Deities and Categories

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Abstract

Implicit in the Hebrew Bible is the proposition that Western philosophy's world-rationalising resources are short a category. This is the category of ones – non-general individuals whose identity is secure apart from such wider wholes as they are/might be associated with. Since the Bible's thinkers classify men and women as ones, their view would therefore be that Western philosophy cannot deal effectively with the human condition. This is the ultimate meaning of the injunction to each of us not to accept the other gods (who do not belong to the category) before God (who does). In these pages, I set out and defend the Bible's implied critique of Western philosophy. By examining the positions of several leading philosophers of our time, I explain why philosophical analysis of the specific sort that traces back to God-less Greece is, as the Bible maintains, out of synchrony with human reality.

Keywords


1 Jerusalem versus Athens

A category of being is missing from the style of reflective thought that we know as ‘Western philosophy.' The no less distinctive style associated with Western religion makes good the omission. In the [Hebrew] Bible, the personal deity called ‘God’ is the vehicle of the category's presentation to the world.

No one needs to be told that the Jerusalemite thinkers oppose the pagan cultures in whose Greek variant philosophy took shape. ‘I am the Lord your [g]od,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me' (Exodus 20:2–3, Deuteronomy 5:6–7). But even experts on the Bible do not recognize that this axiom of the Jerusalemitic charter document advances a philosophical point against those cultures. Not to accept the god of Abraham is to leave out the category. The omission has more profound effects than the misdirection of worship. Each person’s understanding of themselves and of each other person is a casualty.

2 Finding the Philosophy

‘Why,’ the reader will ask, ‘would the presentation of a category of being be packaged as a story of the formative travails of the Israelite nation?’

The Bible, in its earliest form, was produced to meet the threat that the Babylonian conquest of the Kingdom of Judah in the early decades of the 6th century BCE posed to national survival. Since its construction nearly four hundred years earlier, Solomon’s Temple had been the center of communal life. The structure now in ruins, the society’s leading members weeping by Babylon’s waters, an even dozen would in a generation or two have been made of the ten lost tribes had despondency turned to resignation. Under the circumstances, a book, both portable and reproducible, was an excellent choice for counteracting the otherwise inevitable effects of dispersion.

The compelling situational reason for a providential tale of Israelite servitude and liberation to dominate the Bible is however consistent with the axiom’s having no special connection to current events. Indeed, the non-situational message can be expressed in exactly the same terms. The truth associated with God liberates from a false way of thinking. Wherever their circumstances, men and women who hold the truth firm are out of the house of slavery. The message remains a live one. The God-less way, in the form of various stripes of naturalism, exercises a standing attraction.

That the philosophical message is conveyed by the story of the exodus does not mean that the philosophy is exposed in the story. In fact, though, it is. What God says about himself to Moses applies to a lot of the exposition. ‘[Y]ou shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen’ (Exodus 33:23). What are the

1 With one exception, in quoting from the Bible I draw upon the New Revised Standard Version [NRSV].
2 In written Hebrew, all letters are in the same case. The NRSV has (upper case) ‘God’ in Exodus 20:2 and Deuteronomy 5:6. But the word in these occurrences is a common noun. ‘Amun-Ra is a god; God, too, is a god.’
plagues of Egypt if not object lessons in what it means to place the other gods first? That the Israelites are unscathed dramatizes God's being their truth. The exposition isn't all oblique, however. God's 'I AM' (Exodus 3:14) in answer to Moses's question 'What is [your] name?' (Exodus 3:13) expresses the philosophy's essence unvarnished.

Although the story that begins with God's call to Abraham and ends with Moses's death takes up the bulk of the Torah, there is also the part that describes the creation and the part that tracks the early career of those to whom we trace back. Here, the critique of philosophy is set out. The centrality of the national narrative, taken non-philosophically, might again explain why the opening is so widely put to the side as scene-setting. But since even Jewish thinkers of a philosophical cast, Maimonides prominent among them, don't see the philosophy there, a deeper explanation is needed.

