Abstract:
Jewish thinkers in the modern West have often struggled to resolve apparent conflicts between Jewish doctrine and the demands of post-Enlightenment secular ethics. Yeshayahu Leibowitz’s 1953 essay “Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah” is one response to such attempts: Leibowitz aims to rebut “Reformers” who have adapted Judaism in light of various social or moral concerns, arguing in response that proper Jewish practice consists of complete obedience to Jewish law (halakhah) irrespective of its content. Yet Leibowitz neither rejects ethics as a normative category nor claims that halakhic and ethical imperatives are in perfect alignment. Instead, he maintains that halakhah should take precedence over ethics when the two come into conflict. This paper assesses Leibowitz’s defense of this position. I maintain that Leibowitz justifies this position with two incompatible claims: his primary argument suggests that privileging ethics would improperly deify humans by characterizing humans as the “supreme end” and by elevating human wills over the divine will, while his supplementary ones implicitly posit humans as the supreme end by justifying halakhah as a means of addressing various human concerns. Of these two arguments, the first is more persuasive, yet I argue that it still falters by both inaccurately downplaying the human elements of the halakhic system and failing to justify its normative assessments. I conclude that the shortcomings of Leibowitz’s arguments point to the fundamental challenges of justifying the halakhic system with some external rationale—a system like halakhah only functions properly if it presupposes its own validity.