



March 2012

The Non-Identical Self, Autonomy and Heteronomy: A Response to Hannah Hashkes

Ephraim Meir
Bar-Ilan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Meir, Ephraim. "The Non-Identical Self, Autonomy and Heteronomy: A Response to Hannah Hashkes." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 7, no. 1 (2012): 57-68. <https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-bk0t-0945>.

This Response Essay is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Textual Reasoning by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

THE NON-IDENTICAL SELF, AUTONOMY AND HETERONOMY: A RESPONSE TO HANNAH HASHKES

EPHRAIM MEIR

Bar-Ilan University

Let me first reprise the main lines of Hannah Hashkes' sophisticated argument. First of all, Hashkes asks whether autonomy and individual freedom are compatible with engagement in a religious community. Her thesis is twofold. Following Levinas, she argues that an affiliation with a particular community of discourse does not preclude autonomy, but conditions it. Further on, following Peirce's pragmatist model of knowledge, she explains why development of reason and subsequently freedom requires social affiliation. She thus argues that she has found a double argument contra the idea of the loss of freedom in traditional communities.

I repeat here in detail Hashkes' way of thinking, since it is worth taking seriously. In her first move, Hashkes reminds the reader of Kant's notion of human autonomy and his idea that rational beings make their own laws. From the Kantian perspective, the heteronomy of the Jewish law is unacceptable. People like Hermann Cohen, she argues, tried to show that Judaism is not incompatible with universal, autonomous

reason. But, she asks, what about the particular modes of Judaism? Unlike Cohen, Rosenzweig did not base revelation upon reason. Rather, he highlighted the particularity of Judaism.

With Buber and Rosenzweig, Hashkes includes the encounter with transcendence in her account of human experience. Along the lines of Levinas' philosophy, she situates the ethical demand in the human community, but outside reason. Staying close to Levinas' position, she accepts heteronomy in the face to face of human beings, which leads to legislation of rules that belong to the realm of reason. She concludes that sovereignty and heteronomy, autonomy, communal affiliation, freedom, and adherence to transcendence can exist together. Consequently, she rejects Ari Elon's distinction between the autonomous Jew and the rabbinic Jew, *yehudi ribboni* and *yehudi rabbani*. After this philosophical statement, she turns more concretely to the question of the self and the Jewish community.

Hashkes starts her analysis of the Jewish individual and collective self by considering Eugene Borowitz's covenantal notion of Judaism. She situates him within the broader framework of American pragmatism that is not interested in ontological questions about God. Neither were John Dewey or Mordechai Kaplan interested in the supernatural. Kaplan thought that the *sancta* were necessary in the Jewish civilization, but not as divine dictates. Hashkes then narrows down the focus upon Borowitz's view of the relationship between freedom and the communal value system. Borowitz criticized Cohen's rationalism that does not allow for communication with something beyond reason or for particular expressions of Jewish life. For Borowitz, God, Israel and the Torah receive meaning within the covenant. The Jewish self belongs to the covenant people, is involved with God, is radically historical, equipped with hope, and, yet, individual and free. Hashkes finds Borowitz's idea of Jewish selfhood helpful, but asks if this idea sufficiently takes into account the "totality of the experience" that is involved when one belongs to a traditional community.¹ Borowitz thinks that the adult, free Jew may

¹ Hashkes, section 4.

choose to be what one is: a Jew. Hashkes doubts if this liberal position succeeds in combining the private and the communal. With David Novak and Yudit Greenberg, she determines that Borowitz's covenantal relationship lacks the force of a religious stance. In her view, Borowitz starts from a personal religious experience, and his thought is without "communal teeth." She is skeptical that Borowitz's vision of choice takes into enough account the attachment to a community that is "a much more total and all encompassing experience"² than Borowitz thinks. She insists on the "all encompassing power of the experience of commitment to a religious community,"³ which is not in contrast to getting involved in different language games.