Jerusalemite reaction is not to Greek culture itself. It's true that Zeus corresponds to Babylonian Marduk and to Egyptian Amun-Ra. 'Have no other gods before God' therefore extends to the Greek system of gods. But the Jerusalemites never had access to the distinctively philosophical development of paganism. As a result, getting at the dialectical relations between Jerusalem and Athens requires translating the pagan mythos into logos. The Bible, as I read it, does the translating in its foundational part.

3 Cambridge and Chaldea

Here, in anecdotal form, is the contrast that is at the center of the present discussion. The protagonists of the two mini dramas are the Bible's Abraham (the verse is Genesis 12:1) and Bertrand Russell (Spadoni, p. 37).

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3 Heqet, the Egyptian fertility god, is sometimes portrayed as a frog, and hence connects with the second plague. Heqet re-appears in the Greek pantheon as 'Hecate,' who associates with, among other things, witchcraft. Kek, the Egyptian deity of chaos, obscurity, darkness, has Greek correlates: Chaos, Erebus, Nyx.

4 Are Israelites invulnerable to flood, pestilence, etc.? They alone, however, have a way of making sense of the reversals that does not require putting themselves in the deity's bad books. The Book of Job defends the view that the afflictions that Job suffers needn't affect his self-regard.

5 If a book had been produced independently of geopolitics, the story of Israel in Egypt wouldn't have dominated it. Would such a book would have resembled Plato's Republic more than it resembles Homer's Odyssey? That doesn't follow. Plato's kind of reasoned give and take, normative for philosophical activity in the West, is a choice.
Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

One day Russell was walking along Trinity Lane having just bought a tin of tobacco. Suddenly, he threw the tin up in the air, and at the same time uttered the words 'Great God in boots! – the ontological argument is sound!'

Did Russell fall to his knees before the tin landed? We'll never know. By contrast, Abram's response, which brings about the change of his name to the God-associated 'Abraham,' is recorded. '[He] went as the Lord had told him' (4).

Structurally, what is presented in the Bible as God's revelation to Abraham is similar to what appears in the anecdote as Russell's revelation about God. Abraham, reflecting on his experience, comes to realize that the way of thinking into which he was acculturated is insensitive to how some things are. It's not that there are things in heaven and in earth that are undreamt of in the philosophy of his county and of his kindred and of his father's house. Rather, some among the things of which this philosophy is obliged to make sense are miscategorized. As to why Abraham's gaining of the insight should be packaged in the form of a communication from God, I'll fill out the answer as we proceed.

Russell too comes to appreciate that there is more to reality than he had believed prior to his visit to the tobacconist. The thitherto missed thing, he comes to appreciate, is implicit in the mode of thinking itself. He appeals to nothing other than the forms of the mode. In this regard, his case differs from Abraham's.

Russell underwent a reconversion. The change of mind concerns the ontological argument's soundness, not the way of thinking of its propounders. And on the way of thinking nothing gives a clearer window than the ontological argument.

To recapitulate: Both Abraham and Russell, reflecting on their ways of thinking, arrive at an ontological conclusion. Russell: something that he did not hitherto acknowledge is inseparable from his way of thinking. Abraham: there is more to things than his current way of thinking can accommodate.

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6 The conversion, if one occurred, didn't stick. Russell's lasting reputation is that of a crusading atheist. Oddly, he doesn't mention the ontological argument in his survey of the various pieces of reasoning for God in Why I am not a Christian.

7 Question: Why would a person make a sharp break with his current in response to a call from out of the blue? Answer: If, as I say, it's Abraham himself who comes up with the new understanding, then there is no gap between call and compliance. Question: If the ideas are Abraham's, why does he resist God later? Answer: Abraham adjusts his course of action ambulando, as would any rational person.
While Russell makes his discovery (and later backtracks) as a Western philosopher, Abraham's discovery, though he obviously would not have put it that way, is of a commodity that no philosophical pipe is capable of smoking.

