

TEXTUAL REASONING AS SOCIAL PERFORMANCE: MEETING OVER THE TEXT

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It is indeed an honor to be asked, as a Christian scholar, to respond – if only in a cursory and provisional way – to the phenomenon of Jewish Textual Reasoning (TR) and in particular to two of its central spokespersons and practitioners, Peter Ochs and Robert Gibbs. Having had the privilege over the last several years of witnessing some of the society’s activities (at annual meetings of the AAR/SBL, for example) and reading some of the exchanges between its members, I must confess to an ever-growing interest in and fascination with the practices and vision that constitute the Society for Textual Reasoning (STR). The mixture of curiosity and puzzlement with which I first encountered the group, but also the awkward feelings of embarrassment – akin to being caught in the act of reading surreptitiously ‘over the shoulder’ – soon gave way to gratitude, joy and profound appreciation. For what I discovered was a group of scholars engaged in a mode of argumentation that evoked and continues to evoke, at certain vital points, strong resonances with Christian reading habits. The question that most immediately arises, then,

is how might the work of Ochs and Gibbs, and that of TR in general, be situated in a larger context of correlative “postcritical” work in Christian theology? How is the work of TR similar to and different from postcritical Christian returns to scripture? What is it about TR that distinguishes it from other forms of scriptural reasoning? What are the strengths and weaknesses of TR? And what prospects does it open up for interchange across various textual/reading communities, religious and non-religious alike?

Let me begin by characterizing as best I can what I understand by TR. Robert Gibbs’ rich, supple and closely textured account is a useful but also a most difficult point of entry. Without mistake, Gibbs’ central motivating impulse is Levinasian, signaled perhaps most succinctly by the phrase “duty precedes reflection.” I am under command, and obey I must; only then do I think. But how is it that doing goes before hearing? Here the gap between Judaism and philosophy seems at its widest, yet paradoxically exactly because the remoteness of one to the other is so extreme does the opportunity for mutual disturbance, correction and enhancement become especially promising. Just when Jewish wisdom and philosophical reason appear to be completely out of reach of one another, inhabiting entirely independent orbits, do two pivotal points emerge to form the foci of what can become a common ellipse: the primacy of ethics and the irreducible sociality of human existence.

How, asks the philosopher, can there be a responsible, ethical acceptance of a command which precedes knowing what is commanded? Absent that, reason becomes naïveté at best and blind faith at worst. How can the declaration “duty precedes reflection” not but be an effrontery to philosophical reason? The answer from the Talmud – which is the answer from Exodus 24:7 (“we will do and we will hear”) – nevertheless opens up for reflection the possibility of a responsible, ethical acceptance which precedes knowing what is commanded. The wisdom of the sages comes to the philosopher as a reminder that the philosopher’s view itself presupposes a sovereign self, a self that not only stands independent of the past but free of all community. What better way can there be to speak of the excess of responsibility that marks the person as primordially social

than the notion of election, of being the chosen people? To speak of belonging to a people, of being chosen by God and not to choose God, is but another way of indicating how rationality and society might be co-originary. Indeed, the genius of the Jewish sages is precisely their discovery of how reasoning and responsibility emerge together.

It is not for me to rehearse Gibbs' lucid account of how Levinas's key concept of the Face – the face- to-face, the facing of the other person – illuminates the intrinsic sociality of human existence, except to offer a few remarks on the ethical character of that exchange. Encountering the other, experiencing the asymmetry and nonreciprocity of the face or proximity of the other, draws out of me a response. I am compelled to justify myself to the other, even though the other is not similarly responsible for or answerable to me. Speech, then, begins (and continues!) in this apologetic mood – which is but a reminder that the ethical purpose in speaking always takes precedence over the cognitive function of language. TR, in other words, names a mode of reasoning that suffers, that hurries to wait upon the other, that makes itself available to the other. TR is first and foremost a listening, a mode of attention – one that remains alert, attuned, constantly vigilant, in a posture of openness, risk, vulnerability. It represents a way of answering the other which does not distance, deface or cancel out the other in the name of reason, but rather affirms the other by reasoning responsively and responsibly – which is to say, *acknowledges* the other and invites the other to stand forth in all their un-subsumable particularity. Reasoning thusly amounts to adopting a posture that not only risks but actively invites displacement, rupture, destabilization. As Gibbs puts it, the type of reasoning that is TR profoundly puts in question the questioner herself. It “breaks up not only the façade of my thought, but the very project of thinking.” I cannot reason, I cannot be rational, without also and at the same time being put under question, without there also being “a questioning of me”. Indeed, “there is not only a questioning of me, but a questioning *in a language, coming from another person*, a unique

source of authority and questioning – and not a second thinking subject, not an alter ego, but an eruption of what exceeds thought.”¹

