Response to Ari Schick’s Comments

Howard Wettstein; University of California, Riverside

1. The utility of analytic philosophy

My 1997 paper, “Doctrine,” reprinted as “Theological Impressionism,” questioned the fit of principles of faith, religious doctrine, with traditional Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism. The question is whether Jewish religious life needs to be seen as, say, Maimonides saw it, as rooted in a metaphysical conception of God and His role in the world. Since it is sometimes seen precisely in such a way there is no question that it can be so seen. The question is whether it must be so seen and indeed whether the legacy of the Rabbis is most naturally so seen.

This is not the same question as that of the applicability of analytic philosophy to our religious tradition. If the tradition is seen as grounded in doctrine, the applicability of analytic philosophy is straightforward: clarifying the theological foundations, establishing their epistemic justification, etc. But what if we were to see Jewish religious life as I am suggesting? It does not follow that analytic philosophy would be irrelevant, or have nothing to say about our religious ways. Indeed many of the emphases of analytic philosophy, clarity and clarification, care in argumentation, and the like are clearly useful here as elsewhere.

At the same time, it is no accident that the virtues of analytic philosophy have been displayed more in areas like philosophy and language/logic, epistemology, and metaphysics than in say the philosophical exploration of the arts or religion. Of course, there is a large and growing literature in analytic philosophy of religion. But arguably, this has more to do with the epistemology and to some extent metaphysics of religion than to an exploration of say, religious affect⎯like love and awe and gratitude⎯or prayer, or the very idea of a what it is to have a religious attitude. Clearly, many of the emphases of analytic philosophy are of great value, here as elsewhere. Still there is much in this domain that calls for other sorts of skills and emphases, for example, poetic imagination and the ability to think in broad rather than narrowly focused terms. But just putting it this way strikes one as removed from the spirit of analytic work. Perhaps the point is that there are characteristic virtues (and oversights) both to the sharp but relatively narrow focus of analytic work and to the broad scope that is not typical of that work.

2. Belief

While the justification of religious belief is a widely shared agenda item, the application of the concept of belief to religion seems straightforward. If one thinks of religion as fundamentally a set of doctrines, then the application of the concept of belief is indeed straightforward. I don’t think this is so with respect to Jewish religious ways. It’s worth beginning with a point emphasized by Heschel, Buber and others, that our notion of belief as a doxastic attitude is foreign to the Hebrew Bible and much of the New Testament. That seems really important, even if it’s not the last word. It’s not the last word since it does not follow that we can’t apply our notion of belief even to the ancients. But clearly this must be done with some delicacy. I discuss the matter further in a number of papers that are included in my book, *The Significance of Religious Experience* (forthcoming this summer from Oxford University Press), especially in the papers, “Against Theology” and “The Significance of Religious Experience.”

The notion of *emunah* found in the Hebrew Bible is sensitively explicated (although surely not in Carnap’s sense) in the first five chapters of Buber’s *Two Types of Faith*. Far from being a doxastic attitude *emunah* involves the whole person, indeed the life. And unlike assent to a propositional content, it’s not an all or nothing affair, not the sort of thing one can come to in an instant. It involves such things as standing firm in one’s commitments, an intimacy with God, realized in one’s life, a certain responsiveness, even writes Buber, acting in “God’s tempo.” And in a related development, Heschel, in *God in Search of Man,* speaks of an ideal type, the *y’re shamayim*, one who stands in awe of heaven. It is this sort of approach to *faith* (as distinct from *belief*) that is of special interest to me. Such faith is at the heart of the religious sensibility that I inhabit or try to.

Again, I don’t claim that this is the only sort of religious sensibility that is available or possible with the broad parameters provided by Jewish tradition. But it is one with which I resonate, and one that seems to me congenial with much of biblical and Talmudic thinking. It is also one that does not call for the epistemological and metaphysical straining that to my mind characterizes much of analytic philosophy of religion.[[1]](#footnote-1) William James and Robert Nozick speak of a non-coercive approach to philosophy and philosophical argument; the recommendation of an approach that is put forward as an attractive way to think about the domain, not the only way.