4 The Essence

Philosophy as a practice I understand to be the reason-guided study of invariants of being and of knowing and of acting. The invariants are invariant in the strongest sense. A philosophical truth is true in every possible world. In this regard, the ontological argument is as pure an instance of philosophy as pure can be. It unfolds in terms of a pair of ideas without appealing to which we are hard-pressed to make sense of any subject-matter: the idea of a (general) property, captured by the capital ‘F’ of the quantificational form ‘F(x),’ and a (particular) instantiator of the property, captured by the ‘x.’ By contrast, Russell's position about numbers is based on, but goes beyond, the idea of a thing a's satisfying some F. It also makes use of the idea of a set, and hence is less pure.

Of interest to me here is the basis of the argument: the duality of property and instance. The biblical way of thinking calls into question the Greek understanding of the duality. Specifically, it targets the understanding of the value of the variable x – the something that has the property. The problem that the biblical thinkers identify is that the something is given no autonomy of the property. Sheer ‘this-ness’ apart, its character is exhausted by the property.

To illustrate the ongoing influence of the Greek understanding on philosophers in this matter, I shall describe a dispute between the two leading analytic philosophers of the preceding generation, W. V. Quine and P. F. Strawson. Revealingly for our topic, what looks initially like deep disagreement about the duality turns out to be something less deep.

5 Properties and Instances: A Modern Dispute

Quine's abiding concern is with logical streamlining. The idea is to eliminate unstructured singular terms in favor of quantifiers and bound variables, thereby achieving great notational economy. The feat is accomplished

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8 With the addition of the idea of ‘more,’ the assertion that an x that is more F than any y ≠ x, which is a wheel in the ontological argument's clockwork, is itself specifiable in these purely logical terms. I'll just note that mereology's part/whole pair does seem to be less mysterious from a metaphysical viewpoint than property-instance, since a part and the whole of which it is a part are of the same type.

9 Quine's position is set out in Word and Object; Strawson's, in ‘Singular Terms and Predication.’
ingeniously. Names are turned into predicates. The ordinary language proper name ‘Socrates’ emerges from the streamlining lathe as ‘the Socratizer,’ ‘Socratizer’ being a predicative agglomeration of the characteristics appealed to in (effectively) picking the person out: snub-nosedness, baldness, loquacity, and so forth. The singular character of the name survives – in the bound variable. It’s therefore not quite true to say that the bound variable replaces the singular term. Rather, the bound variable is the only non-general element that remains.

On the side of descriptive content, Quine’s logic has only general terms. Non-general terms survive the program of regimentation into canonical notation as (bound) variables of quantification. These have no descriptive content. It’s not ‘Socrates is bald.’ It’s ‘It to which “snub-nosed,” “talkative,” etc. apply, also satisfies “bald.”’ Or, without the mentions: ‘It that is snub-nosed, talkative, etc. is also, on the head, hairless.’

Suppose that ‘Socrates is bald’ is truly asserted. The singular term ‘Socrates’ picks out the thing that the assertion is about. ‘Bald’ applies to that thing. Handling the terms uniformly, could we not say that ‘Socrates’ applies to the thing and that ‘bald’ applies to it too, or, equivalently, that both terms are true of the thing? Assume that the assertion is true. It’s true, if so, that the thing is Socrates; true, too, that the thing lacks hair. Why then say of ‘Socrates’ that it refers, and say, differentially say, of ‘bald’ that it applies? Quine maintains that we should say the same of both. His program thus collapses referring into applying All descriptive terms, including the singular ones, are applicers.

Strawson, by direct contrast, holds that there is a distinction in the difference. A name like ‘Socrates’ has more to it than is captured by ‘Socratizer.’ It serves a purpose that ‘Socratizer’ obscures – a purpose that must be served. The use of ‘bald’ says something about. It does not identify. On Quine’s regimentation, ‘Socrates’ too says something about. ‘Socratizes’ is what it says about. So if we take Quine’s regimentation as more than merely the implementation of a notational preference, the identifying function gets eliminated. We say all manner of things about. But what we say these things about is fugitive. Discourse hovers above its subject matter.

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10 A variable corresponds to a pronoun of ordinary language. A variable is said to be ‘bound’ when it is tied to a specific value or range of values in the relevant area of discourse.