Finally, Peirce's pragmatism provides Hashkes with a supplementary argument. Without entering into detail, Peirce's position runs as follows. There is an experience of encounter with something exterior, and knowledge advances within a community of inquirers who make laws that may predict future experiences. Hashkes points to parallels between Levinas' and Peirce's accounts of encounter with externality: both deal with heteronomous exteriority. She conjoins these thinkers, who further deem that such an encounter has the power of generating a rational discourse. In this manner, she finds a solution for the problem she deals with: there is a confrontation with the non-ego that defines the ego's separateness and calls upon it to develop a rational discourse. In her view, the religious self is visited by a heteronomy that generates rational discourse. Heteronomy is "the point of departure for a discourse that constitutes religious law."⁴ Relying on Peirce's views, Peter Ochs too highlights the validity of particularity in religious discourse. Ochs maintains that Peirce rightly saw that each reasoning occurs in a community of readers and that a corrective approach to knowledge is crucial. He qualifies such a corrective approach as redeeming: one has to read the

² Ibid.

³ Idem., section 6

⁴ Ibid.

Bible in a corrective manner, continually rereading and reinterpreting. Yet, Hashkes questions the ability of such an open-ended discourse to keep the Jewish self and retain communal selfhood. She doubts if communal textual reasoning has “the commanding force expected in a religious community.”⁵ She wonders if Ochs’ idea of textual reasoning does justice to the experience of commitment to a religious community, in which one is committed to what is beyond reason. In the community, the experience of exteriority is mediated by symbols that provide for a “full picture of reality” that determines the experience of the self.⁶ Only such a total picture of reality that refers to transcendence would be able to generate continual religious existence. Moreover, being part of a communal discourse—secular or religious—is for her a condition for thought and freedom, not an obstacle. Consequently, one may live simultaneously in different worlds, at the same time free and in community.⁷ The challenge, she concludes, is to avoid confusing religious communities and the individual with his spiritual aspirations. Her final conclusion is that the self is always with the non-self and that a community has to provide religious meaning to the totality of human experience, without cutting itself away from participation in the modern world.

The Self

To my mind, the discussion of the Jewish self has to take place within the broader framework of the self as such. Every self is situated and, as such, embedded in different contexts and participating in different language games, amongst which the religious language game is certainly not to be neglected. We live in a time in which religious engagement becomes more and more optional and in which religious coercion is less and less present. Yet, the formation of a religious self remains for many people a high priority in different Western countries, which separate

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

religion from state and rearrange the relation between religion, society, and state. Although one may certainly organize his life without any religion or religiosity, religious engagement remains important for many. Religious engagement is not self-evident any more, but many still want one or another kind of religiosity. If this is true, one has indeed to answer the question: why should the individual self-limit his freedom in order to be engaged in a religious community? I agree with Hashkes (and for this matter with Levinas) that one's freedom is conditioned by the heteronomous call of the other. The question is thus not unlimited freedom or limitation of freedom. Hashkes too thinks that this is not the question, since freedom and communal belonging go together. The self is shaped by the other.

To the question, "what is selfhood about?" one could answer that a person "shapes" his self, but the self is also "shaped." In Levinas' perspective, the accent lies upon "being shaped." He approaches the I as "hostage," traumatized," "exposed," "passivity," "persecuted." Positively formulated: the self is in ethical maternity, *hineni*, "here I am."⁸ Selfhood and the unicity of man are therefore one's availability for the other. The I is unique because of his responsibility for the other as the one-for-the-other, and not because of some physical, psychical or cultural features in itself. Face to face with the other, my spontaneous freedom is called into question; I am demanded, beyond my will. If this is the self, one has to recognize a self-transcendence in the human being, which links it to others. I insist upon this fact, since there is a certain evolution in Levinas' thought. In *Totality and Infinity*, he still thinks that the self exists before its social relationships. But in *Otherwise than Being*, the self (itself a product of social context) is from the beginning —or better, before the beginning— demanded. Hashkes writes that the infinite demand is destructive towards the "self that was before."⁹ I would rather think that it is that the totality of the "same" that is opened up towards the other and that,

⁸ Gen. 22:1-7 and Isa. 6:8.