Indeed, the unrelenting claim that reason itself derives from ethics, from responsibility, can only appear as an aggravation, an impediment, if not an offense to a certain form of philosophical thought. For all that, Jewish wisdom does not cease offering itself as gift to philosophy, albeit a gift whose cure is curiously contained in its power to chastise, if not actually to wound philosophical reason. How can one describe the rupture and wounding of knowledge as a gift? Precisely as follows: in tendering reasons to the other, satisfying the other’s solicitation of me, reason is forced to concede its own ‘situatedness’ and the responsibilities that are indissociable from that situation. Shifting the “grounding of reason in reason, to interpreting it in relation to another person”² means that reason forever denies to itself an absolute self-grounding. What at first appears as an immeasurable loss is in actuality an infinite gain. Reason’s refusal of its own absolute self-grounding is not an abandonment of reason but rather its relocation vis-à-vis its inescapable pragmatic coordinates. Moreover, by calling into question reason understood as impersonal and imperial, TR refuses the sovereignty of the “I” as the exclusive locus of reasoning, registering instead the particular sociality of the reasoner’s reasoning. Speculation, after all, can never be justified as an end in itself, but always requires a justification in terms of intersubjective responsibility: “Reasoning is justified not for the sake of reason, but for the sake of responsibility, of practice.”³ As Gibbs’ fascinating reflection on b. Kiddushin 40b aptly shows, TR’s primary concern is always with answering the other; that is, the transformation of praxis and not the cognition of truth in the abstract. Truth is also a goal of TR, to be sure, but it is always a practical goal.

¹ Robert Gibbs, “Why Textual Reasoning?” *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 1, no. 1 (2002): 16-37, 17.

² Gibbs, 18.

³ Gibbs, 26.

The convergence and intersection of Jewish thinking and postmodern thought manifests itself in their joint declaration that the philosopher's reasoning be interrupted, that the totalizing, universalizing and imperialistic proclivities of reason be abandoned, and that philosophy transform itself into apology – ultimately, into commentary.⁴ Having been chastened by the incapacity of reason on its own to produce the absolute origins of knowledge and reality, reason is now enjoined to pursue its proper task: to apologize, to hold itself accountable, to justify its answer to another. But if philosophy has to undergo a 'turning' – or, more exactly, "re-turning", *teshuvah*, "repentance" by means of a re-orientation of phenomenology by ethics – so does Jewish thinking. It too must dare to make an ethical claim upon Jews in the name of philosophy and so revive the transcendent dimension of Judaism. Jewish thinking must continually attempt to translate its own conceptuality into the philosophical world in the hope that it can be received back again, sharpened, clarified, strengthened, and re-vitalized. For the philosopher's analyses may very well help fortify and clarify concepts intrinsic to Judaism, develop and extend lines of thought and practice from that tradition in increasingly fruitful and productive ways. Indeed, this is precisely Gibbs' contribution, his gift to us by offering a phenomenology chastened and corrected by ethics. Now that reason has been forced to abandon its pretensions to pure rational objectivity, it must re-orient itself around "intersubjective practices". In sum, Gibbs requires TR to find its measure in philosophical thought, its impetus from Jewish texts, and its confirmation in the social practices of both.

If "do first and think after" serves as the leading insight of Gibbs' program, then Ochs' work repeats the refrain but in a slightly different register and in reference to an alternate, but clearly compatible philosophical tradition: philosophical pragmatism. In C.S. Peirce's pragmatism Ochs claims to have discovered a reparative, dialogic mode of inquiry that not only makes visible patterns of intelligibility hidden in

⁴ Gibbs, 36.

reasoning, but also repairs its failures and corrects its errant tendencies. Peirce proposes a system of logical graphs diagramming the incompleteness of creatures and of words and their mutual needs. The insight is basic: individuals, like words, appear only by way of relations. People and words are both indefinite signs requiring other people/words to complete their identities/definitions. By displaying judgments, propositions and factual statements in terms of a triadic logic of relations rather than in the form of a dyadic, subject-predicate calculus, Peircean logic helpfully corrects and supplements a Cartesian-Kantian logic. The result is a 'third degree of clearness' that does justice to a concept's practical, communal effects. By attending to when, where, how and by whom a concept is received and deployed, Peircean logic exhibits the ways in which reasoning is necessarily correlative to the concrete practices that 'ground' its very operations.

