

Reconciling Imagery and Doctrine

Introduction

According to Howard Wettstein (2002) the imagery of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud and Midrash doesn't sit well with the doctrines of medieval Jewish philosophy. Since Jewish imagery is inconsistent, Wettstein fears that it's going to serve as a shaky foundation for a body of coherent theological doctrine. Wettstein's response – the response that this paper seeks to reject – is to jettison the entire project of building a coherent body of doctrine. For Wettstein, a healthy religious life is fuelled by its imagery and not by its doctrine; unlike doctrine, imagery doesn't need to be consistent.

Profiles of God

Wettstein counsels us to think of the conflicting images of Jewish lore as 'profiles', or 'views from a perspective' (Ibid. pg. 112). One is reminded of the Indian story of the blind men and the elephant. They've been told that they're all touching the same object. The first man, holding the elephant's leg, concludes that they're holding the trunk of a tree. The second man, holding the elephant's trunk, disagrees, thinking it to be a large snake. The third man, touching the elephant's side, argues that they're touching a great big wall. Sometimes God appears to us as a lover, and sometimes as a ruler. That's because we're like the blind men in the story; we cannot see the whole of God and cannot arrive at an 'inclusive principle' to describe discursively what it is that's causing these disparate appearances.

But, what we can do, Wettstein counsels, is to cultivate a set of practical skills: (1) understanding the various relationships mentioned by our imagery (the relationship of lover, parent, ruler, etc); (2) seeing God in terms of these relationships, and thinking 'about [God] from both sides of the relationship' (Ibid. pg, 113); and (3) the skill to 'call upon, or be called upon by, the appropriate image, at the appropriate time, sometimes a single image, sometimes multiple ones' (Ibid.). For Wettstein, a theoretical answer to the question as to what sort of God can underwrite so many profiles is beyond us. Our perspectives are inherently limited like the men in the story. But, even if we cannot arrive at a full answer to the question, perhaps we can say more than Wettstein does.

Meaning and Pointing

Let us turn to a Midrash from *Shir Hashirim Raba* (1:8) about the power of Solomon's metaphors:

R. Hanina said: it is like a deep well full of water. And its waters were cold, and sweet, and good. But, nobody was able to drink from it. A man came along and

tied string to string, and rope to rope, and drew from the well and drunk. Thereafter, everybody began to draw and drink. So to, [moving] from word to word, and from metaphor to metaphor, Solomon was able to understand the secrets of the Torah.

The content of the Torah lies beyond the reach of any word; and even beyond the reach of any metaphor.¹ You have to tie metaphor to metaphor, and only then you'll be able to access the water. Let us call an *entrenched* metaphor any metaphor that can't be faithfully cashed out without reference to further metaphors. 'Thomas has a cold heart', translates pretty cleanly to, 'Thomas lacks compassion'; thus, the cold-heart metaphor wasn't entrenched. But, when Romeo describes Juliet as the sun (Act 2, Scene 2), he says something that we struggle to translate without recourse to further metaphors: she sustains him; she gives him warmth and light; life without her would be dark. A metaphor is entrenched when its explanation requires at least one more metaphor.

The chain of metaphors initiated by an entrenched metaphor supervenes upon a chain of associations: the mind moves from the sun, to warmth and light, and from there to sustenance, etc. A chain of associations moves in an order, it is, in some sense or other, a *directional* affair. This gives rise to the notion that a chain can *point* towards something. One metaphor might not be able to express the inexpressible, but a chain of metaphors can point you in the right direction; just as a chain of ropes can reach the water that lies beyond the grasp of any individual rope.

According to Donald Davidson (1978), words only have a *literal* meaning. Romeo's words mean that Juliet is numerically identical to the big burning ball of gas that seems to rise above the eastern horizon every morning. To ask, in addition, for the *metaphorical* meaning of Romeo's utterance is to expect some new words in return. But, if there were words that Romeo could have said in order to express literally what he was trying to say, he wouldn't have been forced into using a metaphor.

How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture.

(Davidson 1978 pg. 46-7)

¹ Compare R. Hannina's position here with what he says in BT Brachot, 33b.

The words just mean what the words mean – Juliet is a burning ball of gas – but what we really want to know is, what was Romeo’s *point*? What sort of great unstatable fact, or ineffable truth, or truths, was Romeo pointing towards? And of course, we can’t put the answer, literally, into words; for literal word use is the wrong currency. There isn’t always a neatly delineated and accessible meaning to be expressed, even if there is always a *point*. It’s not what Romeo’s words meant that really mattered here – for their meaning is obvious and absurd – what matters is what Romeo was trying to *point* to with the use of his words. We must distinguish between the meaning of an utterance, and its point; and between the meaning of an utterance and what that utterance points to.

