity to illuminate the conceptual foundations of each other and in that way create a new approach to the question of the thinking processes in the talmudic and philosophical traditions. From the point of view of talmudic studies, this project entails using studies in pagan philosophy in a way similar to how studies in Christianity have been used to understand rabbinic texts better. From the point of view of studies in