



Regents' Professors Induction Ceremony Hava Tirosh-Samuelsan • February 8, 2018

Good Evening! It is a great honor to be appointed a Regents' Professor at Arizona State University. I would like to thank the Arizona Board of Regents, the President Arizona State University, Dr. Michael Crow, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Dr. Patrick Kenney, the Interim Dean of Humanities, Dr. Elizabeth Langland, and the Director of the School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies, Dr. Matthew Delmont, for this appointment. The announcement of my appointment to Regents' Professor singled out my contribution to the field of Jewish philosophy especially as the Editor-in-Chief of the *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers*. Let me say a few words about Jewish philosophy by way of reflecting on the significance of the humanities.

The Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers

The *Library* features 20 outstanding Jewish thinkers so as to showcase that Jewish philosophy today is robust, creative, diverse, and penetrating. Defining Jewish philosophy is difficult because Jewish philosophy is rooted in a paradox. It refers to philosophical activity carried out by those who call themselves Jews. As philosophy, this activity makes claims of universal validity but as activity by a well-defined group of people it is inherently particularistic. Jewish philosophy represents the interplay of particularistic demands and universal concerns. The universal or that which is in theory open and accessible to all regardless of race, color, creed or gender confronts the particular or that which represents the sole concern of a specific group that by nature or definition is insular and specific minded. Precisely because it concerns itself with a particular group of people—the Jews—Jewish philosophy consists of thinking that is socially and culturally embedded. From antiquity to the present, Jewish philosophers have reflected about God, the cosmos, and humanity as well as about Judaism as a religious way of life, the interpretation of sacred texts, and the relations between Jews and non-Jews. Today Jewish philosophers wrestle with the challenges of being Jewish after the Holocaust, the Jewishness of the State of Israel, the on-going Israeli-Arab conflict, the relationship between Judaism and democracy, the ecological crisis, and the place of sexuality and egalitarianism within Judaism. To be a Jewish philosopher, in short, is to pursue universal truth and wisdom within the particular context of Jewish existence.

The *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers* defines the field of Jewish philosophy very broadly to include science and medicine as well as mysticism and art, because Jewish philosophers themselves have always engaged many intellectual and cultural pursuits, and they still do so today. I have been introduced to the breadth of Jewish philosophy in my training at the Hebrew University of

Jerusalem in the 1970s but I honed my broad approach to Jewish philosophy during my years at Columbia University in the 1980s. That approach can be summarized as intellectual history, a contextual, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural inquiry. Framed in the contours of intellectual history, Jewish philosophy is a socio-cultural force that generates reflexive critical thinking as well as transformative action through education.

The *Library of Contemporary Jewish Philosophers* tells the story of contemporary Jewish philosophy as a story of individuals. Why? Because there are many paths to becoming a Jewish philosopher and many ways of doing Jewish philosophy. The Jewish philosopher can be an analytic philosopher, an intellectual history, a theologian, a historian of science, a hermeneuticist, a legal theorist, a social critic, a literary and cultural interpreter, or a political thinker. No one epithet fits the Jewish philosopher because Jewish philosophy is so multi-faceted. The Jewish philosopher is often conversant in several intellectual disciplines and discourses, which means that Jewish philosophy is inherently interdisciplinary. Religiously speaking, the Jewish philosopher may be observant or non-observant, a scholar immersed in the interpretation of traditional Jewish texts as well as an intellectual who is versed in the literary output of non-Jewish thinkers. The *Library* frames Jewish philosophy in a deliberately pluralistic and inclusive way, highlighting the dialectics between universality and particularity. Although not everyone will agree with my broad framing, I maintain that it is historically correct, intellectually coherent and socially beneficial.

The Humanities

Why is Jewish philosophy relevant to the academy especially in a public university? Here is my answer: the contextual, interdisciplinary, and cross-cultural approach to Jewish philosophy, and by extension Jewish Studies, offers a model for the humanities at large. The humanities are the disciplines that enable us to think through critically, imaginatively and contextually about the meaning of being human. The humanities study that which is inherently not measurable: ideas, ideals, norms, values, preferences, aspirations, and hopes. While these non-quantifiable dimensions of human life can be expressed in behavior that is observable, quantifiable, and measurable, it is a mistake to assess cultural relevance, importance, and impact of the humanities by pointing to measurable activities. Although scholars of the humanities should work closely with scholars of the natural and social sciences, we should not reduce the humanistic inquiries to the other two types of inquiries, nor should we evaluate the humanities by standards derived from the other inquiries, let alone by market value. The humanities are the discourses that study ideas, metaphors, symbols, narratives, paradoxes, and ironies, all the linguistic subtleties that only humans can generate and articulate. Therefore, the humanities provide intellectual depth, nuance, subtlety, and inspiration without which human beings cannot survive, let alone thrive. This is not to say that numbers do not matter at all, but that numbers do not tell the entire story of being human.

I very much hope that ASU will continue to be at the forefront of humanities research, highlighting their cultural impact, social relevance, and political necessity. My work on Jewish intellectual history, on religion, science and technology, and on religion and ecology has demonstrated that the humanities are both analytic and interpretative; they are relevant to individuals as well as to social institutions; they capture what we think and believe in the privacy of our subjectivity, as well as how we share our interiority with other people in diverse social settings. Focusing on human agency, the humanities inspire people to action and exert impact on the public sphere through public education in formal and informal settings. The work of the humanities is especially important today when human freedom is threatened by authoritarian regimes all over the world, and when humanity entertains a vision of the remote future in which the human species will become obsolete, overtaken by super-intelligent machines.

I trust that by including a scholar who specializes in Jewish intellectual history among the Regents' Professors for 2017-2018, ASU is signaling its recognition of the invaluable contribution of the humanities to the vision and mission of the university, to our cultural creativity, and to the future of humanity.

Thank you!