

THE GROUND OF TEXTUAL REASONING: RESPONSE TO ROBERT GIBBS

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Robert Gibbs' "Why Textual Reasoning" offers an illuminating and refreshing statement on what textual reasoning is or could be. In my response I want to highlight both what I like about Bob's view and where I differ from it.

One of the things I like best about Bob's work in general, and this piece in particular, is its deep investment in overcoming dogmatism. It's an old story (but one all too recently re-enacted) that the fanatical religious voices are the loudest. Where in this post-September-11 time are the non-fanatical religious voices that call for self-critique, for humility, for listening? We must turn to our sacred texts in these times and we must feel confident in their ability to guide us away from fanaticism and towards community. Gibbs' work helps inspire confidence in our sources and is a valiant effort to show how our texts actively listen and self-divest.

Another thing I like about Gibbs' essay is his appreciation of reason as apology or perpetual risk. Asked if I'd side with Kierkegaard or Aquinas in a debate over the relation between faith and knowledge, I'd side with the Kierkegaard who argues that faith's true ally isn't rational certainty – but insecurity and risk. Still, while this Kierkegaard isn't like

the typical fideist, proud in his absolute assertions of faith, Kierkegaard's believer has little interest in philosophy and to me, it seems, he's the lesser for it. Of course, the only way to reconcile Kierkegaardian faith with reason is to appreciate how reason, as well as faith, is a never-ending exercise in risk and vulnerability. Gibbs' description of reason as the effort to offer reasons for another – his portrait of a reason always in doubt of itself – is a promising move in this direction.

Nevertheless, while I agree with both Gibbs' view of reason and of how we might use reasoning seen as being for-the-other to read texts, I still wonder whether his view of textual reasoning is too optimistic or too idyllic. Simply said, Gibbs thinks the rabbis are better listeners than I do. According to Gibbs, the rabbinic texts and the ongoing process of study are smooth and easy performances of giving the other person primacy. It seems that Gibbs' rabbis are happy to divest themselves of their own interests and offer justifying reasons only for the other and not for the sake of establishing their own positions. "The practice of [rabbinic] study itself is reading for the other person . . ." ¹ Contrary to Gibbs, it seems to me that the rabbis are quite concerned to assert and establish their own points of view—indeed, often concerned to the point of anxiety.

The work of Jewish feminists on the rabbis, especially Miriam Peskowitz's *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History*, has been instrumental in the development of my views on this issue.² Like Gibbs, Peskowitz maintains that rabbinic reasoning is social. However, unlike Gibbs, Peskowitz appreciates the role that desire plays in social relations. This desire is not a Levinasian desire for the infinite, as Gibbs focusses on in his work, but a desire for textual self-expression that always risks performing violence on the other. In numerous examples, Peskowitz highlights how anxious the rabbis are to assert their points of view and yet, despite their best efforts to show otherwise, how shaky their positions truly are. Peskowitz's analysis of how the rabbis in m. Ketubot 8:1 attempt

¹ Robert Gibbs, *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 1, no. 1 (2002): 16-37, 33.

² Miriam Peskowitz, *Spinning Fantasies: Rabbis, Gender and History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

to demonstrate the self-evidence of their claims concerning a husband's rights over his wife's property while they nonetheless, struggle to deal with and dismiss another rabbi's bothersome objection, offers a case in point. We must, Peskowitz exhorts, appreciate how the rabbis sought to assert their own positions and declare them self-evident if we are to be honest about our own efforts to do the same. Elsewhere I have argued that a truly philosophical hermeneutics demands a recognition of the role this all-too-human desire plays in the production of knowledge.³ Fanaticism can only be avoided if we are honest about the motives and interests that inform the production of knowledge. Otherwise we will never be able to identify our own motives and interests, and in the name of religious rationality will overestimate our ability to engage in acts of true listening and self-critique.

Additionally, Gibbs' underestimation of the role of desire in the production of knowledge also impacts on his understanding of how transcendence enters into rabbinic texts or conversations. Like David Novak, I believe that an awareness of transcendence requires an awareness of my desire for transcendence. This transcendence must always be a transcendent God, since only a transcendent God can be the condition of the possibility for the type of community that Gibbs claims can be created through his account of reasoning.⁴ Gibbs' rabbis have divested themselves of their own desires and glimpse transcendence in the face of the other to whom they are fully committed. I would like to believe that Gibbs is right, that conversations and in particular, textual conversations, offer opportunities for responsibility, reason and faith. And I am a member of TR because reading Jewish texts and appreciating their finite and flawed efforts at expressing divinity offers endless reminders and in fact, the imperative to recognize our own equally flawed efforts. But I remain skeptical of models that neglect the realities of human social

³ See my "Re-Admitting Philosophy into Contemporary Jewish Thought: An Encounter between Jewish Feminism and Exegetical Jewish Thought," in *On Being Human: Women in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).

⁴ See David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

interaction; for these reasons, I remain committed to carving out theological pictures that begin at a different ground zero.