

Theology and Aesthetics: A Response to Steven Kepnes

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In presenting his agenda for a positive Jewish theology, Steven Kepnes has set out a program that draws on the strengths—while also correcting for the weaknesses—of both medieval and modern Jewish philosophy, at the same time always keeping an eye on Hebrew Scripture, as any Jewish theology worthy of the name ought.

Our shared starting point is the theological realism according to which God is “an independent Being separate from the cognitive structures of the human mind.” While I am less convinced than Kepnes of the greater explanatory power of theism regarding the origin of the universe, and correspondingly more skeptical about the probative value of traditional arguments for the existence of God, that seems to be of little consequence for the question of realism. Religious thinkers believe in God, atheists do not. While, to my mind, that comes down to faith rather than proof (which is not to say that one cannot give reasons for belief or for the lack thereof), the distinction between believers and nonbelievers who engage in theological discourse will concern whether they think they are speaking of an existing reality or are engaging in an interesting intellectual parlor game. Steven Kepnes and I are doing the former.

The real nub of the issue, though, centers around Kepnes’ second positive claim: whether “rational knowledge of God is attainable and...human language is capable of addressing God.” It is on how to approach this issue that we diverge.

Let me begin with the areas of agreement. In Part I, Kepnes presents a pithy but penetrating account of the theological trajectory from medieval negative theology through to modern theological anti-realisms. For Kepnes, the avoidance of direct propositional statements in much of modern and postmodern thought leads “toward the existential experience of the individual, the aesthetic strategies of myth, the thick descriptions of phenomenology” and ultimately render it “impossible to really say anything positive about God at all”—or as he later puts it, to the “negation of all meaning” to theological statements.

Let us first admit that Jewish Scripture is indeed replete with positive assertions about God. I would confidently say that such assertions far outnumber the more occasional limiting statements. Indeed, in reference to the latter, Kepnes only references the idea that no man can see God’s face and live.¹ Nonetheless, that God and man are radically incomparable can clearly be biblically grounded (Isaiah 55: 8-9 is a *locus classicus*) and has been a staple of Jewish theology for centuries. Maimonides’s negative theology is likely the best known, most far-reaching, and sophisticated of the purely philosophical takes on the matter, even if his view was far from standard in his own day, such that he could still be taken to task for labelling believers in divine corporeality heretics.²

¹ As told to Moses by God at Exodus 33:20. To me, however, this statement does not actually imply that God doesn't have a face. On the contrary, he does, though it's clearly a very scary one.

² In the now famous gloss of R. Abraham ben David of Posquierres (Ravad) to *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 3:7.

The use of humanly constructed concepts in order to address the nature of God remains a topic of intense debate, or even, like contemporary American politics, polar attitudes that barely reach the threshold for debate. The issue here is not a normative one that would question, for example, our use of religious language in prayer; there might be very good pragmatic reasons there for using anthropomorphic language, as even Maimonides would admit. It is rather whether the attempt to intellectually cognize God and describe his nature using language developed within—and suited to—a world of human discourse can have any literal descriptive purchase. Even relatively conservative thinkers like Joseph Soloveitchik who acknowledge (and welcome) Maimonides's failure "to purge Jewish liturgy of poetic elements and anthropomorphic symbols derived from our sensational experience,"³ at the same time concur with him on the "nonsensical undertaking of applying concepts derived from temporality to eternity...clearly recognized by negative theology."⁴

Those who believe that we *can* speak of God using some extension of ordinary language are forced to struggle with all manner of issues, such as the problem of evil, paradoxes of omnipotence, or the problem of freewill versus omniscience. At times these challenges force thinkers to conclusions with which those who might otherwise be sympathetic to the general program of positive theology struggle;⁵ some, for example, find theodicies rationally compelling, while others find them morally disturbing.⁶ But these are clearly issues over which reasonable people can and do disagree, and the distinction between those who are and are not compelled by positive theologies hardly seems to distinguish the rational from the irrational. It appears instead that scholars with differing religious sensibilities find themselves convinced by different approaches when it comes to these challenges and to the positive theology that generates them.

Given all of the above, Kepnes approaches positive theological formulations with appropriate caution, admitting that it's "necessary to clear the air of easy and too confident attempts to say we know who God is." But what can we then say with any degree of confidence about God?

