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PRAGMATIC CATAPHASIS: PLENITUDE AND CAUTION IN MORNING PRAYER (TAKING UP DANIEL WEISS' CHALLENGE)

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Daniel Weiss has offered us a worthy set of challenges for textual reasoning: to consider the way God is addressed in the texts of rabbinic prayer; to consider, through the instruments of rhetorical and semiotic analysis, the "oddly deictic" character of this address; and to measure, at once, the ethical and theological force of this deixis: Does it move the worshipper to action? Is this action *for* the other/Other? And does this action embody all that can be said of God, "that there is nothing to say of You beyond this action to which You bring us"? I believe this challenge is worthy for three reasons: (1) Prayer renders scripture a ground of action, so that Weiss' study has the consequence of drawing textual reasoners to address the practical efficacy of classical Jewish textuality; (2) A strong source of textual reasoning is postmodern Jewish philosophy, and Weiss' thesis raises the central postmodern question concerning Jewish prayer: Does Jewish prayer offer training in compassion for the "other" (care for the human other is a primary virtue for postmodern Jewish ethics), or does it inculcate a traditionalism that may in fact occlude attention to the other

outside the worshipping community? (3) But "post-liberalism" is another source of textual reasoning, and Weiss' thesis may set a place for fruitful dialogue between postmodern and postliberal practitioners of textual reasoning. Such a dialogue may introduce a non-romantic means of valorizing the practice of Jewish prayer as, at once, socialization in traditional rabbinic discourse and training for a life of care for the other.

I will take up the last question as a point of departure for this response to Weiss' thesis, posing the following thought experiment. What consequences would follow if we took Weiss' thesis as a contribution strictly to the postmodern direction in recent textural reasoning? His thesis would, I believe, introduce a radical apophasis. On the other hand, what consequences would follow if we took his thesis as a contribution strictly to the postliberal direction in resent textural reasoning? His thesis would, I believe, introduce a radical cataphasis. But, finally what consequences would follow if we understood his thesis to display the results of a dialogue between the postmodern and postliberal tendencies in textual reasoning? His thesis would, I believe, introduce a pragmatic account of rabbinic prayer as training in the practical (which includes social, relational, and ethical) efficacy of classical Jewish belief. I will limit this response to the terms of this thought experiment, sticking for the most part to a philosophic and semiotic vocabulary. Having had the opportunity of reading Adam Zachary Newton's contribution to this volume, I believe his detailed study of various levels of rabbinic liturgical practice provides sufficient illustrations of what I take to be the most satisfying reading of Weiss' thesis – the pragmatic one.

1. A Postmodern Reading of Weiss' Thesis: "You" as Apophatic Address

Is Weiss' "odd deixis" a contribution, specifically, to the postmodern turn in Jewish philosophy? Is his reading, in other words, consistent with the Levinasian ethics that has been at the center of Jewish thought – and textual reasoning–the past decade or two? If so, we might gloss his thesis in the following way:

Rabbinic prayers address God not merely through the second-person You, but also through a You employed as radically deictic, which, to use a few synonyms, means radically indexical or demonstrative. A bit of history of these terms may be in order. Working at Johns Hopkins in 1883, the young logician O. Mitchell suggested that certain elements of speech may refer to their objects without any predication: referring, in other words, strictly to the thatness or raw existence of something out-there, without delivering any other information about the whatness or characteristics of the something. Charles Peirce founder of the American brand of semiotic theory, of pragmatism and of its attendant logics took up Mitchell's insight with great energy. He called these speech elements "indices" or "deictic signs" and described "indexicality" or "deixis" as the way that certain signs refer to their objects.[1] Prime examples are the demonstrative pronouns "that," or "there!" These pronouns point to something that has meaning only for those who observe some physical behavior that accompanies the speaker's claim. While declaring "there!" for example, the speaker may point with the index finger at a certain tree that his or her interlocutors are looking at. This means that the index lacks any predicative meaning apart from the living context of the speech act. Within that context, however, the index carries a range of qualitative meanings *to those who share in the context*: listener A may understand the pointing to refer to "that tree there with the squirrel on it;" for listener B, it may point to "that bush there with the berries." One feature of indexicality is thus non-predicative reference. Another is context-specific meaning. Another is vagueness or indefiniteness, since listeners may understand the predications in different ways; they are not spelled out even to those present in the context. Since Peirce, many inquirers have examined the rhetorical, semiotic and logical force of deictic signs. As noted in Adam Zachary Newton's essay, "Thou, so to speak: Dei-xis," these include the linguists Roman Jakobson, Emile Benveniste, and Otto Jesperson; the philosophers Jacques Derrida, Emanuel Levinas, and Roland Barthes; and, I would add, the semiotic logicians Paul Grice and