To return to *belief,* in addition to the idea that it’s not in the biblical vocabulary, there is another highly suggestive feature of biblical literature: it is literary. That is, the various medieval doctrinal principles are somehow derived from a literature that expresses itself in largely poetic and narrative modes. (I’ve joked that doctrine derives from extracting lines of poetry from context and inserting them into lines of proof and argument.)

It’s possible, of course, that biblical poetry is what Santayana called “philosophical poetry,” that is, poetry that sits atop a doctrinal foundation. No decisive argument here. But that’s surely not the only possibility. Schick quotes Blumenberg[[2]](#footnote-2) and there are many others to quote here. Perhaps, as I am inclined to suppose, the poetic imagery is as foundational as it gets. As Rorty writes, it is pictures rather than propositions that drive much of one’s philosophic outlook.

3. The Mystery

How did we get from ineffability and mystery, the stuff of our sense of divinity, to principles of faith?[[3]](#footnote-3) It seems a genuinely religious intuition that when we try to think about God we are over our heads. And perhaps strangely, or perhaps not, such is also a Maimonidean intuition. I had a student who asked how I could pray without a more or less clear conception of to whom I was praying. Perhaps, I responded, but that’s not how it works for me. When I *daven*, at least when it works, I feel a sense of focus, of elevation, of⎯as it were⎯contact. But if you ask me about the party on the other side of the communication, I have little to say that’s clear, or much to say about why the matter is so difficult, perhaps beyond us.

Concerning conceptions of God, it’s fascinating that we find so much difference within the tradition. I recently heard a lecture in Jerusalem about Rav Kook, a giant of 20th century Jewish thought, which highlighted Rav Kook’s critique of monotheism (in favor of his “panentheism,” God help us).[[4]](#footnote-4) And the differences between the mystical and rationalist ways are legend. Charles Taylor argues that the biblical conception was not of two domains, natural and supernatural; that such a conception is modern and reflects a distinctively modern disenchantment of nature. And Buber comments that we can only speak *to* God, and there is nothing to say *about* God that gets Him right.

Ari Schick writes:

The understanding of God that emerges through the Bible, Aggadah, and history—both communal and personal—is contradictory and inconsistent, and perhaps can only be understood and expressed metaphorically. Yet, I cannot escape the feeling that in order to orient ourselves toward a transcendent God, we have to at least be sensitive to the existence of truths about God that transcend history and contingency, even if we doubt that we have epistemic access to them. In other words, the ambitions of speculative theology, even if they are beyond our grasp, are what orient us toward a proper appreciation of the magnitude of the mystery that confronts us. The challenge then is to hold this idea in mind without allowing it to draw us into modes of thinking that alienate us from the rhythms and resonances of biblical/rabbinic poetry and metaphor.

I very much agree that the question of how to “orient ourselves towards a transcendent God” is the crucial one. It seems important that Schick does not see the enterprise of philosophical theology as providing us with cognitive access to divinity so much as providing the right sort of religious orientation. However, for me at least it is not medieval doctrine, but rather literature like the Talmudic *Aggadah* that provides just such orientation. And it does so by the use of literary devices that engender awe, love, gratitude, and the like, a literature aimed not at elucidating non-anthropomorphically characterized features of divinity but at hyper-anthropomorphic characterizations that elevate and move us, that edify, that provide religious insight rather than theological theory.

1. For example, the attempt to justify religious belief by reference to skepticism, for example, by advocating a kind of skepticism about ordinary belief that has the effect of equalizing doubts about religion with doubts about, say, other minds, or belief in the external world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For which I and Amazon.com are grateful. I didn’t know of Blumenberg. I immediately ordered the book. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I owe this way of putting to question to Vance Ricks. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. About all I know about this topic is that Mordechai Kaplan was an advocate. The concept of heresy seems overrated. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)