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Obituary

Joseph Agassi (May 7, 1927 – January 22, 2023)

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The problem of rationality concerns the choice of one's principles, of one's values, of one's lifestyle.

Joseph Agassi

Joseph Agassi was one of the most inspiring, challenging, and insightful philosophers of our time. A philosophical “all-rounder”, as Ian Jarvie and Nathaniel Laor aptly described him employing a cricket metaphor, not only did he contribute to every major field in philosophy – philosophy of the exact sciences, metaphysics, philosophy of the social sciences, philosophy of technology, philosophy of education, moral philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, psychology and psychiatry, not to mention history and historiography of science – but just as an all-rounder in cricket can play superbly in all positions, so did Agassi superbly play all available roles: scholar, publicist, speaker, discussant, and teacher, always engaging peers and encouraging students to widen their cultural horizons and uphold their intellectual independence. He was also a relentless critic of Israeli politics, identifying its core problem in the state’s patent conflation of ethnic-cum-religious identity with modern civic nationality, a distinction he recognized as a minimum requirement for democracy proper.

Joseph Agassi was born and raised in Jerusalem, where he received a strict religious upbringing. Aged 15, he left religion, but the Jewish-style love of learning remained with him. Later, he adopted a Talmudic approach, never concealing controversies, and contributed to the investigation of Talmud itself, pointing out that in the Talmud factual questions may be legal questions as well, and knowledge is not only a matter of nature but a matter of conventions, thereby challenging the traditional distinction between legal questions and factual ones. From 1946 to 1951, he studied physics at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, at the Department founded and led by the Italian physicist Giulio Racah, a former pupil of Enrico Fermi’s in Rome. He received his master’s degree in physics in 1951. It was during his studies that he met with his future wife, Judith (1924–2018), the daughter of Margarete Buber-Neumann (1901–1989) and the granddaughter of Martin Buber (1878–1965). They married in 1949 and had two children, Tirzah (1950–2008) and Aaron (b. 1958).

Together they moved to London, where both got their PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Agassi wrote his doctoral dissertation (*The Function of*

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Interpretation in Physics) under the guidance of Karl Popper, and submitted it in 1956. Its aim was to be a case study of Michael Faraday, but it was much more than that: it was a study of the Scientific Revolution as a movement of researchers, mostly amateurs, who were led by the philosophy of the Enlightenment Movement, and fashioned modern science within the context of stimulating institutions. Materials from this dissertation were later published in three separate works: *Towards an Historiography of Science* (1963), *Faraday as a Natural Philosopher* (1971) and *The Very Idea of Modern Science* (2013).

Agassi was Popper's research assistant from 1953 to 1956, and accompanied him during his 1956-1957 visit to the Center for Advanced Studies in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, after which he was appointed Lecturer in Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method at LSE (1957–1960). In 1960, choosing to pursue an independent intellectual path, he gave up his position at LSE to become Lecturer and then Reader and Head of Department of Philosophy at the University of Hong Kong, where he remained until 1963. He then moved to the University of Illinois (1963–1965), and to Boston University (1965–1983). Since then, he held dual appointments as Professor of Philosophy at York University, Toronto (1982–1997, and thereafter as Professor Emeritus) and Tel Aviv University (1971–1996, and thereafter as Professor Emeritus). He lectured at several universities around the globe, especially in Europe and North America, and in 2019 he was appointed Honorary Professor at the University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy.

Agassi was a member of the World Academy of Sciences, the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, and the Royal Society of Canada. He was offered a Rockefeller fellowship in 1959, which he eventually declined, and received an Alexander von Humboldt Senior Fellowship in 1978–1979 and 1986–1987. One of the most prolific authors of the twentieth century, he published some six hundred articles and reviews in the learned press and many more in the popular press, as well as over forty monographs and collections of essays (both in English and Hebrew, some of which were translated into other languages).² He was the editor of the first two issues of *The Philosophical Forum* (1968), editor or co-editor of more than ten volumes – including six volumes of works of Ernest Gellner, with Ian C. Jarvie – and translator of Popper's *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* into Hebrew (2017).