To be sure, formal philosophical reasoning – even of a Peircean variety – is not identical with Jewish textual reasoning. For the former is "neither bound by texts nor generated by the reading of texts,"⁵ and it is texts, after all, rather than concepts that constitute the well-springs of Jewish reasoning. Because the categories of textual reasoning are prototypically rabbinic, it is therefore necessary to modulate Peirce's triadic logic with something like Max Kadushin's 'value concept' – a term coined to refer to "any of the units of meaning that integrate reason, communal tradition, and personal feelings."⁶ Building on Peirce's insight regarding reason's practical and social character, crucially modified by Kadushin and re-contextualized within the particular practices of the faith community, Ochs exploits further the augmented hermeneutical potential of Jewish textual reasoning. That is, he extends and deepens the theological implications of several key aspects of a pragmatic/sapiential rationality construed as a set of performative practices capable of both identifying

⁵ Peter Ochs, "Behind the Mechitsa: Reflections on the Rules of Textual Reasoning," *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 1, no. 1 (2002): 47-103, 49.

⁶ Ochs, 78.

and making explicit the rules by which a community reasons. The challenge, then, is to articulate those norms.

In Peirce's graphic world of logical relations, any indefinite term is complemented by some defining term and *is also a sign of the rule* that brings one term to the other. Since a pragmatic/textual form of reasoning is inescapably dialogic, it is impossible to provide any single, theoretical formulation of the rules or norms of textual reasoning in the abstract. For such norms and rules are embedded in the practices and performances that constitute textual reasoning and in the communities they serve – which means that they can be identified only on the occasion of attempting to repair failed practices. It is no surprise, then, that Ochs' interest is to trace the historical movement of STR with a view to reflecting on the rules of reasoning that Jewish textual reasoning has actually nurtured and tested throughout its relatively brief existence. This proceeds in three stages: collecting, choosing, and selecting.

In the first stage, actual interpretative practices (recurring patterns and rules of engagement) are identified, named and articulated with the goal, in the second stage, of choosing standards for selecting rules or adopting norms that in turn, in the third stage, shape and reconfigure the mission and vision of TR. The circular or spiral movement is clearly discernible: the community's vision and self-identity influences standards selected, which in turn determine the rules that will govern the particular domain, or set of domains, under consideration. The community's experience over time with these rules will lead it to reshape its vision of the domain and hence also its standards of textual reasoning. It is not surprising, then, that Ochs and Gibbs should find themselves converging, albeit from different angles of approach, on the central query thrown up for discussion in b. Kiddushin 40b: "is study greater or is practice greater?" But the distinctive character of Ochs' program vis-à-vis Gibbs – which is more a matter of emphasis and nuance than a difference in kind – is to focus on the emerging sense of identity and purpose of the STR and, specifically, to specify ways in which rule-making and rule-following are crucial to that identity and vocation.

The time has arrived, Ochs is convinced, for members of STR “to come to some communal agreement on what it means to perform textual reasoning.”⁷ Why might this be an especially good time? One immediate answer, according to Ochs, is that members of the society are already raising these questions, overtly or implicitly, about their own interpretive activities. They are reflecting “on the process and not just the issues – nurturing the *form* of text reasoning debate while the debate itself continu[es].”⁸ But perhaps a more telling reason is Ochs’ own commitment to the talmudic insight mentioned above: namely, that although doing clearly precedes reflection – “we do first and then we understand”, *naaseh v’nishmah*⁹ – the doing always finds itself in need of the type of adjustment, amendment or repair that reflection alone can provide. Moreover, doing and reflecting proceed concurrently – in several stages and on various levels. It is not as if one departs first before the other can get under way. Rather both advance together, according to their own individual paces, to be sure, and in keeping with their own specific rhythms, yet never entirely independently of the other. The fluctuations, interruptions and oscillations of this paired movement shapes the identity and self-understanding of the community of its practitioners.

Surely Ochs’ task is a daunting one, for the STR is a complex, highly differentiated community of scholars committed to diverse and sometime competing constituencies. In fact, Ochs identifies three very different but often overlapping communities that comprise STR: (1) multiple academic communities; (2) diverse everyday religious communities; and (3) a single albeit pluralistic community of textual reasoners.¹⁰ A distinctive (perhaps even unique) mediating role falls to this third community, poised as it is between Jewish academe and Jewish communal life. Drawing on both its academic commitments and its religious- communal ones, the STR is able to contribute an especially valuable gift; namely, “a new way of mediating

⁷ Ochs, 83.

