Descriptive Varieties of Philosophical Commentary

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the author argues that philosophical criticism as a form of biblical criticism can supplement literary-historical interpretation. Descriptive philosophical analysis has as its primary aim the clarification of meaning, namely understanding – not the justification or critique – of truth-claims. Three forms of functional philosophical commentary are discussed: presupposition reconstruction, conceptual analysis and philosophical translation. The objective is to demonstrate how these varieties of philosophical exegesis aimed at understanding rather than at adjudication are able to reveal dimensions in the text otherwise inaccessible to non-philosophical approaches to the Hebrew Bible.

A   INTRODUCTION

The concept of "philosophical criticism" denotes different things in different contexts. In the context of philosophy, it can refer to a critique of epistemological or moral assumptions (as in Kant or Nietzsche). In this case it is concerned with a critical evaluation of truth claims (propositional justification). It can also involve a refutation of philosophically outdated assumptions or the pointing out of fallacies in argumentation. To sum up, the concept of philosophical criticism can be understood as dialectic:

> In philosophy, which concerns the most fundamental aspects of the universe, the experts all disagree. It follows that another element of philosophical method, common in the work of nearly all philosophers, is philosophical criticism. It is this that makes much philosophizing a social endeavour. Philosophers offer definitions and explanations in solution to problems; they argue for those solutions; and then other philosophers provide counter arguments, expecting to eventually come up with better solutions. This exchange and resulting revision of views is called dialectic. Dialectic (in one sense of this history-laden word) is simply philosophical conversation amongst people who do not always agree with each other about everything. One can do this sort of harsh criticism on one's own, but others can help greatly, if important assumptions are shared with the person offering the criticisms. Others are able to think of criticisms from another perspective.[1]

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[1]   Wikipedia contributors, "Philosophical method," n.p. [cited 14 July 2010]. Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Philosophical_method&oldid=367114388. Of which an early example relevant to our theme is that of Andrew S. P. Pattison, *Essays in Philosophical Criticism* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co, 1883).

In this sense, philosophical criticism is similar to what biblical scholars understand by the concept of meta-commentary or *Sachkritik*. Examples of this in biblical scholarship can be found in Mark Brett's analysis of Childs via an eclectic and critical use of philosophical scholarship[2] and Megan Bishop Moore's *Philosophy and Practice in the Writing of a History of Israel.*[3] The objective is to discredit of certain views by exposing the shaky philosophical assumptions on which it is founded.

There is second older context within Biblical Studies for the same concept, one where it had a slightly different sense. So for example in the writings of Gabler, "philosophical criticism" could refer to "pure biblical theology" as the preparation for the construction of a systematic philosophy of religion.[4] Placed alongside historical criticism, philosophical criticism was distinct from historical interpretation proper.

A third sense of the concept "philosophical criticism" involves the bringing to bear of some or other philosophical approach or perspective on the biblical text. Examples of this include Seizo Sekine's *Transcendency and Symbols in the Old Testament: A Genealogy of the Hermeneutical Experiences*[5] William H. U. Anderson, *Philosophical Considerations in a Genre Analysis of Qoheleth*[6] and recent philosophical studies on Job, including, John T. Wilcox's *The Bitterness of Job: a Philosophical Reading*,[7] and especially the section on entitled, "A Philosophical Analysis of Job," an extract in Robert Sutherland's *Putting God on Trial: The Biblical Book of Job.*[8] Other philosophical perspectives appear in Leon Kass's *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis,*[9] Martin Sicker, *Read-*

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[2]   Mark Brett, Biblical Criticism in Crisis? The Impact of the Canonical Approach on Hebrew Bible studies (London: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3]   Megan B. Moore, *Philosophy and Practice of Writing a History of Israel* (London: Continuum International, 2005).

[4]   To be sure, the term "philosophical criticism" is used here with reference to Gabler; see Otto Merk, *Biblische Theologie des NT in ihrer Anfangszeit* (Marburg: Elwert, 1972), 68-81. However, Gabler's and others' sporadic use of the notion of philosophical criticism should not be confused with what is meant by it in this study, which is the utilization of philosophy of religion as exegetical tool. One also encounters the idea in a few titles and contexts in biblical criticism, but there is no unified and official exegetical approach under the title recognised by mainstream biblical scholarship.

[5]   Seizo Sekine, Transcendency and Symbols in the Old Testament: A Genealogy of the Hermeneutical Experience (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999).

[6]   William H. U. Anderson, "Philosophical Considerations in a Genre Analysis of Qoheleth," *VT* 48 (1998): 289-300.