Above all, perhaps, he was admired by his students, whom he always tirelessly stimulated to pursue their own intellectual development and flourish as human beings. In his honor, pupils, friends and colleagues published *Critical Rationalism, Metaphysics and Science* and *Critical Rationalism, the Social Sciences and the Humanities* (both edited by Ian C. Jarvie and Nathaniel Laor, 1995); *I limiti della razionalità* (edited by Martina Del Castello and Michael Segre, 2013); *Encouraging Openness* (edited by Nimrod Bar-Am and Stefano Gattei, 2017); and two special issues of *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 52:6, 2022, and 53:1, 2023 (edited by Nimrod Bar-Am and Jeremy Shearmur), based on a Symposium held in November 2021.

Both for my own limits and the extraordinary scope and variety of Agassi's production, I am unable to offer a proper account of it, let alone to do it justice. Yet, however sketchy, no proper portrait may omit the following works of his.

In *Towards an Historiography of Science* (1963), Agassi discusses two criteria for historical assessment, both stemming from the uncritical acceptance of two philosophies of science: the inductivist philosophy of science, according to which scientific theories emerge from facts, and the conventionalist philosophy of science, according to which scientific theories are mathematical pigeonholes for classifying facts. Both are unsatisfactory, Agassi claims, although the latter improves on the former: inductivists keep the path of science clean by sweeping errors under the carpet, whereas conventionalists, while allowing for errors, consider criticism as condemnation. By contrast, Agassi points out, trying to see the world through the eyes of our predecessors would let us better appreciate our heritage: knowledge of the struggles that led to our present conditions would help us avoid taking

² For a list up to December 2021, see <https://www.tau.ac.il/~agass/pub.html>.

such conditions for granted, and understand them more thoroughly. The only way to do so, he suggests, is by appealing to Popper's 'situational logic', which allows for the reconstruction of problem situations of past thinkers by appealing to theories that are open to criticism, and treats most of human greatest intellectual achievements as errors to be proud of, and human greatest discoveries of facts as the refutations of such great errors. Metaphysics permeates science at almost every stage of its development – untestable ideas, that is, which not only determine what the most pressing problems are, but also what kinds of answers to those problems we shall consider as satisfactory or acceptable, and as improvements of earlier answers. In so doing, metaphysical systems function as unifiers and generators of research agendas. This will constitute a consistent line of inquiry in Agassi's large philosophical and historical production, throughout some seventy years of relentless work.

Combining ideas of Edwin A. Burt and Alexandre Koyré, in *The Continuing Revolution: A History of Physics from the Greeks to Einstein* (1968), written as a three-week discussion with Agassi's son Aaron, Agassi presents the development of science as an endless dialogue, centering around the posing of problems and debate over their possible solutions.

In *Faraday as a Natural Philosopher* (1971), the second published outcome of his dissertation, Agassi considers and compares two portraits of Faraday: the private, personal, or psychological, and the public, or scientific. The resulting integrated portrait expands on the idea that science is an exciting and specialized form of metaphysical exploration, in which champions such as Faraday need to be considered as humans whose spiritual, metaphysical and psychological aspects are to be integrated with their intellectual achievements.

While teaching at Boston University, Agassi published his first major collection of essays, *Science in Flux*, the first of his several contributions to the prestigious 'Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science' series (1975). Beautifully dedicated to Popper "in gratitude, with admiration and dissent" (a dedication Popper did not appreciate), the collection presents science not as based on experience, as the more or less refined traditional picture would have it, but rather as consisting of explanatory hypotheses which attempt to conform to a general picture of the world, and in which the competing general theories of the world (that is, metaphysics) generate competing research programmes. The collected essays – including some of Agassi's classics, such as "The Nature of Scientific Problems and Their Roots in Metaphysics" (1964), "The Confusion Between Physics and Metaphysics in the Standard Histories of Science" (1964), "The Confusion Between Science and Technology in the Standard Philosophies of Science" (1966), "Sensationalism" (1966), "On Novelty" (1968), "Science in Flux: Footnotes to Popper" (1968), "Unity and Diversity in Science" (1969), and "When Should We Ignore Evidence in Favour of a Hypothesis?" (1973) – offer a dynamic view that highlights the various ways in which the conflicts between science and metaphysics, between the scientific and the technological attitude towards positive evidence, within constraining social frameworks, enhance scientific progress.

His second collection in the 'Boston Studies' series, *Science and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Science* (1981; the volume is dedicated to the memory of Michael Polanyi, who is also the main target of Agassi's criticism), including over thirty major philosophical and historical papers, some of which previously unpublished, provides a general picture of the place of science in society, a description of the practice of scientific research, a critique of that practice, and a new view of rationality. Agassi identifies Popper, Polanyi, Evans-Pritchard and Merton as the founding fathers of the sociology of science, and sets as agenda the problem of the order of priority between toleration, criticism, and scientific progress. "Science", Agassi points out in the postscript to the Preface, "will do better and be more humane if the (inner and outer) democratic controls of the commonwealth of learning improve, become more effective, and apply to wider ideas".