[1] Peirce writes, "Mr. Mitchell also has a very interesting and instructive extension of his notation for some and all . . . to the logic of relatives," *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, eds. Charles Harteshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass., 1934,5: 3.393). Behind this quote is Mitchell's notion of indexicality as applied to the meaning of demonstratives and of what we mean by "some."

> Stephen Levinson (both of whom influence Weiss' thesis[2]). Grice is most well-known for his notion of "conversational implicature": that certain speech acts are not meant to bear their surface or plain sense meaning, but to signal another dimension of meaning to those who share the speaker's interpretive context.

In these terms, let us assume that, in a postmodern mode, Weiss is claiming the following: (a) A semiotic observation: that second person address in rabbinic prayer illustrates deixis (indexicality); (b) A semantic inference: that this address delivers no information about the addressee other than its being there *as* addressee; (c) A set of theological and epistemological inferences: that the non-predictability of this addressee is precisely what merits its being the object of prayer; that it is the uniquely non-predicable since it bears no knowable attribute other than this; and that any effort to say more about this addressee is to do it a disservice by misrepresenting it; (d) An ethical inference: that it is good to address the object of one's prayers in this way. It is good because it corrects one's "totalizing" tendencies (to capture others within the finite and thus restrictive terms of ones own conceptual frameworks). And it is good because it thereby teaches one to address other humans, as well, as You: as those whose freedom and capacity to surprise can never be limited by one's own prejudgment.

If these were Weiss's postmodern claims, they would imply: (a) that rabbinic prayer is practice and training in the fact that the one we in English call "God" *is there* as the object of prayer, but also (b) that we humans have no basis for predicating anything other than that to this addressee, so that there is no warrant for our naming this one "God," *Hashem*, the Creator, and so on, for such names bear predicative meaning; (c) that rabbinic prayer validates the Levinasian direction in recent textual reasoning. This direction includes:

A) *A hermeneutics of suspicion*, comprised of: (1) A nominalist or skeptical critique of any universal or necessary claims (I believe Levinas'

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[2] Weiss cites Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and draws also on H. Paul Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).

critique of totalizing uses of speech and language fall within these rubrics); (2) A tendency to extend this critique to any positive (or "synthetic"[3]) claims about entities or relations other than individuals within this world of experience or observable relations among such individuals (on the assumption that such claims are equivalent to totalizing claims).[4] Such claims are assumed to be both unwarranted (and thus either simply errant or deceptive) and dangerous (since they may be adopted as conditions for actions that are errant or deceptive); (3) A tendency to assume that all positive theological claims fall within the category of claims subject to this second critique and, thus, to argue that all positive theological claims are unwarranted and potentially dangerous.

B) *A hermeneutics of retrieval,* which qualifies these skeptical tendencies by way of what we might call a pragmatic or regulative realism. According to this sort of realism, theological claims (and perhaps others that belong to category A-2) are warranted if and when they can be shown to bear positive fruit when adopted strictly as regulative ideals. These are second-order claims that do not, despite appearances, offer any empirical information about the world of direct experience (in Kant's terms, that which is known through the understanding). Instead, they function as pragmatic recommendations for acting in certain ways in certain contexts of social action. Within the terms of Weiss' thesis, for example, the daily practice of addressing "God" as You may nurture a range of good habits among rabbinic worshippers, for example: (a) Removing the worshipper's devotion to any idol in the sense of any finite entity, concept, or construction (lacking predicable content, the "You" cannot be the object of idolatry); (b) Freeing the worshipper, therefore, to encounter everything and event in the world with less presumption about what it may be or mean; (c) Opening the worshipper, therefore, to new or fresh observations and relations; (d) Opening the worshipper, therefore, to encountering other human beings (or others more generally) as comparably free from

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[3] To use Kant's term.