In the story about the blind men, each person’s statement had a kernel of truth at its heart. The elephant isn’t a tree, but its leg is certainly tree-like. On Wettstein’s suggestion, God isn’t a King, but some profiles of his are certainly King-like. Rabbi Hannina can deny that. The content of religious imagery might be completely false, with no kernel of truth at its heart whatsoever. God is no more King-like than Juliet resembles the star at the center of our solar system. Rather, something about *saying* ‘God is king,’ in the right circumstances, despite its falsehood, can point you and your audience in the direction of certain ineffable theological truths.

The first hint of a resolution

Apophaticism is the view that language can’t say very much, or perhaps anything at all, about God. Negative theology (the *via negativa*) could be treated as a special and distinct branch of apopahaticism, according to which you can’t say anything about what God *is*, but you *can* say a lot about what God *isn’t*; and thus, via a series of negations, God can be described negatively.

We should note that the *via negativa* of Maimonides moves in a very specific order. First we deny that God has eyes, recognizing that the Bible’s talk of his eyes is supposed to indicate, to the vulgar, that God can see. Then we deny that God can see, recognizing that our earlier claim was merely indicating, to the slightly less vulgar, that he has knowledge of our actions.² Then we deny that he has particular knowledge of our actions, recognizing that our earlier claim was merely intended to communicate, to the still less vulgar, his perfection.³ By telling us all of the things that we *shouldn’t* be saying about God, and by doing so in a specific *order*, we are lead in a direction of ever diminishing vulgarity that supposedly transcends the limits of language, towards a God who cannot be spoken about discursively. Where Maimonides *points* with a chain of negations, R. Hannina thinks that religious imagery *points* with a chain of associations;

² ‘[W]e say that [God] has eyes, ears, hands, a mouth, a tongue, to express that He sees, hears, acts, and speaks; but seeing and hearing are attributed to Him to indicated that He perceives’ (Freedlander, 1947, pg. 60).

³ ‘[P]hysical organs are ascribed to the Most Perfect Being... [as] indications of the actions generally performed by means of these organs. Such actions being perfections respecting ourselves, are predicated of God, because we wish to express that He is most perfect in every respect...’ (Ibid., pg. 61).

both pointing to that which cannot be said. Already, the divide between Jewish lore and philosophy seems less wide.

Concerns with Apophaticism

There is good reason to be concerned when anybody starts to talk about something that can't be spoken about. If it can't be spoken about, then what are you doing speaking about it? In a nutshell, this was Alvin Plantinga's main concern with apophaticism (Plantinga 1980, 2000).

Initially, Plantinga seemed happy to exempt the *via negativa* from his general onslaught. The *via negativa* doesn't say that you can't say/know anything about God. That would be absurd. Instead, the *via negativa* accepts that we *do* know things about God, but that what we know is 'essentially negative'; that is to say, 'there are no properties such that we know of God that he has them, although there are some properties that we know he lacks' (Plantinga 1980, pg. 19). If you couple this view with the view that there are only positive properties, and not negative ones, such that 'there is such a thing as the property of being a horse, but no such thing as the property of not being a horse' (Ibid.), then, as far as Plantinga was concerned, your *via negativa* is safe from his charge of incoherence. You're not saying that God has the property of having no properties, since you don't think that negative properties exist.

Plantinga's attack has grown stronger over the years. In his *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), he considers John Hick's attempt to formulate a coherent variety of apophaticism. According to Hick, if there were an infinite, transcendent, and ultimate being, then the only properties it could have of which we have a grasp are (a) formal properties and (b) negative properties. Plantinga attacks this suggestion on a number of fronts.⁴ But, at the front of his list of grievances is his doubt that one can coherently draw a distinction between negative and positive concepts. For example, Hick wants to say that being infinite is a negative property, defined as not having limits. But, who's to say that he's right? Isn't it equally intuitive to say that *being infinite* is a positive property and that *having limits* is negative?

The positive-negative distinction is hazy. This threatens the coherence of Hick's whole thesis. But, it also threatens the *via negativa* that Plantinga (in 1980) had initially sought to let off the hook. If you cannot make the distinction between positive and negative concepts, then you won't have the resources to make the claim that negative properties don't exist, and thus you won't have the conceptual resources to stop your position from collapsing into the paradoxical thesis that God has the property of having no properties.

A Plantinga-Proof Apophaticism

⁴ See Lebens 2014a for a full account of Plantinga's attack on Hick's apophaticism

Elsewhere, I've tried to argue that Plantinga is unduly harsh towards apophaticism.⁵ I accept that apophatic-talk about an indescribable God is absurd. But, so is the claim that Juliet is the sun. Sometimes by the power of metaphor, and sometimes via other, under-researched mechanisms, falsehood has the power to be, in some sense or other, *illuminating*.