11 Why ‘must’? In order for discourse to be possible. I’ll return to this.

12 At one point, Strawson (p. 403) states that Quine’s flattening is only in aid of notational streamlining. ‘Quine does not claim that the sentences which replace those containing definite singular terms have the same meaning as the latter (182). Nor, presumably, would he claim that they would normally serve exactly the same purpose …’
6 Metaphysical Implications?

Strawson’s criticism is persuasive. But does the point about the irreducibility of the identificatory function tell us something about the world or does it (only) tell us something about discourse? Even if the identificatory function has got to be served, and even if its service requires spatio-temporal things, it doesn’t follow that the latter cannot be characterized metaphysically in terms of the application function. After all, the things brought into discourse by being identified are not brought into existence thereby.

In Part II of ‘Singular Terms and Predication’ Strawson argues that predicate position is accessible to quantification. For Hamlet, To be or not to be. For Quine, To be is to be the value of a variable. One who quantifies over predicates therefore commits themselves to the existence of general things such as redness and honesty. Quine, as all analytic philosophers know, spent a career arguing against allowing quantifiers access to predicate position. Whatever its effects on Quine’s ontology, Strawson’s argument boomerangs. It shows that the kinds that are in Strawson’s view basic to discourse can be characterized fully in terms of the application function. This, on my reconstruction, is exactly what Quine maintains in turning ‘Socrates’ into ‘the Socratizer’.

Behind Strawson’s argument is a general point that Leibniz (‘Preface to an Edition by Nizolius,’ in Loemker, p. 126) states thus: ‘modes can be repeated to infinity[,] there are qualities of qualities.’ If I assert that the colour of a red apple is glossy, I am ascribing a quality, glossiness, to a quality, redness, to which I am referring. ‘Glossy’ applies to the colour red. But doesn’t ‘red’ apply too – to the apple?

When I assert ‘The red is glossy’ of a glossy red apple in the fruit bowl, I am making reference to the same something that, when I assert ‘The apple is red,’ is introduced into discourse by a term in predicate position. The ‘red’ that functions ascriptively in ‘The apple is red’ is the same ‘red’ that appears referentially in ‘The red is glossy.’

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13 Two additional views of Quine’s operative here are the view that science is the best thing going in world-description, and the view that the identity of properties as objects of reference is intrinsically obscure.

14 Strawson gives this example of a property to a property (= a quality of a quality). ‘Prettiness is a property desirable in a date.’

15 It applies to the colour red that I am looking at, not to the colour generally. ‘Red is glossy,’ stated of the colour, is false.

16 If morphological changes occur, that can be put down to syntax. When an active form like ‘Peter criticizes Willard’ is converted to the passive, ‘Willard is criticized by Peter,’ ‘Peter’ in Latin changes from nominative to accusative form. But the two sentences are identical in meaning.
Quine treads on, is borne by a term that is predicative. That apples are basic spatio-temporal objects doesn’t imply that the same isn’t true of ‘apple.’ Does this mean that the identifying function isn’t important? It doesn’t. It means that the function doesn’t have any significance to the nature of the world apart from being a function that is sometimes fulfilled in the world.

Leibniz was quoted to state that, in effect, there can be qualities of qualities of qualities and so on. In my example, we have a ladder of three terms:

- glossy
- red
- apple

‘Glossy’ expresses a quality of the quality that ‘red’ expresses. We classify the upper levels as levels of qualities. Why not classify the lowest level in the same way? The fact that we think of apples as non-qualities could be a function of ‘apple’ being for us on a lower rung of the ladder (of qualities) than the others, rather than its being on the lowest rung. Imagine a being whose world is a (two-dimensional) surface. This being could be imagined using ‘red’ as a noun, as we use ‘apple.’

In ‘Particular and General,’ another examination of the distinction between general and non-general, the metaphysical emptiness of Strawson’s idea of identification comes over even more clearly. Here Strawson maintains that there a style of factual discourse, feature-placing, in which what ascriptive terms express is directly located without their being used ascriptively. I can speak of water being here rather than of there being a lake here, a glassful of the liquid, etc. I can speak of [the colour] red being there, without referring to the apple of that colour.