Kepnes seems to equivocate here a little. He admits that our positive use of such terms as "good" or "wise" in relation to God "are not adequate to all that we might want to express in a theology," yet he nonetheless maintains that such uses of language allow for "excellent formulations of aspects of God's nature and reality that communicate knowledge of God and can stimulate contemplation, exploration, and the development of theology." Yet, in almost the same breath, and even while returning to medieval notions of Absolute Being that posit God as the "fundamental reality and philosophical principle of Judaism" whose "existence provides the ground and sustenance of all other beings," Kepnes seems unwilling to posit these as attributes in any straightforward sense. So, rather than being "excellent formulations," they instead become a "good starting point for theological debate." The reason for this equivocation is Kepnes's

³ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Halakhic Mind* (New York: Seth Press, 1986), 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵ Peter Van Inwagen's retreat from the standard view of omniscience is one of many interesting contemporary examples. See Peter Van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 80-83.

⁶ As D.Z. Phillips wrote of a dying child, "If this has been *done* to anyone, it is bad enough, but to be done for a purpose, to be planned from eternity—that is the deepest evil. If God is this kind of agent, He cannot justify His actions, and His evil nature is revealed" (D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* [London: Routledge, 1965], 93).

recognition of the need to supplement the philosophical God of Absolute Being with the “the speaking, hearing, willing” personal God of the Torah. This, in turn, means that Kepnes’s modern reconstruction of positive theology needs to be comfortable with contradiction as “the price to pay for a Jewish theology that is true to the fundamental sources of Judaism.” It strikes me that this is indeed the inevitable cost if we are to treat theological statements as literal propositional truths. For me, it is too high a price to pay. For one thing, if it is systematic conceptual knowledge of God that we are seeking, it seems to me that truth-apt propositions that lead to contradiction cannot yield this. In the realm of indicative propositions that seek to describe reality, a contradiction is just a contradiction. I believe that there is, nonetheless, a way to treat statements about God as a “good starting point” for a form of “Jewish theology that is true to the fundamental sources of Judaism” that does not exact the same cost.

Other avenues that historically have been pursued in search of meaningful ways to understand God include the one that some understand as being suggested by the arch negative theologian Maimonides, whereby God is not to be “understood” through attempts to describe his essence, but instead by appeal to his actions. On this interpretation, God models moral or political perfection through his “governance of the world” as evidenced by the laws of nature. While I will preserve something of this practical appeal in my approach, I am unconvinced that one can interpret the laws of nature in such a way that they model moral or political virtues. More than that, I find attempts to understand God through a moral lens only slightly less difficult than the attempt to understand him more “theoretically,” given that the behavior God exhibits in the Hebrew Bible is hardly behavior that we would wish to emulate as human beings. Emulating some of God’s actions as portrayed in Hebrew Scripture would more likely land us in the International Criminal Court than on the shortlist for the Nobel peace prize.

Kepnes quotes Plantinga, who allows that our inability to comprehend God “doesn’t mean that we can’t think about God at all, and it doesn’t mean that we can’t know some extremely important things about God.”⁷ Here we agree. We differ, however, and quite substantially, over what it means to “think about” God without “comprehending” him, and for me the scope of “extremely important” things we can genuinely *know* about God is far more limited.

In order to introduce my contrary view, let us consider the following. Kepnes initially seems committed to positive theology for reasons that have to do with ontology, or as he puts it, with making sense of the world’s existence. This leads him into the more austere medieval considerations of the first part of his piece. This, however, is not a question that all thinkers believe requires a theological answer. At the very least, not everyone is as convinced as Kepnes (or for that matter Richard Swinburne) of the greater explanatory power of theism when it comes to such ontological questions. So, it is interesting that when Kepnes speaks of the issue with apophatic theologies, his immediate concern is that “the commandments lose their anchoring in a commanding presence,” rather than the more ontologically driven questions that his medieval considerations were designed to resolve. It is because this anchoring seems only capable of satisfaction by the turn to God “as a person” that Kepnes reverts to less “austere” theologies in the later part of his article. But that seems now to place questions of practice and meaning over those of existence and ontology at the center of his theological concerns. Kepnes even sees the

⁷ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

ontological role as that which makes God “worthy of our gratitude,” once again sliding from the realm of ontology to that of value.

