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Book Review: Referring To God: Jewish And Christian Philosophical And Theological Perspectives

Tim Bayne

cryptography, and archaeology, and are now being formalized by people in the intelligent design movement. Demski concludes his contribution, and the volume, by drawing on the work of biochemist Michael Behe to argue that acceptance of the possibility of design in natural systems will enrich science, not stifle it.

Referring to God: Jewish and Christian Philosophical and Theological Perspectives, (ed.) Paul Helm. St Martin's Press, 2000. ix + 175. $65.00

TIM BAYNE, Macquarie University.

Although both the title of this volume and its introduction suggest that its concern is with issues that lie at the intersection of philosophy of language and inter-religious dialogue, readers looking for sustained discussion of these topics will be disappointed. Four of the seven chapters are based on papers (and their commentaries) delivered at a conference on Christian and Jewish philosophy of religion, but forays into inter-religious dialogue are infrequent, and only one contribution - Joe Houston's "William Alston on Referring to God" - explicitly engages with the question of how reference to God is secured.

In fact, the papers included in this volume form a rather mixed bag. In "The Source and Destination of Thought" John Haldane presents an argument for God's existence based on concept-acquisition. Jerome Gellman has two papers in this collection. In "Identifying God in Experience: On Strawson, Sounds and God's Space" he responds to objections against experience-based arguments for God's existences by drawing on some ideas in Strawson's *Individuals*. In his second paper, "Judaic Perspectives on Petitionary Prayer" Gellman develops a model of petitionary prayer based on the idea of holding God to his promises. Eleonore Stump contrasts the theodicies of Aquinas and Saadia, a tenth century Jewish philosopher, in "The God of Abraham, Saadia and Aquinas," and in "Maimonides and Calvin on Accommodation" Paul Helm examines the different roles that Maimonides and Calvin assign to equivocation in their accounts of religious language.

Rather than attempt to say a bit about each paper, I will restrict my comments to two contributions: Haldane's "The Source and Destination of Thought" and Houston's "William Alston on Referring to God". Haldane develops a semantic version of the cosmological argument, what he calls the "Prime Thinker" argument. According to Haldane, neither of the two standard naturalistic accounts of concept-acquisition — abstractionism and innatism — are satisfactory. More promising is the Wittgensteinian view that concepts are acquired through the learning of general terms. But, says Haldane, this explanation generates a vicious regress: "The Wittgensteinian proposal that concepts are inculcated through membership of a linguistic community … is not itself ultimately explanatory because for any natural language user it requires us to postulate a prior one. This regress will be halted if there is an actualising source whose own

conceptual power is intrinsic; and, that of course is precisely what God is traditionally taken to be" (21).

The Prime Thinker argument is provocative, but I found Haldane's presentation of it rather wanting. There are at least three respects in which the argument seems seriously under-developed. First, Haldane says nothing about the fact that individuals and communities can develop novel concepts and words. On the face of it, this would seem to be explicit proof that one can acquire a new concept/word without being taught it. But perhaps this point misconstrues the heart of Haldane's dissatisfaction with naturalism. Perhaps his objection isn't that naturalism can't account for the unassisted acquisition of *new* concepts, but that it can't account for the unassisted acquisition of conceptual abilities *tout court* (22). But more needs to be said here, for its plausible to suppose that these two abilities are closely related. Second, Haldane says nothing about *how* God is meant to have actualized our conceptual powers. Presumably Haldane's account is meant to be inconsistent with evolutionary accounts of the genesis of language, but he doesn't directly engage with, or even mention, such accounts. Third, the argument assumes that God's conceptual powers are unproblematically intrinsic: unlike our powers, God's conceptual abilities can be actualized without the aid of another concept-using being. But what is the difference between God's conceptual powers and ours? Haldane leaves it completely mysterious why our conceptual powers must be actualised by another mind if God's conceptual powers needn't. There seems to be a decidedly large frog grinning up from the bottom of this beer mug.

Houston's paper is a detailed critique of Alston's paper "Referring to God".[1] In that paper, Alston develops a Kripkean account of reference to God, on which "God" enters a language as a name or label for the object of religious experience rather than by way of descriptive content. Once introduced into the language, other speakers use "God" intending to refer to whatever it was that those who introduced the word into the language intended to name. Alston acknowledges that theists normally take certain characteristics to be necessary for being God, but he denies that such characteristics play a role in determining the referent of "God."

Houston argues that Alston's attempt to downplay the importance of descriptive content in securing reference to God is unsuccessful. His objection centers on the problem of co-reference. Members of a religious community must have reason to think that the object of their perception is the very same object that prompted the introduction of "God" into their lexicon. Houston argues that this can happen only if the members of a theistic community can recognize God as God.