From a metaphysical point of view, Strawson’s view, we see, is wholly Platonic. His stated position, characterized as a piece of ‘descriptive metaphysics,’ is that (three-dimensional) spatio-temporal objects are basic to factual discourse. This misleads in two ways. One: Features are more quality-like than qualified-object-like. They are not basic particulars in Strawson’s sense. Yet he advances feature-placing assertions as analysantia to standard ascriptive forms as analysanda. Two: Strawson’s position reads conditions on reality out of conditions on discourse. His important book Individuals is subtitled ‘An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics.’ In fact, Strawson is exploring invariant features of linguistically packaged factual information. This is a perfectly legitimate philosophical enterprise. Metaphysics, descriptive or otherwise, it is not. Strawson

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17 Glouberman, 1979 develops these ideas.
is not extending the project of categorial analysis that Aristotle's pursues in Metaphysics z (1028a10–15):

There are several senses in which a thing may be said to be [...] in one sense it means what a thing is or a ‘this,’ and in another sense it means that a thing is of a certain quality or quantity or has some such predicate asserted of it. While ‘being’ has all these senses, obviously that which is primarily is the ‘what,’ which indicates the substance of the thing.

My claim that Strawson’s position, metaphysically, is entirely Platonic can now be spelled out in a few letters.

At the heart of Plato’s metaphysics are two things, and two things only: the Forms, and the Receptable. The Forms are the general features; the Receptable is the spatio-temporal whole, hence the basis of particularity. This means that application is the basic relation of the general to the particular. If we read ontology into Quine’s program of regimentation, this is what it comes to.

7 Back to the Bible

Let’s now plug these matters of logic and ontology into the Bible’s critique of paganism. My large claim is that the critique reveals the limitation of the pagan understanding of things, and liberates the constituents of the compartment of being to which each one of us persons belongs from servitude to a metaphysical view of the Platonic type.

Observe that the axiom of the biblical view does not state the categorical: ‘have no other gods.’ The injunction is modified with a prepositional phrase: ‘have no other gods before God.’ It’s this that is proclaimed to the referents of the (singular) pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your.’ The referents are individual persons.

In the account of the creation in Genesis 1, heavenly bodies and bodies of water and non-human animals are spoken of. But the axiom is not applied to these things. This isn’t because stars and lakes and foxes lack the capacity to understand. It’s because what the axiom says doesn’t apply to them. If words of the sort that the Bible directs to persons were directed to stars, lakes, and foxes, the words would state the negation of ‘I am the Lord your god.’ ‘I am not your god. The other gods are your gods. Have no other before them.’ Which is

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18 Plato speaks not of the Forms applying. He says of the Form of the table that it is reflected in space and time. A Form has generality. It can have many reflections. That is to say: ‘table’ can apply to many things; there can be many instances of tablehood.
exactly what, in the beginning of the Bible, we who can understand the verses are told. The other gods are the gods of the heavenly bodies, of the bodies of water, of the beasts.  

This talk of gods is talk of the principles underlying things and their modes of operation. The contention is that persons, men and women, have a different underlying principle of being than do (merely) physical things. Among creatures known to us, only persons belong to the category omitted from pagan thinking. To them, and to them alone among creatures, God's 'I am your god' applies.

Scholars have observed the first chapter of Genesis (G1) echoes the Babylonian myth Enuma Elish. 'The numerous points of contact between [the Babylonian Creation Epic] and the opening section of Genesis have long been noted' (Speiser, p. 9). 'The Primeval History is largely Mesopotamian in substance' (ibid.) Had Hesiod's Theogony been available to the thinkers behind the text, the chapter could easily have echoed it. One striking difference between the biblical story and the pagan ones is that the former de-mythologizes. The earliest phases of the physical creation are described by extending processes familiar from our everyday interactions with things to the cosmic level: separating, congealing, extruding, hammering out, placing, etc. But the thinkers behind the Bible accept the pagan creation accounts so far as the extra-human realm goes. The biblical account, that is to say, echoes the pagan creation stories not by way of deconstructing them, let alone in order to mock those who accept them, but, as the de-mythologizing shows, to improve on them consistently with their underlying character.