[4] Among proponents of this postmodern argument are Edith Wyschogrod, Gilles Deleuze, Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault.

pre- definition – and, in this sense, as images or places of the unpredictable You.

2. A Romantically Postliberal reading of Weiss' thesis: "You" as an Opening to Cataphasis

What if, however, Weiss' thesis is postliberal rather than postmodern? If it is a postliberal thesis, then I think it might imply a set of claims like these:

1. *A critique of circular reasoning in postmodern humanism*. Consider the claim offered in A-3 above: that predictable claims about God are necessarily totalizing. Perhaps Weiss' thesis about the divine You would imply that this claim is circular. The humanistic postmodernist presumes that any locution about God (or about whatever is infinite or not limited to the terms of human experience) is a human construct. If so, according to rule A-3, the construct would be totalizing, since it exceeds the limits of empirical observation. But this inference begs the question: on what ground can the postmodernist assume that all locutions are human constructs? Such an inference is based either on a totalizing premise (that all locutions that are meaningful to humans must be constructed by humans) or it is simply circular (that our vocabulary excludes the possibility of nonhuman agency);

2. *The possibility of nonhuman agency*. This critique of humanistic postmodernism does not itself warrant any specific claim about the potentially extra-human source of a given locution. It favors theology no more than it favors, say, accounts of the utter contingency of human knowledge, or claims that our locutions are utterly determined by evolutionary or other forces. According to this second postliberal claim, Weiss might read the "odd deixis of God" as training in a more radical skepticism than the humanist allows: an openness to sources of knowledge that we may not have dreamt of. In this case, Weiss' thesis would retain an apophasis that might still please many postmodernists, including Levinas: that "God language" is there to undo our idolatries, not to reintroduce any of our epistemic pretensions under the guise of "what we know of the Infinite." Of postliberal approaches, this one would

come closest to the postmodern reading of Weiss, except in its more thoroughgoing skepticism. We will return to that in a moment;

3. *A romantic postliberalism.* Postmodern critics, however, are wont to associate "postliberalism" with a far less skeptical and more romantic alternative. It is clear that Weiss does not pursue such a postliberalism. Nevertheless, I want to take time to imagine what it would look like, in order to get a clearer picture of what Weiss may be rejecting. Suppose, for the sake of this exercise, that the "odd deixis of You" served a cataphatic function: that the divine discourses of scripture and prayer introduce a vocabulary that by definition exceeds the limits of human comprehension. In Charles Peirce's logical terms, each name of God is irremediably vague. This means that each name is a deictic sign that points directly and forcefully to the reality and presence of God (just like Weiss' You) but also discloses something of this God, introducing this something into our lives and understanding so that the naming changes what we know as well as reinforcing the limited character of all that we know.

In the scriptural account of Exodus, for example, God discloses such names as *ehyeh imach*, "I will be with you," or *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, "I will be what I will be," or *yhvh* (the unspeakable name). In the prayer book, many other names appear, drawn from both scriptural and latter rabbinic sources: for example, *hakadosh baruch hu*, "the Holy One, blessed by He," or *hamakom*, "the Place." For the romantic or cataphatic postliberal, these names all imply the deictic You, but they are not reducible to it alone. They add bits of information about the God and God's relation to creation and to us. Indeed, as both postmodern and postliberal thinkers would argue, we cannot fully capture any of this information in discrete sentences of our natural language. In Peirce's terms again, the information is introduced vaguely. This does not mean, however, that sentences of natural language are not useful means of delivering this vague information to us, or clarifying or extending it; it is simply a warning against self-satisfied or idolatrous employment of any single set of natural language sentences or descriptions.