Agassi's pioneering *Technology: Philosophical and Social Aspects* (1985) is a passionate search for better democratic means to control technology while fostering society's ability to

cope with the very shortcomings of technology itself. Calling attention to the various components of technology, its difference from science, and its sociological settings, Agassi expresses concerns for the dangers posed by the inadequacy of present philosophies of technology. As in many of his later writings, Agassi's stress is on the role of education: we need broad-based education for both technology and democratic control, he argues. Poverty, pollution, population explosion and the proliferation of nuclear weapons are urgent threats to the future of mankind, and drastic democratic reforms are called for.

Towards a Rational Philosophical Anthropology (1977) – undoubtedly one of Agassi's major works, despite its almost absolute neglect – evolved out of three lectures delivered at the Van Leer Jerusalem Foundation in May 1971, and one lecture delivered at the Boston Colloquium for the Philosophy of Science in October 1972. It explains and criticizes five distinct anthropologies: man as machine, man as animal, man as rational, man as social, and man in the image of God. It attacks the prevalent all-or-nothing attitude in philosophy and argues for an anthropology that does not depend on the Greek polarization of all that is good with all that is evil, not condemning mankind for its inherent imperfections. Only if we dispose of the Greek dichotomy, the author suggests, will the road be cleared for a more moderate rational picture of man as only partly rational, hopefully more at peace with himself, his partial rationality and his partial democracy.

Let me conclude by referring to two collections of essays. The first, *Rationality: The Critical View* (1987), is another happy outcome of the long and fruitful collaboration of Agassi and Jarvie. It all started with a joint paper, "The Problem of the Rationality of Magic", first published in *The British Journal of Sociology* in 1967: the phenomenon of magic (including sorcery and witchcraft) poses a variety of interesting problems, some of them sociological. Among these, the most difficult appears to be: Why do people we deem to be rational perform magical acts, such as, for instance, cast spells, enact rites, and so on? A person may be deemed rational if he acts rationally, or if he holds rational beliefs, or both. The rationality that consists in acting rationally is what Jarvie and Agassi call the 'weak' sense of rationality; whereas the rationality that consists in acting on the basis of rationally held beliefs they call the 'strong' sense of rationality. Their thesis is that magic is rational in the weak sense, but not in the strong sense (unlike science, which is rational in the strong sense): this is their proposal to demarcate magic from science. At the end, Jarvie and Agassi suggest the sociological problem of the rationality of magic should be posed differently. We should ask: Can people with inefficient magical beliefs be critical of them, under what conditions, and to what extent? Or, to put it differently: the problem is not, How on earth can some people believe in magic?, but, rather, Can they come to accept criticisms of magic? How would they do that? In what circumstances? Here lies, Jarvie and Agassi argue, the really important sociological problem posed by magic. Upon its publication, the paper provoked a considerable amount of controversy, and generated, directly or indirectly, a large literature both within philosophy and the social sciences. A subsequent paper, "Magic and Rationality Again", with the authors' second thoughts and replies to critics, appeared in the same journal in 1973. There followed attempts to extend the model of rationality to other areas, with two more joint papers, "The Rationality of Dogmatism" (1979) and "The Rationality of Irrationalism" (1980). These were all usefully reprinted in Part III of *Rationality: The Critical View*, a volume that illustrates the fruitful proliferation of thoughts on the problem of rationality as it stemmed from Popper's ideas, and relates back to them. The volume, which was later complemented by "Rationality: Philosophical and Social Aspects" (1992), also includes one of Agassi's more cited papers, "Methodological Individualism" (1960).

The second collection I wish to mention here is *The Gentle Art of Philosophical Polemics* (1988), a selection of Agassi's most sparking and piercing reviews and critical comments, illustrating the author's unconventional critical attitude towards the works of his peers, as well as his indications on how to properly conduct philosophical discussions. The volume presents Agassi's criticism of conventional thinking in philosophy of science and

epistemology, including Kuhn's theory of scientific revolutions and contemporary analytic philosophy, his reappraisals of thinkers such as Bacon, Mach, Duhem, Wittgenstein and Carnap, not to mention devastating assessments of Grünbaum's account of psychoanalysis, Lakatos's methodology of scientific research programmes and Feyerabend's epistemological nihilism – as well as of Popper's own evolutionary epistemology, as presented in *Objective Knowledge* (1972).