This means that the structure of the world whose creation G1 describes is captured by a metaphysical position of Plato's sort. The gods who preside over the world of G1 express the principles that govern its objects and their behaviour, just as the Forms do: Zeus and uranological things and happenings;

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19 The Bible's poking fun at those who bow down to idols is a cheap shot. The real point is that pagan modes of worship are a mistake because the (merely) physical is alien to the basic nature of the worshippers.

20 I did not say that God's 'I am your god' applies to humankind of Genesis 1's story. Humankind, for all its difference, is another species among the many species. The distinction between humankind and particular men and particular women corresponds to the distinction between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2. The new category first appears in Genesis 2. More on this presently. See in particular footnote 22.

21 Observe that the coupling of Ouranos with Gaia in Theogony parallels the mating of Tiamut with Abzu in Enuma Elish.
Poseidon and marine occurrences; Hades and the subterranean. It’s these gods who emerge, de-mythologized, as Platonic Forms.

The Bible’s irreducible difference comes first to expression in the second chapter of Genesis (G2), in the description of the emergence of persons. Here, the other gods, who preside over the world of the first chapter (G1), fall short. The principle of which God is (so to speak) the embodiment is brought into play.

In the narrative (2:7), God is described as breathing his breath of life into a parcel of matter. Not a [indefinite article] breath of life. Not the [definite article] breath of life. His [singular personal pronoun] breath of life. Something of God is inserted into a part of the physical world. Observe that that part does not reflect God, as, from the Platonic viewpoint, a table reflects the Form of Table.

In Michelangelo’s rendering of the Bible’s description, the two fingers – God’s, Adam’s – are two fingers. The human one is not an instance of a higher digitkind. God, in G1, is said to hover over the creation. ‘[T]he spirit of God [is] hovering over the waters’ (2).

In G2, he is down among us.

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22 ‘[I]n [God’s] image, according to [God’s] likeness’ is used in the creation narrative to describe the link between humankind and God. But (a) this is in G1 (it’s from verse 26); and (b) it’s humankind that is in the image and like, not a particular person. Running G1 and G2 together is one of the original sins of Bible scholarship. Speiser is a sinner here. ‘The Babylonian creation story features a succession of various rival deities. The biblical version … is dominated by the monotheistic concept …’ (p. 11). It’s only in G2 (and in its sequel) that monotheism plays a role. Speiser’s kind of position on G1 and G2 is almost universally held. Two examples (from both of which I’ve learned a lot) are Friedman and Sacks.

23 In the original: God’s breath is breath; the same as the man’s breath. Not the same sort of thing. The selfsame thing.

24 This is the Complete Jewish Bible (CJB) rendering.
In a dramatized form, the Bible gives us here the thitherto omitted category. Just above, I used the phrase ‘the emergence of persons’ in reference to G2. The plural, ‘persons,’ is not correct. In G2, we have the emergence of a person, the first of a series of single persons at whose end each of us (temporarily) finds themself. Each person has God’s one-ness. This one-ness is not a general characteristic. There is therefore nothing of the kind among Plato’s Forms. All we have up there is perhaps the Form of the unitary. Unitariness is a general thing. One-ness isn’t.25

In formulating these ideas, I’m sticking to the direction of the presentation in the Bible. Perspicuity requires a reversal of direction. God is portrayed as God is portrayed in the Bible because whichever person first had these thoughts – we can name him ‘Abraham’ – recognized the inadequacy of the pagan way of thinking of his home and native land; inadequacy about persons; inadequacy about the individual person; inadequacy about themself. ‘The other gods are not enough. Each of us needs a new god. Each of us needs God.’

God, it is said in the Bible, called to Abraham. God spoke to him. This is a version of God’s act of artificial respiration on the first man. Abraham, in turn, speaks God’s name to the world. He breathes the new truth to the world. It is written (Genesis 22:33): ‘Abraham planted a tamarisk in Beer-Sheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God.’ It’s better to render this as ‘Abraham called with the name of the Lord.’ That’s his mission, to alert those who will listen to his new way. Why a name? He’s advancing the new category. What could be more everlasting than a category, whether it’s recognized or not?