⁸ Ochs, 56.

⁹ Ochs, 102.

¹⁰ Ochs, 55.

these two commitments: nurturing forms of rational criticism that could serve the indigenous values and hermeneutics of the religious communities and standards of witness and practical concern that may lend purpose to academic inquiry without threatening the discipline.”¹¹

While the practices of STR exhibit an unmistakable pragmatic dimension, it is also true that the ways in which these practical, concrete problems actually inform the scholarly work of textual reasoning and orient the work of the Jewish academe, remain unclear. Identifying the standards and rules of TR will greatly help. But the task is complex and multi-layered. For even should these standards and rules be successfully identified and described, it still leaves unanswered the question how might they be ordered and internally related. Are there local as well as universal standards for textual reasoning? Are these rules perduring or are they emergent and provisional, serving in a rather ad hoc fashion practices that are relatively transient? Are the rules finite in number? Do the rules admit of varying degrees of definiteness and indefiniteness? Are these rules and standards fully formalizable, or is there always a residual tacit dimension to them that eludes complete articulation? And if the latter, how should that be guarded, nurtured and respected? How might these rules and norms be deployed so as to discipline the practices of textual reasoning without policing them? These and similar issues Ochs broaches with an intellectual dexterity and sophistication, but also a reserve, that is at once compelling, gracious and charitable.

There is much in both Gibbs’ and Ochs’ accounts of TR that deserve comment but which, alas, I must pass over in silence – due in part to the restrictions of this essay but also to the limitations of my own abilities to do justice to the intricacies of their thought. Let me conclude, however, by making one general point about how the work of Gibbs and Ochs, and the STR generally, provide an especially helpful model for Christian post-critical returns to scripture. This will be followed by two further observations, one specific to Gibbs’ work and the other to Ochs’ program.

¹¹ Ochs, 56.

Textual reasoning, and the group of scholars that comprise the STR, model in wonderfully encouraging ways how Christian theologians and text scholars might collaborate in responding to the intellectual and religious crises of our time. Like our Jewish counterparts, Christians too find themselves in a world hopelessly bifurcated – culturally, intellectually, institutionally – but also frequently locked in battle between ancient, pre-critical modes of reading and reasoning and modern, philological and historical-critical modes. The search for a third paradigm that eschews reductionist or monological modalities of reasoning and textual appropriation of every kind is also a goal of postcritical Christian scriptural reasoning. Postcritical Christian theologians, too, are committed to searching out fruitful ways to nurture disciplines of reason that will do justice to the ontological and epistemological significance of categories of thinking indigenous to the Christian faith. For some time the discussion within Christian circles over the relative merits of adopting ‘confessional’ as opposed to ‘public’ approaches might well be constructively recast in the light of Jewish textual reasoning. In view of what I have witnessed in and understood from the STR, the question is not so much whether it is more faithful to respect the integrity of the scriptural text or allow extra-biblical or conceptual categories of thought and meaning to determine theological modes of reasoning. The more crucial move is *to reconceive the rules of reasoning* on which Christian theology is based as semiotic rather than as propositional or logocentric. Other areas of shared concern and potential mutual illumination between Jewish textual reasoning and post-critical Christian approaches to scripture are: (1) to revitalize the role of biblically based studies as sources of its own ethical reflection and self-understanding; (2) to develop and deepen, through the most sophisticated intellectual and academic methods of the day, something of the fundamental sociality of the church’s life and mission; and (3) to identify, articulate and understand more precisely the pragmatic stimuli and conditions of the theologian’s/text scholar’s own activity vis-à-vis the multiple communities that ‘ground’ that diverse intellectual work.

These last three points serve as a provocation to remark on the importance to postcritical Christian theology of one of Gibbs’ central