Much more should be mentioned, which I cannot but list here, only to offer a better idea of the sheer complexity, richness and wide-ranging character of Agassi's output:

- Works in the philosophy of medicine: *Paranoia: A Study in Diagnosis* (1976) and *Psychiatry as Medicine* (1983), both in collaboration with Yehuda Fried, as well as *Diagnosis: Philosophical and Medical Perspectives* (1990), with Nathaniel Laor, advancing the proposal to restore the traditional association between medicine and education.
- *The Siblinghood of Humanity: An Introduction to Philosophy* (1990), a little-known and hard-to-find extraordinary book, in which Agassi introduces students to philosophy as debate about the nature of rationality. This may be coupled with *The History of Modern Philosophy from Bacon to Kant (1600-1800): An Introduction* (1993, in Hebrew).
- Works in the history of science, such as *Radiation Theory and the Quantum Revolution* (1993), a treasure trove of original ideas on the dawn of quantum physics, also discussing problems inherent in methodology, metaphysics and philosophy of science (and, at times, the psychology of scientists); and *The Very Idea of Modern Science: Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle* (2013, dedicated to the memory of Alexandre Koyré and I. Bernard Cohen): this was the first part of Agassi's dissertation to be written, and the last to be published. Combining micro and macro approaches, the book is an important study of the Scientific Revolution as a movement of amateur science: it describes the ideology of the scientific societies as the philosophy of the Enlightenment Movement, and shows how the scientific organization of science gave way to professional science in stages. Key papers include "On Explaining the Trial of Galileo" (1971), "Who Discovered Boyle's Law?" (1977), and "The Place of Metaphysics in the Historiography of Science" (1996). History of science is also the focus of *Science and Its History* (2008; dedicated to Robert S. Cohen), which – together with *Science and Culture* (2003, dedicated to life-long friend Mario Bunge: in 1982, Agassi co-edited with Robert S. Cohen a volume of essays in honor of Bunge's sixtieth birthday, *Scientific Philosophy Today*) and the aforementioned *Science in Flux* and *Science and Society* (all published in the 'Boston Studies' series) – forms what Agassi saw as a sort of tetralogy on the various facets of the scientific enterprise.
- Works on aesthetics and art: *A Critical Rationalist Aesthetics*, with Ian C. Jarvie (2008), and *Malevich: The Lost Paintings*, with David Harel (2018).
- Works in political philosophy, such as *Liberal Nationalism for Israel: Towards an Israeli National Identity* (1999; the book was first published in Hebrew in 1984), challenging the most fundamental dogmas of Israel: nationalism and religious identity. Failure to make the distinction between religion and nationality, Agassi argues, leads to discrimination against the non-Jewish citizens of Israel, thus preventing peace. In this ground-breaking book, Agassi supports the vision of Hillel Kook (1915–2001), according to which Israel should be state of the Israeli nation, which includes non-

Jewish citizens and excludes Jews who are not Israeli citizens, giving it a philosophical home. Also, he articulates it into the demand of Jews unilaterally to give up the Zionist myth, offering a moral and political blueprint that also applies beyond the boundaries of Israel, one that must precede any political attempts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. In a follow-up paper, “Israel: A State Governed by Rule-of-Law or Rule-by-Arrangement?” (2000, in Hebrew; translated into English in 2003), Agassi openly denounces the actual discrimination against non-Jews citizens by Israeli civil servants, a discrimination that is forbidden by law but in fact allowed, if not expected of Israeli civil servants, who might otherwise lose their jobs. Such covert discrimination, Agassi suggests, prevents progress to a modern liberal state, and has dangerous consequences: as Spinoza taught, hate ends up destroying those who hate.