I will add parenthetically that it seems less than clear to me that God’s ontological role is a reason for gratitude, for reasons that are at once conceptual, empirical, and even rabbinic. The sages of the Babylonian Talmud seem less than convinced too, ruling (unusually) in accordance with The House of Shammai that “[i]t would have been preferable had man not been created than to have been created” (*Eruvin* 13b). Nonetheless, the Talmud continues, “now that he has been created, he should examine his action,” bringing us back immediately to the realm of practice and values as the settled center of Jewish thought rather than ontology.

What does the above slide from ontology to axiology mean for the realm of “God-talk”? Kepnes enters the more intimate and relational theological realm with his use of Gellman and Peirce, both of whom are instructive for the alternative theological approach that I would briefly like to sketch here. Kepnes’s example of Gellman’s doublemindedness has the Torah telling us “what was actually going on in the mind of Abraham.” It has more to do with the phenomenology of religious experience and the way in which Abraham relates to and thinks about God than with the description of God himself. As Kepnes notes, we “can make use of these personal and embodied images to help us imagine God, to contemplate God’s powers.” What, then, if we limit the meaning of assertions about God to this “imaginative” sphere rather than see them as literal descriptions of God? For Kepnes, this reduces all God-talk to the “thick descriptions of phenomenology” that ultimately make it “impossible to really say anything positive about God at all.” But it seems to me that literal contradictions make it possible to say too many positive things about God, which lands us with a meaningless morass of propositions. Taking a more phenomenological approach, one that emphasizes how we experience religion and relate to God, seems a much more promising way to proceed, especially if the questions we are concerned with are the more practical and evaluative questions at the heart of Judaism. Moreover, as we will see, the rabbinic theology of “thirdness,” a more literary interpretive mode of discourse which Kepnes sees as developing out of his discussion of Peirce, seems better able to bear contradictions.

Recalling that Kepnes wants theological statements to “stimulate contemplation, exploration, and the development of theology,” I would contend that such contemplation and exploration can be better stimulated if we approach the logical status of descriptions of God more as we do literature, where we paint a picture that does not try to give a literal description of the static essence of a character. The theological alternative I therefore would like to sketch here is aesthetic, though this will be little more than a program for future development,⁸ together with some considerations regarding why the aesthetic approach might have advantages over the rejected intellectual and moral alternatives.

There is, of course, good reason for taking a more literary approach, not least that it’s the approach embodied in Jewish Scripture itself. When one combines that with the qualified acceptance of negative theology and the issues that attend to positive theology, one has some impetus for looking to this alternative. The Maimonidean view that the literary form of

⁸ While in the fullness of time my approach will develop somewhat differently, I am certainly not the first to affirm the significance of the aesthetic for Judaism in this direction. See, for example, Zachary Braiterman, “Aesthetics and Judaism, Art and Revelation,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (2004): 366-85.

presentation is simply a “sop to the masses,” with which the philosophical elite can dispense, reflects a prejudice against the value of imaginative explorations of important ideas that can surely be questioned (though I imagine I will not be able to persuade those steeped in that prejudice away from it). Either way, merely asserting that this literary mode of presentation can be ignored without cost does not make it true, and while he would have no time for my approach, I am reminded here of the words of Yeshayahu Leibowitz:

A prevalent conception, which stems from a shallow rationalism, distinguishes kernel from husk in religion; the eternal ideational content of absolute value becomes incarnate in various external forms, which may, without loss, be exchanged for others and ought to be superseded from time to time to fit changing circumstances. This distinction is baseless. Substance is embodied in form. The essence of a given content is inseparable from the particular form which it takes on. Were it clothed differently, it could not be the identical content.⁹

The literary presentation of God, it seems to me, should not be interpreted away. At the very least, the effects of literary presentations on religious believers differ substantially from those of systematic theology, and that is a difference that cannot be ignored.

