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BOOK REVIEW

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I

Randi Rashkover is a contemporary Jewish philosopher whose work recovers a pragmatic rationality implicit in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Her previous monograph, *Freedom and Law,* drew especially on Franz Rosenzweig to ground a logic of contingency in a post-liberal theology of the lawfulness of divine freedom. Without such a logic, she argued, Jewish and Christian theo-political claims cannot be distinguished from naked assertions of power or mere expressions of subjective desire.

In *Nature and Norm: Judaism, Christianity, and the Theopolitical Problem*, Rashkover now discerns a deeper manifestation of this theo-political problem, which results from the inability of Jewish and Christian thinkers to come to terms with modern science. In their attempts to situate their claims in relation to scientific criteria of knowledge, Jews and Christians tend to place theo-political claims outside the domain of rational criticism. The result is to afflict these traditions with a fundamental arbitrariness, what Rashkover calls *arbitrary anchoring.*

Rashkover's intervention in *Nature and Norm* is not theological, but philosophical and, in particular, *logical:* "Jewish and Christian thought needs a logical reorientation that would illuminate conceptual practices capable of issuing on-going and changing measures of the justifiability of claims derived from both natural and social orders of discourse" (xiv). With its call for ongoing rational criticism of religious claims, the book represents a turn in her thinking towards a more thoroughgoing rationalism, closer in spirit to Hermann Cohen than to Rosenzweig.

Rashkover traces the problem of arbitrary anchoring to a set of logical assumptions that she calls the *fact/value divide.* Rashkover's use of this phrase may mislead some readers. To my ear, the "fact/value divide" properly refers to a logical binary between facts and values: fact judgments are distinct from value judgments, and all judgments must be one kind or the other. Rashkover uses this expression, however, to refer to the more specific view—encouraged by the utility and prestige of modern science—that (scientific) judgments of fact are the prototype of rational validity, such that "the logical validity of natural scientific claims [is] the criterion for the logical validity of all knowledge claims" (xxvi). This view that judgments of fact are the prototype of all logical validity presupposes the binary between facts and values, but it is not entailed by it; after all, it seems possible to suppose that knowledge about values has its own distinct rational criteria of validity.

In any case, *Nature and Norm* makes a persuasive case that Jewish and Christian thinkers have tended to treat modern natural science as the prototype of logical validity, often despite their stated intention. Consequently, they have failed to identify non-arbitrary criteria for their theo-political judgments. One of the book's central contributions is to develop a useful framework for discerning the many and various ways that modern Jewish and Christian thinkers have succumbed to this arbitrary anchoring of core theo-political claims. She identifies four symptoms of arbitrary anchoring: meaninglessness, acosmism, tragedy, and polemicism. Since the meaning of claims is explicated with reference to standards of rational validity, arbitrarily anchored claims will prove to be *meaningless* or unintelligible. Such claims must therefore lack

determinate inferential relations to the world that we inhabit, what Rashkover calls *acosmism.* Since meaningless and acosmic claims "cannot operate as models or effective road maps for action" (24), they lead in turn to two characteristic political postures: *tragedy* (asserting beautiful ideas doomed to pragmatic failure) and *polemicism* (dogmatically defending one's stance "through other than rational means" [24]).

Guided by these marks, the central chapters trace the intractable problems that the fact/value divide has posed for Jewish and Christian thinkers through a series of case studies. Chapter one, "Theology and Subjectivism in Rosenzweig and Kant," signals the break with her previous work by showing that the postliberal Rosenzweig's appeals to revelation cannot warrant meaningful theological claims, any more than the liberal Kant can do so through appeals to the supposed "fact" of practical reason. (This chapter, which culminates in a summary of her thesis, may fruitfully be read on its own as an overview of the whole book.)