According to Hilary Putnam (1982, ch. 1), it turns out that a brain in a vat, who's had no contact with brains outside of the vat, or with the unenvatted world, is unable to say that he is a brain in a vat. It turns out that she speaks a different language to us. When she says, 'I'm a brain in a vat', she's speaking vat-English; not real-English. Her use of the word 'vat' doesn't refer to earthly vats, because she's had no direct causal contact with unenvatted vats! Now is not the time to explicate Putnam's argument any further,⁶ but let's assume, if only for the sake of argument, that he's right.

A skeptical brain caught in a vat might have the sneaking suspicion that everything she experiences is one big illusion organized by other-worldly scientists. She has the feeling that she might be a brain in a vat. But, subscribing to Putnam's arguments, she realizes that she doesn't actually have the linguistic concepts necessary for expressing the situation that she's trying to think she might be in; she can't even mentally represent to herself the situation that she wants to represent, because she can only say the vat-English sentence, 'I am a brain in a vat', and not the relevant English sentence. But, she might still feel that her false utterances of 'I am a brain in a vat', somehow gesticulate in the direction of the true proposition that she wants to assert but can't. She might feel that her false utterance, though false, is somehow illuminating. It points in the direction of what she really wants to say and think.

Here is not the place for a long exegetical discussion of Maimonides and other Jewish apophatic theologians. But, one way to save them from absurdity, and contradiction (since, on the one hand, they often say a great deal about God and his nature, and on the other hand, they say that we can't say anything about God) would be to refuse to take their apophatic-talk at face value. Maimonides made all sorts of positive claims about God. He believed them too. But, perhaps he also believed that engaging with the *via negativa*, and uttering the absurd claim that we can't know anything positive about God, could point you towards central ineffable truths. His apophaticism may have been adopted as an illuminating falsehood.

Interpreting Maimonides this way saves him from an odd puzzle. Gersonides couldn't understand why, according to Maimonides, it is good to say that God isn't ignorant, but bad to say that God isn't wise. If Maimonides was serious about his negative theology, he should have

⁵ See Lebens 2014a

⁶ For that, see Brueckner 1986

accepted both negations: God is neither wise nor ignorant.⁷ But, perhaps both are false, whilst only one is illuminating. To arbitrate that discussion, we'd need a test for a sentence's illuminating powers. That, I'm afraid, is beyond me. But, there's good reason to think that only some theological falsehoods are going to be illuminating; just as only certain metaphors have the power to illuminate what it is you really want to point out.

Resolution #1

Golda believes that on Rosh Hashona, God judges people and inscribes them into either the book of life or the book of death. Is she asserting the proposition <God judges people and inscribes them into the book of life or into the book of death on Rosh Hashona>? No. God's writing names into books is clearly a metaphor. Golda knows that. Is she then asserting the proposition <On Rosh Hashona God judges people, and their lives depend upon the outcome of the judgement>? Is that the proposition that she's asserting? Not necessarily. Does she think that God is a temporal being such that he can do a specific action at a specific time, or does she think that he lives outside of time and can act, but never at a specific point in time? Perhaps, like many of the Jews who claim to believe that God judges people on Rosh Hashona, she has not worked out theory of the metaphysics of God's relationship to time. So, what is she really asserting in her alleged belief that God judges us on that auspicious day?

Wettstein's (2002, pg. 111) insight is that there is no propositional attitude here. Golda is merely signing on to the *imagery* of Rosh Hashona, with its heavenly books of justice. She's agreeing to structure her life through the prism of that narrative; to engage her emotions with it; to make it hers. When you say, 'Golda believes that God judges us on Rosh Hashona', perhaps you're not really reporting her to have a propositional attitude, so much as to, 'kidnap a piece of [her] favoured imagery' (Ibid.) using it as if it functioned as a proposition that she believed in, but really meaning to say that 'This image plays a fundamental role for [her]' (Ibid.).

Despite the strength of Wettstein's insight, it can't be that *all* of our religious beliefs can be reduced to the wilful signing on to of an image. The power that the imagery of Rosh Hashona has over me, for example, has a great deal to do with my background belief in God. When I say that 'I am a theist,' I don't merely mean that I sign on to the imagery of theism (although that might be part of what I mean)⁸. I (also) mean that I assert the proposition that God exists. If I didn't assert *that* proposition, and a number of other propositions, I'm not sure what power the imagery of Rosh Hashona would continue to hold over me.

⁷ cf. Feldman 1987, pg. 79, and pp. 111-2

⁸ In fact, I argue in Lebens 2013 that theistic belief has to come along with a signing onto of the relevant imagery; but that the propositional belief element is also necessary for being a theist.

Accordingly, I think that one of the key tasks for the philosophy of religion has to be isolating, for any given religion, the core set of genuine beliefs (or a family of equally sufficient sets of beliefs), that are necessary (or sufficient) for making sense of the choice to choreograph your life according to the symbolic landscape of the rest of the claims of the religion. The task would be to isolate the core of religious beliefs that give life to the religious *images* that orbit those beliefs.

