

LIBERATING IMAGINATION AND OTHER ENDS OF MEDIEVAL JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Kalman P. Bland
Duke University

Abstract

In its treatment of imagination as understood by medieval Jewish philosophers, modern scholarship has tended to neglect the intersection of animal fables and political thought. This paper examines several Aesopian themes in Greek philosophy and medieval Jewish philosophic literature, especially the tales composed by Berakhiah ha-Naqdan, in order to highlight the attention lavished by these pre-moderns on the faculty of imagination. It is argued that, according to the philosophers, human perfection requires the cultivation of both intellect and imagination. It is also shown that Pierre Hadot's notion of "spiritual exercises" as constituting philosophy is fruitfully applicable to the genre of fable.

Keywords

Aesop's fables; Berakhiah ha-Naqdan; Maimonides; animals; imagination

Who peyntede the leoun, tel me, who?

The congenial spirit of this gathering beckons us to explore past approaches and new directions in the study of Jewish philosophy.¹ Hamlet came to mind. I hope to persuade you that "there are more things in [the] heaven and earth" of ancient Greek and medieval Jewish philosophy "than are dreamt of in" our prevailing research paradigms and standard accounts of that philosophy. The "more than is dreamt of" alludes to the attention lavished by premodern

¹ The epigraph is drawn from Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale," in *The Canterbury Tales*, ed. V. A. Kolve and Glending Olson (New York: Norton Critical Books, 1989), 122, line 690. "Congenial... gathering" refers to the conference ("Jewish Philosophy: Past Approaches, New Directions") at which a preliminary version of this paper was delivered. The conference was held in April 2009 in Canada, at McMaster University and Kings College, and organized by Professors Aaron Hughes and Dana Hollander. I am grateful to them and to the hospitality of the host institutions for inviting me to participate in the lively exchange of scholarly opinion. I am also grateful to the anonymous reader of this revised version of my paper for challenging me to refine my arguments.

philosophers upon the faculty of imagination.² Critical of imagination's defects, they nevertheless acknowledged its indispensable powers and paid homage to its noble products, including fables and other provocative fictions.³

This one, for example: One day, in the forest, a merchant was set upon by thieves. They robbed and beat the merchant. They left him bloodied, bound, and naked. "The flies gathered upon his flanks and arms and encamped round about all his wounds, to pluck and lick the blood from his gashes, like a swarm of sucking bees. They ate and were sated, and being satisfied, rested there and remained." A knight happened by, dismounted from his horse, and extended a helping hand. "With branches and leaves from the forest he brushed the insects away and made them all flee, until none was left and the body of the wounded man was exposed. The man cursed the knight with a mighty curse, reproaching him and reviling him with a voice like a ghost's issuing out of the earth... 'Why have you chased the flies away? May he that troubled me trouble thee. Why have you troubled me?'" "Distraught, the compassionate knight replied, "Why have you repaid evil for good, and for my blessing a curse, and for my benefaction destruction?" The merchant rejoined: "You have scornfully entreated me and with your outstretched arm troubled me when your hand chased away from upon me the flies who were already sated with my blood. My body they covered like a garment, but after you put them to flight strangers will come and draw my blood... Better for me to endure fly and wasp that have eaten to satiety and drunk to drunkenness than to endure those not yet sated.

² For insight into the parallel and complementary assessments of imagination rendered by the medieval kabbalists, with explicit references to the influential streams of Neoplatonic and Aristotelian influence on the mystics, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 52–74, 270–325, esp. 160–3, 171–81, 290, 294. The gist of Wolfson's compelling argument follows: "In a considerable number of kabbalistic texts priority is given to imagination as the primary means for attaining visionary gnosis of the divine pleroma, which cannot be perceived by the senses or conveyed by the intellect. The imagination is elevated to a position of utmost supremacy; it is, in effect, the divine element of the soul, which enables one to gain access to the realm of incorporeality" (279).

³ For a contemporary approach that resonates harmoniously with premodernity in recognizing the indispensability of imagination and expressing appreciation for its noble products, see Elaine Scarry, "A Defense of Poesy (The Treatise of Julia)," in *Nineteen Eighty-Four: Orwell and Our Future*, ed. Abbott Gleason, Jack Goldsmith, and Martha C. Nussbaum (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 13–28.