⁹ Hashkes, section 3.

therefore, it is the very demand of the other that constitutes the “self.” The self is non-identical. Otherness is in the self. I agree with Hashkes that there is a necessary limit to our freedom because of the adherence to transcendence. But the self has a higher identity that consists in being linked to the other, in the community and outside the community. Traveling through different worlds, the self becomes itself in interaction with the non-self.

In this context, it is useful to compare Rosenzweig and Levinas in order to give attention to the differences between them. Rosenzweig used a different terminology than Levinas: not only is there a difference between the command “Thou shall love” and the command “Thou shall not kill,” but Levinas’ definition of the self or ipseity in *Otherwise than Being* differs from Rosenzweig’s definition of the self. Rosenzweig’s self (*Selbst*) is that what precedes the soul (*Seele*), which one receives with the divine imperative of love.¹⁰ Levinas defines the self in *Otherwise than Being* as “hostage” or “substitution.”¹¹ There are therefore differences in the use of the word “self” in the two philosophies. In any case, both Levinas’ self and Rosenzweig’s soul are the result of the contact with the non-ego, with an exteriority or alterity. The command establishes the non-egological ego. Rosenzweig as well as Levinas write about the ‘I’ as the result of a shock that ruptures one’s totality as well as the totality of history. Both talk about transcendence as a fundamental event in the life of the human being as

¹⁰ Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 213.

¹¹ Before *Otherwise than Being: or Beyond Essence*, Levinas defined ipseity as a human being’s egoism, much as did Rosenzweig. In *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, for instance, criticizing philosophy as “egology,” he distances himself from the Socratic truth that “rests on the essential self-sufficiency of the same, its identification in ipseity, its egoism” (*Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969], 44.) In *Otherwise than Being* there is a change in the use of “ipseity.” In this later work, the self has otherness in itself; ipseity is visited by alterity. The self is subjection, which is the subjectivity of the subject itself (*Otherwise than Being*, 125). Only through the other, I am “in myself” (*Otherwise than Being*, 112). Being oneself is being persecuted, with impossibility of escaping and of taking distance. The I is itself in as far as slipping away from the Good becomes impossible. Ipseity is not identity as the return to itself; it is “my substitution for another” (*Otherwise than Being*, 125).

such. Rosenzweig insists further on the plurality of communities that are constituted around the divine imperative. In my words: he knows about the own, but recognizes the other. Levinas' self as traumatized by the other is also permanently challenged by the non-I, individual or collective. My point is that Rosenzweig and Levinas' account of the soul, c.q., the self, is not only about the Jewish self, but about the self as such: they highlight the difference between people and communities, but also what I would like to call "trans-difference" through which they maintain the difference as well as the bridge to others.¹² True, Jews are Jews because of the special character of their monotheism and therefore because of the specificity of their community. It is nonsensical to discuss this specificity without the external call that makes their self non-identical, i.e. called into humble service of the other. I can identify with Hashkes' concern that the Jewish particular world has not to be absorbed into the general world, but it would not be meaningful to stress the Jewish particularity without considering its function into the broader world. As a self, the Jewish self is always linked to other Jews, but also to non-Jewish others. The Jew is *ivri*, with the possibility of *la-avor*, to pass to the other, whoever she or he may be. The self is related to the entire society. If a self is related to a community that is not world-centered, it remains within the magic circle of a collective "same" that reduces the world to what belongs to the "own." So far for the self as broader than the Jewish self and as that, to which Hashkes refers as "a disturbed self" or "newfound ethical self."¹³ Let me now further go into detail on the particular Jewish self, which is a self that is part of a particular community.

¹² For further explanation of the notion "trans-difference," see E. Meir, *Identity Dialogically Constructed* (Nordhausen, DE: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2011), 10-26.

¹³ Hashkes, section 6.