It is worthwhile to learn, for example, that "God may be with me," provided I bear in mind that the learning is never exhausted by any single

take I may have on what that phrase means. This caution is no ground for radical skepticism, however, for it should apply as well to ways we come to know other human beings or perhaps all other things. Say, for example, that I know you as "my friend" or "that fast runner." Yes, these attributions are much less vague than those we make of God, but they are vague nonetheless: we may understand them differently at different times and, to be sure, we may have reason to change them altogether at different times. In sum, theological language carries with it special instructions about how to use it, and it certainly cannot be used as if it were equivalent to any given set of natural language conventions. But this is to say no more than that theological language is a special language, as are the languages of mathematics, physics, and poetry, or even how to play Monopoly. It takes education to know how to use any such language, and rules of vagueness and probability are appropriate features of any special language. No need, then, for radical skepticism, just for appropriate wisdom.

4. *The pragmatic efficacy of divine discourse*. Since he does not take this third, cataphatic option, I must assume that Weiss might raise some objection to it, perhaps this one: that the option is ahistorical, offered as if in ignorance of the century we live in and of what effects un-self-critical cataphatic theology has had on social and political life. Perhaps Weiss would say that a postliberal option that takes vagueness seriously also understands the context-specific meaning of any vague locution. If so, it should comprehend its own context, and we are in a context where religious practitioners are making egregious misuse of cataphatic language: justifying persecutions, wars, mistreatment of persons on the basis of claims about the context-specific meanings of this or that scriptural or doctrinal pronouncement. Weiss may argue that he has learned enough about human character, at least in our time, to be very wary of the optimism embedded in a romantic post-liberalism.

Perhaps, however, Weiss would entertain another kind of cataphasis: one that included instructions and practices for when and where to use or to avoid use of divine names and other potentially totalizing terms. If so, this "pragmatic cataphasis" might include the following:

- *A Kantian-like distinction of levels of discourse.* The first rule for a pragmatic post-liberalism would be to respect a version of Kant's over-drawn distinction between the Understanding (*Verstand*) and Reason (*Verstehen*) as two distinct domains of knowledge and locution. Weiss may claim that statements of empirical observation belong to one category of locution (like the Understanding) and theological statements belong to another (like Reason). In these terms, theological statements do not compete with empirical claims. They describe neither "another world" that certain of us can see and describe beyond this world, nor a set of claims that compete with what most of us take to be empirical claims. Instead, theology offers a second-order discourse, of which there are various kinds.
- *A Lindbeckian-like notion of transformational discourse.* Without buying fully into George Lindbeck's postliberal account of scriptural hermeneutics, a pragmatic Weiss might borrow at least this much from Lindbeck: that scriptural and doctrinal statements about God introduce transformational grammars that instruct us on how and when to transform the way we use ordinary language. If Weiss were adopting this distinction, then he might restate it in the following, pragmatic terms.
- *A pragmatic account of transformational discourse.* A pragmatic postliberal might characterize Lindbeck's second-order discourse this way: that "God talk" or "divine speech" appears through our use of natural language but not according to the grammars and rules of our natural language use. From this perspective, God is not named, *per se,* in sentences that purport to name God as we would name Sam or Sally. God is named, rather, through the way that our use of language gets changed from its conventional uses. This change is not seen through the semantic rules of our everyday sentences, but that does not mean that it is invisible. It is seen through the way certain collections of sentences (such as

scripture or doctrines and so on) instruct readers to speak and act differently than they normally do, which includes reading these very sentences differently than they normally would.

Where, then, are these instructions to be found? That question rings like Job's question, "Where is wisdom to be found?" In either case, we may suppose that "she cries in the streets..." "She cries," meaning that this instruction is not at all mute. "She cries in the streets," suggesting that the place of instruction is right here where we conduct our everyday affairs. But, "she cries," suggesting that this instruction rises above the sound of our conventional action and speech in the everyday. The question, then, is not "Where is she to be found?" but "Who can and will hear her?" From this perspective, scripture and related discourses offer instruction in how to be one who would hear this very instruction. Unless the postliberal pragmatist is also guilty of circular reasoning, the discourse that instructs us on how to be this one must *include yet not be limited to* the words of our everyday readings of scripture (and comparable texts).