We believe in a God that transcends our abilities to describe him exhaustively. Beyond those limits of description, we believe that certain images have more power than others to point in his direction, towards his grace, so that we should experience his presence and the moral and religious inspiration that that induces in us. Perhaps, if we're more orthodox, our core beliefs will contain certain historical claims, for instance, that the Jewish people experienced a mass revelation at the dawning of their identity, bestowing a unique Divine sanction upon the religious narratives, and rituals that evolved from that moment; and you'll believe, for instance, that Jesus wasn't the Messiah, and that Mohammed wasn't sent by God to correct the forgeries of the Rabbis.

But, if your core set of beliefs are internally consistent, you won't be bothered by conflict between your beliefs and your images, or between one image and another. You only really believe your core beliefs, and merely quasi-believe in the images; and the images are allowed to contradict one another, since two different signs are able to point in the same direction – two metaphors with conflicting meanings can still have the same *point*; or point to the same ineffable features of the world. We might even find out that some of what passes as religious doctrine from the medieval ages, such as the doctrine of the God of whom nothing can be said, will turn out not to be doctrine at all, but just new and powerful imagery, that, despite its falsehood, continues to point us ever closer to the God that we long to know.

Resolution #2

Perhaps a consistent image of God could emerge from the Biblical text if we had some sort of hermeneutic for deciding which images to take literally, and which images to treat as metaphor. Many Jews would argue that the Bible doesn't commit us to God's having a body, because all such Biblical talk is clearly metaphorical, just as Romeo's calling Juliet the sun was metaphorical. The audience of the Bible is no different to the audience of Romeo and Juliet; they are supposed to be able to understand when something is a metaphor and when not. But, most religious Jews would say: the Bible *does* commit us to the existence of a God who created the world, made certain promises to Abraham, and brought us out of Egypt.

On such a view, a consistent picture of the Deity is supposed to emerge from a reading of the Bible, when one pays close attention to which parts are supposed to be metaphor and which parts are not. It's clearly going to be difficult to establish rules for determining when a verse should be read literally and when metaphorically. But, let's put that aside for a moment. Even if we adopt a hermeneutic that tames Jewish imagery and gives rise to a consistent picture of God, a new version of Wettstein's problem still emerges.

The God of the Bible doesn't seem to have the properties of the God of the philosophers. Even if you accept that the God of the Bible doesn't have a body, he does seem to change his mind, which contradicts the philosopher's conception of an impassible God; he seems to be ignorant about certain matters, which contradicts their conception of Divine omniscience; at times he seems hurt by the actions of the Jewish people, which contradicts their conception of Divine omnipotence. Even upon harmonizing Jewish imagery, we have a real fear that the body of theological propositions that emerge from that imagery will be inconsistent with the propositions of classical Jewish philosophy. The only way to reconcile Biblical theology with Maimonidean theology is to do too much violence to the Biblical text.

In his novel, *Timequake*, Kurt Vonnegut meets Kilgore Trout. But, Kilgore Trout is a fictional character. It's not possible that Kurt Vonnegut could have met him. Rather, what's true of Kurt Vonnegut in the story – that he met Kilgore Trout – is false of him outside of the story. Of course, we might want to say that there are two Kurt Vonneguts – the author, who wrote *Timequake*, and the fictional representation of the author, who is a mere character in that book. But, this seems unattractive. To assume that there is one, rather than two, Kurt Vonneguts is ontologically economical. When you go to Baker Street, you get excited to be on the very same street where Sherlock Holmes fictionally lived. This excitement is based upon your intuition that there aren't two Baker Streets – the fictional one and the real one – but only one Baker Street; and there aren't two Kurt Vonneguts either. And thus, we can say that the very same Kurt Vonnegut has things true of him outside of the *Timequake* story that are not true of him inside of the story, and vice versa.⁹

If we adopt the seemingly bizarre assumption that the world's history is a story in the mind of God, an assumption that lies at the heart of certain Hassidic philosophies,¹⁰ then there may be things that are true of God inside the story that are not true of him outside of it, and vice versa. The God that emerges through a harmonized appraisal of Jewish religious imagery may be an accurate description of God as he appears to us in this world. The more abstract conceptions of an impassible, omnipotent, omniscient God, may be attempts to sketch what God must be like

⁹ Gergory Currie (1990, §1.2) advances the same argument at length

¹⁰ See Lebens 2014b

outside of the story. This is no more a contradiction than the one seemingly posed by the fact that Kurt Vonnegut both did and didn't meet Kilgore Trout.

This paper has tried to resolve in two very different ways, the tension that Wettstein diagnosed between Jewish lore and doctrine.

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