Comments on “Theological Impressionism” [“Doctrine”]

It’s probably a good idea to begin this discussion with the disclaimer that there are multiple questions that could be addressed under the heading “the relevance of analytic philosophy to Judaism” and at least initially only a few will be touched on here.

Because we are using Wettstein’s “Doctrine” as a starting point, one question initially before us is whether there is anything to be gained in applying certain contemporary modes of philosophy to establishing, clarifying, or revising the beliefs that constitute the doxic cannon of Judaism. In this sense the analytic philosophy of Judaism continues the project that began with the Medieval rationalists who likewise took what they took to be the proper tools for gaining and assessing knowledge—be it Kalam for Saadyah or Aristotelian philosophy (with a bit of Neo-Platonism) for Maimonides.

Wettstein argues that this project is a bad fit with the tradition of rabbinic Judaism; a kind of artificial imposition on both the texts and the lived religious life that the texts reflect and sustain. Philosophy imposes coherence and conceptual purity onto texts where they do not belong, and reduces religious life and its accompanying imagery into a language that achieves clarity at the expense of experiential richness. Wettstein does not simply make the claim—found in numerous forms and iterations—that Judaism is much more a religion of praxis than belief. Rather (and here I may be overextending his thesis a bit), the beliefs central to Judaism as it emerges from the Bible and Talmud can only be expressed in a poetic (or other literary) forms that preserve something of their phenomenal character. To say that someone is committed to a theological belief of this kind is to describe their orientation in the world and not to report its propositional content. And to act on such a belief is not just to call upon its bare propositional content, but to appropriately draw upon its underlying imagery and metaphor in one’s practice.[[1]](#footnote-1)

I am sympathetic to this central contention, and a natural question would be whether we ought to chuck analytic philosophy for phenomenological approaches that are a better fit. Indeed, a good deal of the influential Jewish philosophy produced over the past century has been in the phenomenological mode. However, I proceed on the assumption that there is something to be gained from a variety of approaches in Jewish philosophy (analytic, phenomenological, historical etc.) and more importantly, the fundamental concern as I construe it below is not exclusively a problem for analytic philosophy. (See note 3 below)

Instead of continuing directly to the question as I initially formulated it will help to situate this critique so as to better understand the core dilemma it presents. Criticism of Maimonides for imposing Greek thought onto Judaism came right on the heels of the dissemination of his works and has continued ever since. However, a far more encompassing form of this critique emerged in the last century. Instead of seeing Greek thought as an imposition onto a vastly different system of belief, the new critique viewed the practice of philosophy and the systematized doctrine it delivered as producing a vastly different *form of religious* *life* from that which is contained in and sustained by the Bible and the vast rabbinic corpus. The question is therefore not merely whether philosophy has any relevance, but whether the spirit of philosophy engenders a different form of religious life that is alien to our foundational texts. The question then is not merely academic; it asks us to consider whether the contours of our intellectual lives ultimately reflect the religion we practice. If the answer is no, then by pursuing philosophical theology are we not in fact alienating ourselves from our true spiritual home?

Perhaps this is so, but to a degree this type of alienation may be inevitable. We live in a world that to a large extent is the product of that very philosophical impulse, today expressed primarily through science, which seeks to understand the world by discovering its regularities and explaining it as a well-ordered system. Analytic philosophy (especially in the strict sense) has by now been relieved of its empirical sub-disciplines, but nonetheless proceeds to do the same, albeit in the realm of language and concepts. Seeking the necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct application of a concept as a core philosophical project would surely appeal to Rambam as he sought to enumerate thirteen necessary (though perhaps insufficient) beliefs, just as it appeals to those today who spend a lot of time describing the doctrinal dividing-lines that are supposed to neatly separate the Orthodox from the heterodox and true believer from heretic.

My point is that even in our religious lives we are often deeply oriented toward the world in a philosophical mode that Soloveitchik called “cognitive man.” (Indeed, Soloveitchik’s Platonism described by Wettstein, the idealism of his heroic “halakhic man,” is mostly a product of this scientific worldview, and not the opposing “*homo religiosus*” in search of transcendence.) As such, the idea of Judaism as a system of thought—or as a system of a priori halakhic principles—may very well “appl[y] to biblical/rabbinic Judaism only with the application of force,” but it is a force that is by now second nature to some of us.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Yet, as compelling as this orientation is, it reflects aspirations for certainty that philosophy can no longer meet, and overlooks the extent to which our spiritual lives and perception of God are often confusing and contradictory. Read in the mode of the later Wittgenstein—philosophy as a therapeutic process—Wettstein’s article (ranging as far and wide as it does) is an attempt to cure us from the desire to refashion religion in those idealized and inhospitable terms. However, one has to make sure that the cure isn’t worse than the disease. 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.

1. Wettstein’s basic idea regarding poetry and metaphor bears more than a passing resemblance to Hans Blumenberg’s metaphorology. Blumenberg argues that some metaphorical philosophical language is foundational and cannot be translated into a language of pure concepts, and that these metaphors orient our thoughts in a certain way. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From Soloveitchik it should be apparent that the same philosophical ambitions for systematization and conceptual purity can be expressed in a phenomenological approach to theology as much as in a speculative theosophical approach. So, as to the earlier question regarding the preferability of other philosophical approaches, the answer is that the very same problem can present itself, albeit less starkly. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)