The Jewish Self in All Its Diversity

While Hashkes repeatedly stresses the totality and even exclusivity of the Jewish self and the all-encompassing nature of religious experience,¹⁴ I think that in our postmodern times, many links with Judaism are possible. The question in my eyes is not if there is a total immersion in the community or a mere sense of affiliation. Beyond orthodoxy, liberalism, or any other form of Judaism, the challenge remains to think together individuality and communal loyalty. To stigmatize religious affiliation as anti-rational is one way of solving this tension. The other solution is to repress individual freedom in a totalizing way of thinking. Both solutions are undesirable. The question of the legitimacy of the tradition was heatedly discussed by Buber and Rosenzweig, two friends who had very different life options, although they worked together in the unusual institution for Jewish adult education, the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus*, as well as on the common project of Bible translation. Buber was convinced that he continued prophetic thought when he defined religious existence as presence before a “you” that offered a perspective to the eternal “You,” who is always present. He was suspicious of religious forms, including the Jewish ones, whereas Rosenzweig gave great weight to concrete Judaism that he tried to understand through an analysis of the Jewish liturgical year. Two Jews, three opinions. I can follow Hashkes’ reasoning that freedom and belonging to a community go together. But I doubt that only a “totality” or “total picture of reality” is strong enough to create communal reasoning and a cohesive self.¹⁵ First of all, although the Jewish narrative is certainly a legitimate one within a mosaic of many, there are other narratives. The consciousness of living in a world with a plurality of religions forces us to review our own tradition, in order to highlight dialogical elements and to reinterpret traditional texts, taking into account the other(s).¹⁶ The work of purifying traditions from anti-dialogical ele-

¹⁴ Idem., section 4.

¹⁵ Idem., section 6.

¹⁶ One may find a beautiful example of a critical reinterpretation of traditional texts in Samson Raphael Hirsch’s explanation of the command not to forget blotting out the memory

ments still lies before us. Such a work is only possible in permanent dialogue with people from other religions, or at least having in mind their positions. Abraham Joshua Heschel taught us that “no religion is an island.” In this perspective, theology is always in the plural and the development of dialogical competence becomes a high priority. A monolithic culture or the preservation of the own against the other is not cultural enough. Note that in my view of a “trans-different” attitude, one nevertheless maintains the difference. Keeping and celebrating difference in the Jewish discourse is a valuable undertaking. Becoming conscious that other discourses exist around the same exteriority is equally valid, since no religious self is possible without affiliation to a broader community, beyond the borders of the own community. Secondly, the religious self, as well as the secular self, are only selves in the acceptance of the transcendence of others. The self is necessarily related, but only as a separated, autonomous being. Neither communal coercion or sanction, nor an alienating disengagement of the self, are recommendable. A certain tension may exist. But what is finally desirable is that the Jewish self as well as the Jewish collective self remind that Jewish life in all its diversity is about the ineffable that is only approachable in the care for and attention to the other.

Inter-culturalism

Hashkes asks if one still may maintain privileged cultural positions, and she points to the importance of multiculturalism. She rightly underscores the “own” as significant in the mosaic of different cultures. Yet, multiculturalism is in my eyes not cultural enough, and neither is the

of Amalek (Deut. 25:19; compare Ex. 17, 14). Instead of identifying Amalek as exterior enemy, Hirsch explains Amalek as an inner negative force in ourselves, as the violent and destructive element in us. In a self-critical manner, Hirsch notes that one may tend to desire the crown of leaves and to forget the soil trenched with tears, on which the laurel grew. The command to blot out Amalek’s memory obliges us to remain just and human and not to destroy the joy of life of the other human being. See S. R. Hirsch, *Der Pentateuch. Uebersetzt und erlaeutert. Fuenfter Teil: Deuteronomium* (Frankfurt, DE: J. Kauffmann, 1899), 393; Idem. *Der Pentateuch, Uebersetzt und erlaeutert. Zweiter Teil. Exodus* (Frankfurt, DE: J. Kauffmann, 1893) 182-183.

intra-cultural. What is consequential is inter-culturalism as the possibility of “passing” from one language game to another. In interaction, one may learn from the other or be critical towards oneself or towards the other. In contact with others, a meta- religious standpoint¹⁷ allows for criticism on religion as it functions in everyday life. Hashkes mentions Ochs’ idea of a corrective rereading as a redemptive move. This is certainly a great idea that also implies that one adopts an inclusive standpoint and that one does not approach the “own” on the negative background of other(s), but rather in permanent and positive interaction with the non-I.

