The question what Jewish philosophy is and why this field is important for the academic study of philosophy has often been a subject of debate. The academic study of Jewish philosophy started in the middle of the nineteenth century with the pioneering work of Manuel Joël and Salomon Munk. It was the early period of *die Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Since these early years in the academic study of Jewish philosophers, scholars have debated on what is Jewish and what is philosophical in Jewish philosophy. This discussion focuses on questions like: is Jewish philosophy a philosophy of Judaism, is it a specifically Jewish contribution to the debate on philosophical problems, is it a part of philosophy of religion or is it broader, is it philosophizing by Jews, is there really such a thing as Jewish philosophy, is the term not an internal contradiction?

In reply to these questions some scholars argue that philosophy entered Judaism as an external influence which is not essentially typical of Judaism. Julius Guttmann, for instance, opens his standard work *Die Philosophie des Judentums* from 1933 with the claim that the Jewish people did not arrive at philosophical thought by its own efforts, but received philosophy externally. He believes that the history of Jewish philosophy is the history of the reception of an alien body of thought, which was then merged into Jewish thought. Eliezer Schweid and Aviezer Ravitzky also state that Jewish philosophy is the result of external influences. According to Ravitzky, as long as Jewish thought remains within what he calls the framework of the rabbinic tradition, regardless of the era, no attempt is undertaken to formulate it in universally valid terms. The internal certainty of the particular tradition is sufficient. Jewish philosophy only develops in confrontation with the outside world, as in the Hellenistic period in Alexandria, in the Iberian peninsula.

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in the Middle Ages, in Italy during the Renaissance, in Germany in the modern era. Schweid adds that Jewish philosophy in the Middle Ages lags behind developments in non-Jewish philosophy, because it is the result of external influences, and so is anachronistic.¹

This description of the matter is problematic. Against Schweid’s statement about the anachronistic character of Jewish philosophy, I mention only Mendelssohn’s innovative contribution to contemporary philosophy and his original discussion of Judaism within the framework of Enlightenment thought, and the innovative aspect of Hermann Cohen’s concept of Judaism in the context of his critical discussion of Kant’s legacy. Other examples are easily found, for instance Levinas. They show that Schweid’s claim, if in fact it applies to the Middle Ages, is not valid in the modern era.

Second, the claim that philosophy is essentially alien to Judaism reflects an essentialism which is hard to prove. It is true that Jewish philosophy developed in the Diaspora, and that Judaism in Palestine during the First and Second Temple Period does not have philosophers like the pre-Socratics, Plato, or Aristotle. But these facts do not warrant the conclusion that philosophy is essentially alien to Judaism (Guttman, Schweid), nor that Jewish thought does not need philosophy as long as it remains within the framework of the rabbinic tradition (Ravitzky). Such a claim confuses inception with essence, and forgets that rabbinic thought in Antiquity did not develop in a vacuum. Rabbinic thought in Antiquity, too, shows Greek and other influences which made constructive contributions to it.² The germination and flowering of Jewish philosophy can also be interpreted as the rise and development of something that was already present, potentially or essentially. Ravitzky’s claim that rabbinic thought does not need philosophy as long as it remains within its own domain seems at odds with the Talmud’s words on what we can call the architecture of knowledge. The passage in question reads: ‘Raba said,

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