The reader who hears this instruction (wisdom's cry)[5] would have been nurtured in a way of seeing, hearing, and living, as well as reading, that conditions the possibility of hearing her cry. Even then, the hearing would come only by way of a presence that is ultimately unpredictable.

Does a postliberal Weiss intend something like this pragmatically second-order discourse? If so, is the "odd deixis" a way of turning the reader's attention away from the conventional grammars and vocabularies of scripture and prayer to one that speaks to the wisdom that is now "to be found?" If so, then we should no longer be satisfied with any stark dichotomy of choices regarding how to interpret God's You: neither a skeptical postmodernism (with its apophasis) nor a romantic post-liberalism (with its cataphasis) will suffice to capture the instructional and transformational force of the divine You. This force must propel the reader into some additional realm of discourse, community, tradition, language, and action in which, alone, wisdom's cry is heard. Once propelled by this

[5] See David Ford's theory of "the cry," in *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

force, the terms of discussion may no longer be what they were a moment before. Is God named or not named? Perhaps that is a question we ask only before being propelled by this force. And after? Perhaps a wholly different set of questions arise.

3. Conclusion: The Pragmatics of You

What lessons shall we learn from this exercise? Weiss' sensitivity to the indexicality and thus the pragmatic force of You suggests that he would also expect us to respect the epistemic vagueness of his thesis as a whole: that it should speak in somewhat different ways to somewhat different contexts of reading. I believe we have seen that several different postmodern and postliberal options may be consistent with his thesis. At the moment, I am most warmed to the following reading: that the You of rabbinic prayer marks the performative character of our relation to the One to whom we pray:

- That, as Martin Buber has taught so clearly, to utter any of the Hebrew names of God is at once to perform an action and to be acted upon. It is to address an Other, using whatever language suits you to say that this Other "is there," present before you. This is, moreover, not just any other but what we might call the Other of any possible other and, yet, it is no abstraction, but right there before you, over against you.
- It is to be called to action. To utter such a name is, despite the obvious fact of your own willing participation in the act, not wholly an act of your own doing. This is the claim that exceeds the circularity of any strictly humanistic postmodernism: that it is indeed possible (it is not illogical to claim that) my speech is not wholly my own. Either this is the case in general, and speaking the divine name is a prototype and instruction in what is generally true; or this is what it means to utter the divine name. It means that when I utter it I am addressing You; whether or not I intend to do so, by uttering Your Name I in fact address You. This possibility is

also the possibility of transformational action. In ordinary language use, we assume that we say what we mean to say, or at least we try to do so. But to say that uttering the divine name is addressing You is also to say that it is a speech act that transforms the human speaker into one who both speaks and is spoken to, both wills speech and discovers that the speech enacts another's will. In Abraham Heschel's phrase, it is to perform the fact that "I am what is not mine." Heschel's phrase suggests the additional possibility that this speech act may not transform the self into something other as much as return the self to the one to whom it had always belonged – and from which, at some point and for some reason, it had lost its place.

- To address You is to mark all this speech that addresses You (all this prayer) as bearing context-specific meaning. It is not just any talk, but talk that takes place here in the way I am now, in this history and space-time. But it is also about You who is not just you in general, some this or that, some name for God in general, but this You who is here now in this particular way and exerts this real force in relation to me. The nakedness of the deictic signifier is thus, paradoxically, a sign of the full or utter presence of its object. That is, after all, the meaning of deictic signs: that they cannot be read apart from the immediate context in which they are offered, so that, if they have meaning, the object of meaning is right there.[6] In these terms, the You is, in a sense, no mark of apophasis but a mark of the utter density of Your presence.

[6] Thanks to Emily S. Kempson for pointing out the force of this last point. And thanks to Ms. Kempson and to Kate Vasiloff for editorial help in this paper as a whole.

- Finally, the context-specificity of You means that the speech act is not offered alone but in the specific context of the rules of speech, habits, traditions, communities, memory and grammar that accompanies this act and that enables this encounter with the utterly other and unknown to be addressed in our language.