- Papers explicitly addressed to students, such as “Dissertation without Tears” (1999), in which he recommends writing having an imagined reader in mind and trying to serve him. Most importantly, he recommends always starting with a question (“what’s the problem?”, he often asked), one that has many possible answers, which should then be clearly stated and critically discussed. And works on education, such as *Letters to My Sister Concerning Contemporary Philosophy* (1976, 2000², in Hebrew); the collection *The Hazard Called Education: Essays, Reviews and Dialogues on Education from Forty-Five Years*, edited by Ronald Swartz and Sheldon Richmond (2014); and *Academic Agonies and How to Avoid Them: Advice to Young People on Their Way to Academic Careers*, edited by James H. Collier (2020). Agassi admired the model of studying in the tradition of Yeshiva (the traditional Jewish school focused on the study of Rabbinic literature) and recommended the democratization of education.
- Studies on the argumentative, dialogical character of philosophy, Socrates-style: *Philosophy from a Skeptical Perspective* (2008) and *Beg to Differ: The Logic of Disputes and Argumentation* (2016), both in collaboration with Abraham Meidan.
- Insightful critical assessments of some of the more influential contemporary philosophers and their key works: *Popper and His Popular Critics: Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and Imre Lakatos* (2014), and *Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Attempt at a Critical Rationalist Appraisal* (2018), as well as Vol. 4 of Paul Feyerabend’s collected philosophical papers, *Physics and Philosophy* (2016, edited with Stefano Gattei).
- Two little gems, such as *The Philosophy of Practical Affairs: An Introduction* (2022), a book that recovers and further develops some of the themes of *The Siblinghood of Humanity* (1990), and the posthumous *Games to Play and Games not to Play: Strategic Decisions via Extensions of Game Theory*, with Uri Weiss (2023).
- Last, but by no means least, *A Philosopher’s Apprentice: In Karl Popper’s Workshop* (1993 and 2008²), Agassi’s personal account of his intellectual formation in 1950s London, struggling with the imposing figure of his mentor, colleague, and later rival Karl Popper. As their painful break, due to Agassi’s search for intellectual independence, was never completely healed, the volume offers precious psychological insight into Popper’s attitude towards his pupils and peers, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, and captures like no other the personal, academic and political elements of one of the most philosophically important *milieu* in the history of the twentieth century.

Trait d'union of all these works is the discussion of the problem of rationality in all shapes and forms. Agassi's philosophy was a continuous and relentless attempt to elaborate on Popper's idea that the gist of the scientific spirit is openness to criticism. Developing this idea in fields which Popper himself either directly redefined, merely touched upon, or altogether disregarded, Agassi has always encouraged his readers to doubt even their most cherished insights, and engage in honest, frank critical dialogue. It is not easy, it is not without effort. On the contrary: it is extremely demanding, often exhausting – yet, nothing else is more exciting and rewarding, both from the intellectual and the personal point of view.

We do not have to try to make people critically minded, we have no right to force anybody to offer or accept criticism, or to learn to participate effectively in a critical discussion: it is their right to refuse to do so. All educators can do (and have to do) is try to help them become critically minded if and when they request that. Throughout his intense life, and through a tightly knit philosophical output that spans over seven decades, Agassi followed in Popper's footsteps to develop his master's philosophy in new directions, driven both by the hope that rational debate will lead to improvement, and the conviction that criticism is an expression of respect, and entails responsibility. Such responsibility can be encouraged, but not forced.

The problem of rationality is perhaps the most important of philosophical problems and, in a sense, the core of philosophy itself. It concerns the choice of one's principles and values, says Popper; it concerns the choice of one's lifestyle, says Agassi. Rationality is a part of our way of life, and that goes alike for the rationalist and the irrationalist. The solution to the problem of rationality is the very starting point of every philosophical approach, the very choice of one's lifestyle. Agassi's own approach to philosophy, as beautifully presented in his autobiography, is his solution to the problem of rationality: his whole life is the very embodiment of his understanding of rationality and his solution to its fundamental problem.



Joseph Agassi (left) with Ian Jarvie (right) and Stefano Gattei (middle)
in the gardens of the Buonconsiglio Castle, Trento, Italy
May 10, 2022

This was also the very core of Agassi's swan song, the lectures he gave at the University of Trento, Italy, on May 10-11, 2022, together with his long-time friend and collaborator Ian Jarvie (who passed away shortly after Agassi, on May 16, 2023), and former pupil John Wettersten.

At the end of this note, I cannot help but remember Joske – as his friends usually addressed him – during those last, beautiful few days we had in Trento. I like to conclude as I did when I gave him the floor, by quoting the closing sentence of “In Search of Rationality– A Personal Report” (1982), his contribution to a *Festschrift* volume for Popper:

I may be moving in the world with the wrong map, but I am eager to improve it if and when I can, and I seek friends who can criticize me. For this, I am grateful to [Joseph Agassi].

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