I suggest then, that we experiment with the idea of understanding the God of Hebrew Scripture as we would other literary heroes. To explain: Some of the most difficult problems we encounter in our attempts to develop positive theology concern the contradictions that ensue for various reasons when we attempt the sort of scholastic program with which Kepnes begins. Moreover, even the less theoretical and more moral readings of God’s nature clash with God’s apparently “immoral” behavior in certain instances. What, then, if we take seriously the more the interpretive and imagistic aesthetic of the rabbis as our primary means of contact with God?¹⁰ As Howard Wettstein, who takes an approach that parallels the one I suggest here, has written, “To take such imagery seriously is not to take it all literally.”¹¹ Could it be, then, that much as we are attracted to literary and dramatic portrayals of the morally flawed despite, or maybe even *because* of, those moral imperfections, that the same is true of God?

If we seriously begin to unpack the aesthetic conception of God, we might find a figure that at times exemplifies all of the heroic virtues that we wish to emulate, yet at others acts in a manner that in our reflective moments we would condemn. At the same time though, as in many an artistic context, we cannot help but find ourselves attracted to those who act in this manner when they do so at a safe aesthetic distance, and without wishing to emulate such ways of acting ourselves. Thus, it could be that when God “does” something that we find troubling from an ethical perspective, we can at the same time find that there is an aesthetic attraction there, much as the arch atheist Friedrich Nietzsche himself was attracted to the Old Testament, in which he

⁹ Yeshayahu Leibowitz, “Religious Praxis,” trans. Eliezer Goldman in *Judaism, Human Values, and the Jewish State*, ed. E. Goldman et. al. (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 7-8.

¹⁰ Though I am sure he would not follow my development of the idea, it is Soloveitchik who writes that “the aesthetic experience, if linked with the idea of the exalted, may bring man directly into contact with God, living, personal, intimate. Only through coming into contact with the beautiful and exalted may one apprehend God instead of comprehending Him” (Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, ed. S. Carmy [Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 2003], 59).

¹¹ H. Wettstein, “Theological Impressionism,” *Judaism* 49 no. 2 (2000): 133. At the broad level, Wettstein’s approach substantially anticipates my own, though he focuses more on poetry than literary “character studies.” The full development of my program will ultimately deliver a very different picture from his.

found “great human beings, a heroic landscape, and something most rare on earth, the incomparable naïveté of the strong heart.”¹²

Ironically, the very elements of the book Nietzsche so admires are those that modern liberal readers try to interpret away. My suggestion is that we do not explain them away, but that we take a more holistic look at God as a literary character who can both attract and repel, and that we read biblical statements concerning God not as literal descriptions with truth values that lead us into a mire of contradictions, but as logically inarticulate yet compelling literary descriptions of a figure who transcends the confines of our limited conceptual purview.

It is undoubtedly true that we experience intense emotion when we read literature or watch a drama despite the fact that we know that we are engaged with fiction. It engages us despite our knowledge that it is not real. This emotional response will likely be even more intense when, as in our case, it is not entirely fiction, since for the theist it is based in fact. Thus, we are taking these descriptions more as “faction” than fiction given that my starting point is that there is a real God behind the descriptions. But, if one wishes to take a traditional line, it is precisely because we cannot see God’s face and live (Exodus 33:20) that God would present us with the sort of literary characterization to which human beings *can* relate, and in addition demand of us a set of behaviors precisely so as to avoid the excesses of “problematic” divine behavior. Indeed, this literary perspective saves us from having to justify acts despite their clearly immoral nature, avoiding the need to apologetically force all divine actions into a moral straitjacket. We instead view them through an aesthetic lens, in a manner that need not and maybe cannot meet our moral standards. The attempt to somehow maintain the morality of such acts despite appearances to the contrary begs the question of why we ought not emulate them. The aesthetic perspective avoids such issues. On the aesthetic hypothesis, the portrayal of such acts might even help us to relate to God, whether through love or, more likely in these instances, through fear or awe. As a literary character, God can be admired, loved, but also feared, a figure under whose spell we might fall even in the absence of full understanding—no more a figure we wish to imitate than we would wish to imitate our favorite literary and dramatic antiheroes, from Jay Gatsby to Omar from *The Wire*, however much we are mesmerized and in many instances attracted by such aesthetic portrayals.¹³

The purpose of this aesthetic perspective would not be to form a theological conception of God composed of a set of true propositions, moral or otherwise. What then would its purpose be? If we return briefly to the rather dark view of human existence expressed in the earlier Talmudic quote—though the theological remarks that follow can stand largely independent of pessimistic views of human existence—it is once again Nietzsche who tells us that “[t]he truly serious task of art...[is] to save the eye from gazing into the horrors of night and to deliver the subject by the healing balm of illusion from the spasms of the agitation of the will.”¹⁴ This is reminiscent of the idea that Kepnes cites in his discussion of Peter Ochs, who uses Peirce to

¹² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1998), III, §22.