emphases: the elevation of praxis and the accent on social solidarity made possible by the kind of nontotalizing reasoning advocated by the STR. The sociality in view here is unambiguously Jewish as well as philosophical – which raises the question of *the kind of power* exhibited by Jewish textual reasoners. To be sure, it would be incorrect to claim that the Jewish tradition simply and consistently espouses powerlessness. Yet at the same time there is a sense in which the Jewish faith has developed a remarkable way of fostering forms of reasoning that make possible a society whose concentrations of power are rooted in institutions capable of standing without the support of the nation-state, and especially of a national army. Indeed, it seems to me that part of the genius of Judaism is precisely its ability to create and sustain an enduring society without a state. Whether or not there is intrinsic to Jewish self-understanding a preference for sociality in place of national politics is, of course, a matter of debate – sometimes contentious debate. Nevertheless, the sense of communal solidarity championed by practitioners of Jewish textual reasoning seems to be of the sort that would be, at best, uneasy with civil society and by Jewish assimilation into it. One might say that Judaism, more than Christianity, requires a particular community. But in light of present circumstances, could one not also say – and this is the point that Christian scriptural reasoners need to take seriously – that Christianity, too, requires a very peculiar community, with a concomitantly re-conceived understanding of power, if it is to exhibit forms of reasoning analogous to TR?

Perhaps part of a response is already to be found in Ochs' approach. Recall that Ochs begins with a careful, empirical investigation of the practices of Jewish textual reasoning, moves to a logical (but also a textual and theological) critique of the tensions and inner contradictions in previous practices of textual reasoning, and concludes with proposals for self-consciously refining the work of textual reasoning in the future. What is striking about Ochs' approach is the way in which the normative force of the rules and norms identified and promulgated act as a kind of "idealized empirical self-description" rather than as a finally agreed upon hermeneutic. Indeed, the very process by which rules are identified is

integrally linked to the character those rules will assume and what role they will play in subsequent reasoning practices – these, presumably, apply both to rules that are domain-dependent (applicable to particular domains of inquiry) and domain-independent (‘meta-rules’ applicable to the whole range of domains). “Depending upon the standards it has adopted, the community may decide to make its rules more or less clear-cut and highly directive or vague and open to various sorts of interpretation.”¹²

The generosity and open-endedness of this process is apparent. A readiness to risk being vulnerable, to concede its limitations and fallibility, to proceed in hope that despite failures and setbacks, an overall generativity and fecundity of the enterprise will prevail, constitute a crucial difference between Jewish textual reasoning and Christian scriptural reasoning. But this difference is not unrelated, I suspect, to the kind of power that has characteristically marked Jewish communal life and the kind of power that has typically been exhibited by Christian communities.

In an earlier work, Ochs has remarked about a notable difference he has observed between Jewish and Christian ‘hermeneuts’ – or, as they are latterly known, ‘textual reasoners.’

Among postcritical interpreters, I have found that the Christians are moved, more than the Jews, by the ideal of a single, authoritative hermeneutic in the study of which individual hermeneuts would differ only through a division of scholarly labor. . . . but their work appears to serve a single goal. The Jews, on the other hand, may find unity in the fact of a shared text, but are less inclined to seek (or at least to achieve!) agreement on preferred methods of interpreting it. Jewish postcritical interpretations may cohere dialectically, therefore, rather than through similitude.¹³

¹² Ochs, 85.

¹³ Ochs, “An Introduction to Postcritical Scriptural Interpretation,” in *The Return to Scripture in Judaism and Christianity: Essays in Postcritical Scripture Interpretation* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 46n. 11.

There is, in short, something rather fearless in Jewish textual reasoning that is not quite matched, at least at this juncture, in the practitioners of post-critical Christian scriptural reasoning. This raises the question whether or not more attention ought to be given to a consideration of an ethics of textual reasoning – not at the expense of its pragmatic dimension, but as a way of deepening and extending what is entailed in Kadushin's "value concept."

Significantly, Ochs calls our attention to the friendships, the genuine warmth and humor, the gentle feelings and intense passions that animate the life of Jewish textual reasoning. These are clearly not accidental features of the practices of textual reasoning or the rules that define them. But more needs to be said about how these dimensions of textual reasoning inform the rule-making and rule-following of the community. That said, it must also be remarked that significant overtures of scholarly collaboration are already underway, as witnessed in the activities of the NSSR: the National Society of Scriptural Reasoning. This group of Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars is currently engaged in a common enterprise of scriptural reasoning, a group whose activities include gestures of hospitality, friendship and humor. It is significant to note that this is a movement the impetus of which is largely the work of members of the Society of Textual Reasoning. The future of this joint venture remains to be seen. Early indications of its fruitfulness, however, are quite promising. This is definitely a sign of hope for postcritical Christian theology, not to mention for interreligious dialogue. Perhaps one should not be surprised at all this. For if we in fact have come together to meet over the text—in order to question not only why I/we should read this text, but why my interlocutor should—it is not because we do so in hopeful anticipation of reaching a consensus but because we are expectant of a super-abundant blessing that we can neither circumscribe nor contain.