[7]   John T. Wilcox, *The Bitterness of Job: a Philosophical Reading* (Ann Arbor; University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[8]   Robert Sutherland, *Putting God on Trial: The Biblical Book of Job* (Trafford: Victoria, 2004), 141-157.

[9]   Leon Kass, *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

ing Genesis Politically: An Introduction to Mosaic Political Philosophy[10] and Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham*.[11] There was also recently an edited work by Mary Healy & Robin Parry, *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* involving contributions dealing with books in the Hebrew Bible.[12]

In the remainder of this article, however, I shall use the term in another, altogether novel sense. I am not concerned with involving philosophy so much as *doing* philosophy. It is also different from the evaluative, critical and atheological connotation ascribed to it by myself in an earlier paper.[13] In the context of the present discussion, *philosophical criticism* is (to be) understood as a descriptive form of philosophical analysis aimed at the clarification of meaning. Its aim is to look at the biblical texts from the perspective of loci on the agenda of *philosophy of religion*. The aim is not to ask what the Hebrew Bible can contribute to contemporary Christian philosophy of religion, but to use descriptive tools in philosophy of religion for historical purposes.

B   WHAT IS PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS?

"Philosophical analysis" happens to be a term of art, although during different periods in the twentieth century different authors have used it to mean different things. What is to be analysed (e.g., words and sentences vs. concepts and propositions), what counts as a successful analysis, and what philosophical fruits come from analysis are questions that have been vigorously debated since the dawn of analysis as a self-conscious philosophical approach. Often, different views of analysis have been linked to different views of the nature of philosophy, the sources of philosophical knowledge, the role of language in thought, the relationship between language and the world, and the nature of meaning – as well as to more focused questions about necessary and a priori truth. Indeed, the variety of positions is so great as to make any attempt to extract a common denominator from the multiplicity of views sterile and not very illuminating.[14] "Philosophical

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[10]   Martin Sicker, Reading Genesis Politically: An Introduction to Mosaic Political Philosophy (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2002).
[11]   Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
[12]   Mary Healy & Robin Parry, eds., *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings on the Knowledge of God* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster Press, 2007).
[13]   This article represents a complete revision of Jaco W. Gericke, "The Quest for a Philosophical Yhwh (Part 2): Philosophical Criticism as Exegetical Methodology," *Old Testament Essays* 19/3 (2006): 1178-1192.
[14]   Scott Soames, "What is Philosophical Analysis?" n.p. Cited 5 July 2010. Online: http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~soames/sel_pub/Philosophical_Analysis.pdf. For a more extensive discussion, see his *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, *Volume 1: The Dawn of Analysis* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003).

analysis" can therefore be considered as being an essentially contested concept, despite its long and proud history.

> Analysis has always been at the heart of philosophical method, but it has been understood and practiced in many different ways. Perhaps, in its broadest sense, it might be defined as a process of isolating or working back to what is more fundamental by means of which something, initially taken as given, can be explained or reconstructed. The explanation or reconstruction is often then exhibited in a corresponding process of synthesis. This allows great variation in specific method, however. The aim may be to get back to basics, but there may be all sorts of ways of doing this, each of which might be called "analysis."[15]

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(i)   *Regressive* conceptions of analysis as involving the working back from "what is sought," taken as assumed, to something more fundamental by means of which it can then be established.

(ii)   *Decompositional* conceptions of analysis, which involves it breaking a concept down into more simple parts;

(iii) *Transformative / interpretative* types of analysis as the translation of statements to be analysed into their "correct" logical form

These three conceptions should not be seen as competing with one another. In actual practices of analysis, which are invariably richer than the accounts that are offered of them, all three conceptions are typically reflected, though to differing degrees and in differing forms.[17] To analyse something, we may first have to interpret it in some way and then translating the initial statement into formal logical terms. Then we articulate the relevant elements and structures, all in the service of identifying fundamental principles by means of which to explain it.[18] In the twentieth century, both phenomenology and analytic philosophy can be seen as developing such more sophisticated conceptions of analysis, which draw on but go beyond mere decompositional analysis.