Moses, who picks up from Abraham, inquired about God’s identity. Again, it’s an exercise in categorization. Moses asked for God’s name. ‘I am,’ answered God. The name cannot be treated à la Quine – turned into a predicate. God is an ‘I.’

Recall Russell and the ontological argument What the argument’s defenders purport it to establish is that an instance of the predicate ‘than which there is no greater’ cannot fail to have an instance. Any world meeting the specifications will have an instance. It’s an invariant of being, relative to the specification. And the specification is pure logic. With this clear, we can now identify the Bible’s change.

Even if the ontological argument were sound, it wouldn’t establish God’s (that is, the biblical god’s) existence. Established would be that there exists,

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25 In scholastic philosophy, ‘unum’ is characterized as a ‘transcendental term.’ Transcendental terms are terms that apply, or can apply, to anything. The Bible’s ‘one’ only applies to persons.
because there must exist, some x to which ‘greatest of all’ applies. Could there be two? There could not. The uniqueness follows from what is ascribed to or said of, in the way that maleness follows from the true ascription of bachelorhood.

On this the Bible differs fundamentally when it asserts that God is one. To tell whether some object is greatest, it would have to be checked against other contenders, or, alternatively, some suitable implication of ‘greatest’ would have to be found that rules out an equal. But God’s one-ness is not uniqueness in the numerical sense. If it’s God, it’s a one. This is the view in the Bible. And the statement is more an identity statement than an inference. In any case, the Bible, for two reasons, doesn’t hold that God is the only god. One: Other gods are acknowledged, other principles of reality. Two: It isn’t even necessary (though I shall not argue it here) that the distinctively biblical pantheon contain numerically one deity. The Bible’s point is that some things (in the world) are ‘ones,’ as God is a one. These things do not fall under ‘one.’ That – ‘fall under “one”’ – anyway doesn’t make sense. These things are integral beings. This is the newly recognized category, the category of the one. God is its emblem. By contrast with a Platonic Form, God is not however a predicate in disguise, or a hypostatization of what a predicate expresses. God is a particular thing, whose being is the being of a one. ‘God’ cannot be turned into ‘Godizer,’ as ‘Socrates’ can, according to the philosophers, into ‘Socratizer.’

The point is that the Bible’s God is a constituent of reality that is not at base an x that satisfies various determinations. God is a one that satisfies various determinations. One-ness isn’t one of these determinations.

Russell blurted out ‘Great God in Boots.’ Fortuitously, or, if you like, providentially, the phrase Russell uses in expressing astonishment connects to the substance of my discussion. The god of Russell’s ontological argument has no boots. That god, unlike God of G2, does not come down to earth. In G3, which continues G2, God, we’re told, is ‘walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze’ (8). We’re not told whether he’s got boots on. But he could have.

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26 ‘x is greatest’ is to be understood here as ‘x is greater than any y ≠ x.’ If it is understood as ‘x than which no y ≠ x is greater,’ there could be any number of greatest things.

27 The Bible does stress that God has no competitors. But this means that the ‘other gods’ are not competitors. It does not mean that there cannot be another deity like God. It does so because the difference with pagan pantheons would be smudged if it didn’t, and the members of its audience do not have theology degrees.
8 Among Persons

How are persons, you and he and she and I, not just instances of properties? How is our being, our ‘I am,’ different?

I mentioned Leibniz. Famously, Leibniz subscribes to the principle of the identity of indistinguishables. If a ≠ b, there must be some predicate F which applies to a but not to b. (‘Distinguishable,’ as this indicates, means ‘distinguishability in properties.’) Kant denies this, and most of us are of his view. Two objects can have all their characteristic in common but be found at different locations in space and/or time. Any number of things, we would say, a set of cue balls in snooker, can in principle share a set of characteristics. But Leibniz has a point. Consider this experiment. Although a ≠ b, the two are indistinguishable as to properties. Can you distinguish a situation in which at time t₁ a is in place p₁ and b is in p₂, and the situation in which at time t₁ a is in p₂, and b is in p₁? It’s not just that they are indistinguishable. It’s that the difference makes no difference. a and b are, we can say, fungible. But suppose now that a is a person, and b another person. Here, the substitution does make a difference. Metaphysically, there is more to persons than can be captured by variables and general terms. If you still feel there is no difference, add this to the scenario. You love a, while, prior to the switch, b you’ve never laid eyes on. Unlike the previous case, if the difference makes no difference to you, you are being duped. Persons are non-fungible. As is stated (about God) in The Cloud of Unknowing. ‘By love He may be gotten and holden; but by thought never.’