The subsequent chapters each focus on one of three primary forms of the fact/value divide, constituting three stages of increasing awareness of its problems: *acceptance, redescription,* and *external critique.* Chapter two looks at Spinoza and Hobbes, early modern thinkers who simply *accept* the fact/value divide and attempt to articulate Judaism or Christianity by reducing the content of theo-political claims to causal events within the natural order. Chapter three examines Martin Buber and Carl Schmidt, who *redescribe* the fact/value divide by grounding theo-political claims in some extra-rational "more." Chapter four turns to Leo Strauss and Karl Barth, who explicitly recognize the fact/value divide and its deleterious effects for Jewish and Christian thought. Despite this *external critique,* however, they fail to identify alternative rational criteria for justifying religious claims. In each iteration, Jewish and Christian theo-political judgments remain arbitrarily anchored, and thus indistinguishable from expressions of desire or assertions of power.

Chapter five develops Rashkover's alternative, what she calls *immanent critique.* Jewish and Christian communities must recognize the need, but also claim the authority, to engage in ongoing justificatory

review of their practices in light of persistent challenges to the intelligibility of their communal life. She finds a model in John Dewey's pragmatic logic of inquiry. For Dewey, inquiry is the way in which living communities—in their natural aspect as groups of embodied organisms and their social aspect as traditions and institutions—solve existential problems by correcting their practices. She then identifies paradigms of immanent critique in the work of two contemporary religious pragmatists, Peter Ochs and Nicholas Adams.

Rashkover frames immanent critique as a response to a kind of historical imperative, what she calls a "forced option":

> [Jewish and Christian Thinkers] must either a) conclude that they lack a non-arbitrarily anchored standard of rationality and hence that they cannot succeed in making many of their central claims intelligible, or b) acknowledge the crisis of intelligibility that the fact-value divide creates for their thought and hear it as a call to engage in pragmatic self-reflection upon the worldly conditions and communal habits with respect to which alone Jewish and Christian claims are intelligible. (23)

The notion of a forced option amounts to an *apologia* for philosophy as a last resort in times of theopolitical crisis. The arbitrariness of religious commitments ultimately threatens the very survival of religious communities, and under such conditions, engaging in philosophical reflection is a life or death choice. These existential stakes invest communities with the authority, but also the responsibility, to boldly submit their practices to pragmatic criticism.

Rashkover emphasizes that, because this forced option is "pragmatically driven" (21), it is only thinkers in *our* context for whom this option is forced, and then only as a consequence of the pragmatic failure of previous attempts to resolve the theo-political problem. She insists, therefore, that her book should not be read as a "critical judgment on the…adequacy of prior efforts at logical explanation *for their time* but a commentary on the adequacy of these explanations for our own time" (204). She offers her own proposal as local and particular, in accordance with her broader commitment to a pragmatic account of rationality—though I am not convinced that her pragmatism requires so strict a non-

judgmental posture. The life of a community unfolds over time, and the pragmatic work of solving present problems implies some responsibility *to* the *future* community, where alone the full consequences of a solution can be displayed. Why then should it not sometimes be appropriate for a pragmatist to judge the adequacy of past efforts, even for their own time, in light of their consequences for the *present* community? And indeed, I find it hard to read her relentless display of the unintended arbitrariness afflicting the thought of a wide range of earlier thinkers as anything but a critical judgment.

II

Through five chapters, *Nature and Norm* diagnoses the persistent challenges to the intelligibility of modern religious life and argues persuasively that a religious pragmatism is the only viable way forward for Jewish and Christian communities. The book does not end there, however, but continues instead into a sixth chapter, "Science Apprehending Science," an extended commentary on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit.* Following recent non-metaphysical interpreters of Hegel, Rashkover takes the *Phenomenology* as an account of the historical process by which Spirit—"the self-preserving community," in her gloss (202)—comes to terms with modern science, in parallel with her own narrative in *Nature and Norm.* This process culminates in "Absolute Knowing," which Rashkover understands as an ongoing philosophic practice of critical reflection, through which communities secure the intelligibility of their communal life. Absolute Knowing is, on this reading, identical with what she calls "immanent critique."