¹³ *Imitatio dei* can remain an important principle, but one that moves the discussion away from the aesthetic into the moral and legal sphere. We are expressly told how to act, and would thus have to read the Torah in the spirit of “Do as I say, not as I do.”

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), §15.

portray the Torah as supplying “divine healing energy to a human situation of need.” What, then, if the Torah’s account of God is intended to do something similar and give us an artistic presentation of a being that will help us cope with the harsh realities of life, rather than an accurate literal account of God’s nature?

We began by positing faith in God’s existence as a premise. We are also accepting severe limits on our propositional knowledge of God. To take a leaf out of Eliezer Berkovits’s book, however, through accepting this, “[t]he negative attributes, therefore, become an affirmation of the divine transcendence.”¹⁵ God as a being that transcends our knowledge and reality is presented to us in the Tanakh via a literary representation that induces us to reflect on the important questions of value with which reality presents us. It may, for example, lead us to question our place in the world in relation to a transcendent perfection, and to experience specific emotional responses to this questioning—humility, for example—even in the absence of a static metaphysical or even moral account of God. Furthermore, in fostering a relationship to this transcendent God, the Tanakh directs us to reflect imaginatively on key issues that we ought to reflect upon as religious individuals: will the judge of the world not act justly?; how is one to reflect on evil and suffering (the book of Job)?; or how is one to think about power and sovereignty (slavery in Egypt, the opening books of the Prophets)? etc. God is the transcendent hero, there both to help us cope with the flawed reality that we encounter (without denying the flaws), and to inspire us to consider our role within it.

On this reading, we cease to have to worry about contradictions. There is nothing logically absurd about sometimes feeling conflicting emotions towards someone with whom you seek an intimate relationship or envisaging that person in those contradictory ways—just ask any couple. Having opposed emotions towards the same person is a perfectly natural part of a relationship, as long as the relationship is ultimately one where there is a fundamental commitment to “oneness”—that is, to the very harmony and reconciliation that Kepnes posits as the final religious goal of reconciliation with God.¹⁶

Ultimately, Kepnes and I differ on the literal value of positive assertions about God. I would eliminate all the qualifications he attaches to the medieval part of his project by committing to a more full-blooded development of the approaches he explores in the latter half of his paper. Kepnes moves into this less austere territory in the belief that the key questions “is there an afterlife, why do the innocent suffer and the wicked prosper...finally have answers.” I am less convinced. Rather, this literature, even if not in the business of trying to give us these answers, directs us to consider important ideas regarding a realm of transcendence and value that take us beyond our own self-obsessed nature in order to achieve precisely what Kepnes wants: “to make use of...personal and embodied images to help us imagine God, to contemplate God’s powers,” and, I would add, other matters of significance.

On my view, while the aesthetic portrayal does not teach us literal truths about God beyond that of his transcendence, it can nonetheless do something of great import. Some might question whether or not we are to call this theology, and here I have barely begun developing the

¹⁵ Eliezer Berkovits, *God, Man, and History* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2004), 48.

¹⁶ That such harmony is an eschatological ideal in Judaism is also worthy of note, indicating that it could be beyond our this-worldly endeavors.

aesthetic approach. We will require a far more detailed account of precisely how we would cash out the full implications of taking this path and the role that our picture of God plays in it. But Judaism has a long track record on this front, with midrash having raised and ruminated upon these issues in literary fashion for centuries, if not millennia. The suggestion is that we could do worse than turn our attention to developing this approach using contemporary philosophical tools in order to develop a way of speaking about God that allows us to talk about a Being about whom we cannot literally know very much, but who can nonetheless profoundly affect our lives.