When God creates the woman, Adam reacts (in the NRSV) thus: ‘this one shall be called Woman’ (Genesis 2:23). This one. Not this x which has one-ness.

In Individuals Strawson discusses persons, assigning them to a distinct class. It looks from a distance like a movement towards Sinai. But then we find that persons are distinguished from other things by listing predicative determinations (‘P-predicates’) that apply exclusively to them. ‘So close,’ one might sigh, casting a glance at Strawson’s opposition to Quine, ‘and yet so far.’

Consider this claim of Strawson’s (‘Particular and General,’ p. 241). ‘The idea of an individual is the idea of an individual instance of something general. There is no such thing as a pure particular.’ Not to be a pure particular isn’t necessarily to be an individual instance of something general.

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28 Consider this claim of Strawson’s (‘Particular and General,’ p. 241). ‘The idea of an individual is the idea of an individual instance of something general. There is no such thing as a pure particular.’ Not to be a pure particular isn’t necessarily to be an individual instance of something general.
9 A Final Comment about Philosophy

Talk of (other) gods is, I said, talk of general principles governing/applying to the being and behaviour of non-persons. Talk of God is talk of the principle governing persons. This, the principle of one-ness, is ineluctably non-general.

Here we have Bernard Williams, gushing over a complaint about philosophy. ‘Philosophers,’ Williams states (Smart/Williams, p. 118)

urge us to view the world sub specie aeternitatis, but for most human purposes that is not a good species to view it under.

Williams, being as he is of the Greek philosophical tradition, should reject the complaint as ill-informed. From the standpoint of that tradition, to say that the human purposes that Williams has in mind are scanted is like complaining that for all their expertise about multiplication, the mathematicians don’t help us multiply the bottom line in our bank accounts. Might as well complain that when Quine tells us to mind our Ps and Qs he does not speak in the mode of Emily Post or of Miss Manners. Philosophy as constituted in Greece is not what it isn’t. It deals with the relations between the Fs of ‘F(x).’ These are of a logical sort: entailment, compatibility, compossibility, mutual exclusion, and so forth. The truths asserted (if any are) are necessary truths. The implications for what goes on among the F-things are conditional: if an a is F1, then it’s got to be (can’t be, could be) F2, etc.

Williams complaint has the look of what is called in German Nestbeschmutzung.29 But the thinkers of the Bible can legitimately complain about philosophy; and, implicitly, they do. They recognize a category that philosophy doesn’t recognize. The relations between the ones: how men and women are to live their lives, individually and together: is, legitimately, their topic.

The Bible is what it is not because its thinkers are interested in practical matters. It is what it is because they discovered a new category.

29 Williams's response to the complaint (see for example ‘Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline’) is perfectly Strawsonian. He distinguishes validatory reasoning that applies outside the realm of persons, from vindicatory reasoning that applies within. (We can call the former ‘P-reasoning.’) It never occurs to him, as it never occurs to Strawson, that maybe, underlying this, persons are categorically distinct.
Bio

Soon to complete a half century lashed to lectern and keyboard, Mark Glouberman has taught and researched through the span of years in many areas, geographical and thematic both. For two decades now, the Hebrew Scriptures have been the focus. The core and inspiration of the Bible is, Glouberman maintains, philosophical. The final installment in what Glouberman calls ‘The Bibleism Trilogy’ is *Persons and Other Things: Exploring the Philosophy of the Hebrew Bible*, University of Toronto Press 2021. Its predecessors are *The Raven, the Dove, and the Owl of Minerva: The Creation of Humankind in Athens and Jerusalem*, University of Toronto Press 2012, and “*I AM*: Monotheism and the Philosophy of the Bible*, University of Toronto Press 2019.

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