Certainly the *Phenomenology* offers rich resources for those hoping to bend the idealist tradition in a pragmatist direction, as Rashkover's suggestive reading demonstrates. It shows, for example, how a living community may rationally (non-arbitrarily) correct its own fundamental categories in response to historical crises, while highlighting the distinctive social function of philosophy as the activity of self-conscious reflection on the rational conditions of communal life.

But Rashkover might have done more to separate explicitly the proto-pragmatic wheat from the totalizing chaff of Hegel's absolute idealism. One symptom of this is her occasionally strained reading of Hegel. For example, she argues that Hegel's *Phenomenology* does not recount an *ideal* history of Spirit that would apply to any *possible* human community, but rather the *real* struggles of an *actual* community, the "modern European community." On this view, Absolute Knowing is absolute only *for Hegel's European community*, without normative validity for other communities with other histories and problems. Perhaps the *Phenomenology should* have argued thus; but if the word "absolute" means that which obtains irrespective of its relations, surely "absolute knowing" cannot be a way of knowing that is valid only *relative* to a particular community. Hegel himself says, in the introduction to his *Logic*, that the *Phenomenology* sets the stage for nothing less than "the exposition of God as he is in his eternal essence before the creation of nature and of a finite spirit."[1] It is one thing to say (as Hegel clearly does) that "absolute knowledge" can be attained only under certain historical conditions, and quite another to say that the content of that knowledge is valid only for those inhabiting those conditions.

In other cases, Rashkover's reading of Hegel is sound but in tension with her own pragmatism. For example, in the penultimate stage of the *Phenomenology*, Spirit comes to consciousness of itself as the object of the "revealed religion" of Christianity, implying that the community itself is the proper (albeit veiled) referent of the term "God." Accordingly, the final move to Absolute Knowing involves moving beyond the merely representational mode of religious discourse to the free conceptual language of philosophy. As Rashkover comments, religious representation "fails to *adequately capture* the community's autonomous act of self-preservation since it represents the community's own activity of self-preservation as a saving act of God, and only by extension

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[1] Hegel, *The Science of Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

something the community itself achieves" (201, emphasis added). She develops this point with reference to the argument of *Nature and Norm:*

> At this juncture, consciousness's scientific apprehension of "science" directly parallels the philosophical insight into the historical specificity of immanent critique discovered by Jewish and Christian thinkers in the preceding analysis…From here, consciousness also achieves awareness of its unique historical role as self-consciousness, that is, the community's philosophical responsibility and authority to preserve the European form of life through justificatory self-reflection by *demythologizing religious representation and dissolving the community's consciousness of separation from its object* [viz. God]. (203, emphasis added)

Hegel is not wrong to discern self-critical reflection implicit in religious practice, but this conception of philosophy as *demythologization* does not seem consistent with the more modest approach of the religious pragmatists (Ochs and Adams) that Rashkover commends earlier. To demythologize is to *supersede* ordinary religious consciousness, to claim that philosophy knows the same object as ordinary consciousness, only more adequately. By contrast, for Ochs and Adams, pragmatic philosophy *serves* ordinary consciousness without superseding it, since philosophy has its own distinct object (primarily, the community's implicit practices of reasoning) and its own distinct task (proposing corrections to those practices).

The heart of *Nature and Norm* is Rashkover's account of pragmatic inquiry, together with her analysis of the history of modern failures to come to terms with the fact/value divide. The persuasiveness of her account does not depend on sharing her affinity for Hegel, though it has clearly benefited from Rashkover's deep engagement with his thought. I suspect that her lasting contribution to Jewish and Christian thought will consist in her distinctive articulation of a pragmatic rationalism, her useful framework for identifying arbitrary anchoring, and her provocative hypothesis that contemporary religious life cannot remain viable without cultivating philosophic practices of immanent critique.