Language Games

Writing on the Jewish participation in different language games, Hashkes concentrates upon a Jewish and a scientific discourse. That is important, but we use many more language games according to the circumstances. Different language games are possible and desirable. Hashkes writes that “we have ‘different selves.’”¹⁸ But do we have to “harmonize”¹⁹ them? We can certainly be philosophers and Jews at the same time (and even Jewish philosophers), but do we have to harmonize? Living simultaneously in different worlds, I do not think we have to conciliate the Greek, universal logos and the Hebrew, particular dialogue; that synthesizing approach would still be too Cohenian. Although Greek thought does not allow for any particularistic thought, one does not have to balance between Greek autonomy and Jewish heteronomy. Again, Levinas comes to the mind here. Levinas is a good example of a Jew who was also a Greek; he had an allegiance to the prophets and to philosophy. I call him a “frequent traveler,” who was able to pass from one language to another. He knew how to “translate” without confusing between two distinct worlds. He also pointed to the special contribution of the Jewish particular discourse to the general philosophical discourse. He did not harmonize Judaism and Greek thought, but he pointed instead to the

¹⁷ The term “meta-religion” was coined by David Koigen (1877-1933).

¹⁸ Hashkes, section 6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

possible remedy of the general “love of wisdom” through special attention to the specific “wisdom of love.”²⁰

Freedom, Heteronomy, and Authority

Once again, the backbone of Hashkes’ argument is doubtless the question: can one think together freedom and heteronomy? Can we think personal freedom or autonomy together with Jewish selfhood? I already mentioned that for Levinas the encounter with the other is forced upon the human being but that freedom is nevertheless possible. Borowitz thought that one may be an autonomous self, but he highlighted the priority of the Jewish self that produces Jewish discourse. Borowitz put the accent upon the choice: the grown up Jew could freely choose to belong to the covenantal community. With Hashkes I am adopting the Levinasian view and am ready to object to Borowitz that one does not have a choice. Once at Mount Sinai, Torah is put over our heads “as a bowl,” without choice. Before one chooses, one is chosen, and in fact this is true for all mankind since—as Levinas endeavored to prove—the encounter with God is forced upon the human being and preconditions every choice.²¹ Consequently, with Hashkes, I reject Ari Elon’s distinction between the autonomous Jew and the rabbinic Jew: freedom and heteronomy do not exclude one another.

Even if one accepts that freedom and heteronomy are not contradictory, there remains nevertheless the question of the exact relationship between the self and the community. Some give more strength to the community, others more to the individual. Hashkes doubts if Borowitz’s view on the relation between the self and the community gives enough weight to the community. I agree with her that the attachment to the religious community is not some partial experience: it offers some unified universe and engages the entire person. On the other

²⁰ See E. Meir, *Levinas’s Jewish Thought Between Jerusalem and Athens* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2008).

²¹ Hashkes, section 4.

hand, Judaism can be powerfully lived in very different ways. One can be committed religiously, but also socially, culturally, economically, and politically. Judaism touches life in its entirety. From my Israeli perspective, the Jewish self or Jewish identity is expressed in the most diverse ways that all follow from different interpretations of Judaism as a “full picture of reality.”²² Also within religious communities, I perceive a multitude of interpretations—seventy faces to the Torah. There are various ways of understanding the anthropological consequences of the Jewish faith, since Judaism is less a religious, denominational system as it is a way of life which resists any dogmatic approach. An “open-ended discourse” is perhaps too vague, and final interpretations are certainly wrong. In my view, Judaism is first of all about human dignity, about the dignity of each and every human being. In this perspective, the question is less if the community’s voice has enough authority, since living dialogue between people implies responding to the authoritative demand of any other human being. I certainly do not underestimate the importance of the communal Jewish discourse, which is and remains formative for Jews, and Hannah Hashkes has clearly underscored this. My reflections draw the attention to two points: that the self is constituted by every other and that there are many ways in which the Jewish self participates in the Jewish communal self and discourse.

²² *Idem.*, section 6.