> How is this to happen? Alston skates over, slides past, that issue when he should not have done. He should not have done because recognition of God as God will seem to many of his readers most likely to be secured by the employment of uniquely specifying descriptions. If this is indeed how the essential recognition of God as God is supposed to happen, then descriptions specifying God will have to be developed, and must play a vital and recurring role in the life of Alston's theistic community. (47)

I think that Houston has identified an important problem for Alston's account of reference, but I don't think we need to look to *uniquely* identifying description in order to solve it. Clearly various perceivings need to have perceptual (representational) content in common in order for it to be reasonable to judge them as co-referential. But such representational content need not rise to the level of uniquely specifying descriptions. Suppose that you and I are hiking in the woods. I hear a strange birdcall, very low and staccato. But you're a few minutes behind me, and don't hear it. Later, I do a poor imitation of the birdcall, and ask you if you've ever heard it before. You say that it sounds very much like a bird you heard earlier in the day. We might suspect that we heard the same kind of bird (and perhaps the same actual bird). And this suspicion seems perfectly reasonable. Yet neither of us have provided anything approaching a uniquely specifying description of the referent of our experience. We've articulated a certain amount of the representational content of our respective experiences, and in our present context the amount of convergence of this perceptual content suffices to make an identification of our perceptual objects reasonable.

How much (agreement in) representational content must perceptions have in order for us to be justified in thinking that they are co-referential? A number of factors might be relevant here. For instance, if we think that there are very few bird species about with similar songs, then we will be inclined to demand rather little agreement in representational content before judging that we heard the same bird. On the other hand, if we think that the woods in which we're hiking are rich with similar sounding birds, then we might be inclined to demand a substantial amount of representational detail from our experiences before identifying their objects.

How does this bear on the theological issue? Well, it seems reasonable to hold that religious experiences must have *some* representational content in common before one will take them to be experiences of the same object, i.e., before one will be prepared to use the same proper name to describe their objects. But how *much* content must such experiences share? I'm not sure that there is any straightforward answer to this question. It seems to me that a community's beliefs about the possible causes of religious experiences are relevant here. If one thinks that there are many supernatural entities (not to mention naturalistic processes), each of which is capable of generating "religious experiences," then one might demand a high degree of specificity in content before judging that the object of one's experience is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If, on the other hand, one holds that religious experiences are only brought about by God, then one might be rather more willing to identify the referents of various religious experiences without detailed descriptive content. (Of course, one still needs sufficient content to class them as religious experiences). Although this line of thought fails to endorse the letter of Houston's position in that it rejects the needs for uniquely identifying content (is perceptual content ever *uniquely* identifying?), it does support the spirit of his position, which is to argue that Alston underplays the role of descriptive content with respect to issues of religious reference.

Alston argues that his direct reference approach to religious language has implications for inter-religious dialogue. In particular, he claims that it is conducive to inclusivist approaches in a way that descriptive accounts aren't.

> If one's referent in religious worship and discourse is determined by what one takes God to be like, then we, the Hindus, and the ancient Greeks and Romans cannot be credited with worshipping the same being. But if reference is determined rather by the real contacts from which a referential practice stems, then there may indeed be a common referent, in case these traditions, including their referential traditions, all stemmed from experiential contacts with the one God. (Alston, 1989: 115)

Houston is not convinced. He argues that in order for Christians, Jews and Moslems to belong to the one theistic tradition,

> ... there has to be recognition of God as God. And to secure recognition requires the recognizer be in possession of, i.e. to know of, individuating characteristics of God and to have descriptions at his disposal which provide specifying descriptiveness. So not only do definite descriptions return to the picture in an important role, but also, and as a result, seekers of inter-religious ecumenism will require to address questions about the appropriateness of particular definite descriptions to the God whom we in our community already (think we) know, and to the one encountered/perceived by some other person. Appealing to the primacy of direct reference will not exclude theological debate about what to say of God, from inter-religious rapprochement, or inter-denominational, inter-faction, coming together within a religion. (60)

I'm not sure how fair this is. Alston's position allows that the adherents of different faiths can disagree about God's properties, and even about which properties are necessary for being God. His central point is only that such disagreement does not impact on the question of whether the adherents of different faiths are talking about one and the same entity. But what about Houston's central point: that inter-religious dialogue can't escape the need for definite descriptions? One key issue here, not brought out by Houston's discussion, may be the extent to which the faiths in question are historically connected. Alston's picture of reference can downplay the importance of descriptive content when the religions in question are historically connected. Islam, Christianity and Judaism are, of course, historically connected: Muhammad and Jesus borrowed "God" from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But what about religions that aren't historically connected, where there are doubts for thinking that the various uses of "God" (and its cognates in other languages) are derived from a single baptismal ceremony? What should Alston say here? I think he would (or should) be willing to find a role for descriptive content in deciding whether or not these uses of "God" are co-referential.

NOTES

1.   Alston, 1989 "Referring to God," in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).