If anything characterises "analytic" philosophy, then it is presumably the emphasis placed on analysis. There is however a wide range of conceptions of analysis, so such a characterisation says nothing that would distinguish analytic

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[15]   Michael Beaney, "Analysis," n.p. [cited 18 April 2010]. Online: http://plato.stanford .edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

[16]   Beaney, "Analysis." http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

[17]   Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

[18]   Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

philosophy from much of what has either preceded or developed alongside it.[19] Decompositional conceptions are usually popular today, but were really actually prevalent in the early modern period. All analytic philosophy admits that any analysis presupposes a particular framework of interpretation, and work is done in *interpreting* what we are seeking to analyse as part of the process of regression and decomposition. This may involve *transforming* it in some way, in order for the resources of a given theory or conceptual framework to be brought to bear.[20]

Phenomenology, in turn, contains its own distinctive set of analytic methods, with similarities and differences to those of analytic philosophy. Phenomenological analysis has frequently been compared to conceptual clarification in the ordinary language tradition, for example, and the method of "phenomenological reduction" that Husserl invented in 1905 offers a striking parallel to the reductive project opened up by Russell's theory of descriptions, which also made its appearance in 1905. Furthermore, in Husserl's later discussion of "explication," we find appreciation of the "transformative" dimension of analysis, which can fruitfully be compared with Carnap's account of explication. Carnap himself describes Husserl's idea here as one of "the synthesis of identification between a confused, non-articulated sense and a subsequently intended distinct, articulated sense."[21]

Phenomenology is not the only source of analytic methodologies outside those of the analytic tradition. In his *Essay on Philosophical Method* (1933),[22] Robin G. Collingwood, a British idealist criticised developed his own response to what is essentially the paradox of analysis (concerning how an analysis can be both correct and informative), which he recognises as having its root in Meno's paradox. In his *Essay on Metaphysics* (1940),[23] he puts forward his own conception of metaphysical analysis, characterised here as the detection of "absolute presuppositions," which are taken as underlying and shaping the various conceptual practices that can be identified in the history of religion.[24]

The dominance of "analytic" philosophy in the English-speaking world does not mean that a consensus has formed concerning the role and importance of analysis. There is no agreement on what "analysis" means, and Wittgenstein's later critique of analysis and Quine's attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction, for example, have led some to claim that we are now in a "post-analytic" age. Such criticisms, however, are only directed at particular conceptions of analysis. In the context of Biblical Studies, our concern is simply experimental and func-

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[19] Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

[20] Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

[21] Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

[22] Robin G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933).

[23] *Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

[24] Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.

tional. Even if philosophical analysis becomes outdated in philosophy proper, for its failure to solve contemporary philosophical problems, it might still be of use to access hidden levels of meaning in the text not available to other traditional, non-philosophical exegetical methods. [25]

C   FUNCTIONAL FORMS OF PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENTARY

Ultimately, philosophical criticism as discussed here should not be equated with any single current or approach in analytic philosophy of religion or with Gabler's type or anyone else's use of the terms. As such, what follows represents my own hybrid adaptation of elements from analytic, phenomenological and comparative currents in philosophy of religion. What determined the particular form of the method was the hermeneutical demands posed by the nature of the Hebrew Bible itself as revealed by linguistic, historical, socio-literary and theological forms of biblical criticism. Basically, philosophical criticism will have the objective of providing a descriptive *philosophical* analysis of the *religious* beliefs, concepts and practices encountered in a given text in the Hebrew Bible.

In order to avoid misunderstanding, I wish to state categorically that philosophical criticism can be seen as a form of textualist hyper-descriptivism. Not only do we bracket the question of truth in favour of the question of meaning, the concern of analysis is also first and foremost concerned with the clarification of the world *in the text* alone. The world *behind* it (historical background) and the world *in front of* it (our world and those of earlier reception history) are only of relevance to the extent that the meaning of the text can be elucidated thereby.

The concept of the world in the text is well-known in biblical scholarship, coming as it does from the hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. In his writings the concept of the world in the text refers to that set of assumptions and actions that are conducted in the text itself, without checking to see if these assumptions are possible in the world outside the text.[26] However, in order to do descriptive philosophical justice to the variable pluralism of conceptions of YHWH and of reality in the biblical discourse itself, I have decided to adapt Ricoeur's terms to the context of modal fictionalism to be able to speak of the "worlds in the text" (plural). By this I mean to denote what philosophers of post-Kripkean metaphysics understand by all actual, possible and impossible worlds which I locate in the trans-world domains of intra-textual pluralism.

As for specifics, the primary methodology utilised is philosophical analysis in the form of a) presupposition reconstruction; b) conceptual analysis (clarification); and c) philosophical translation. With the focus being on presupposi-

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[25]   Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.
[26]   See Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*: *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Louisville: Westminster, John Knox Press, 1997), 57-58.

tions, conceptual structures and Gricean implicature, I offer three new related terms to reveal the location of the philosophically relevant data:

(i)   the worlds *under* the worlds in the text;
(ii)   the worlds *inside* the worlds in the text;
(iii)   the worlds *above* the worlds in the text.

To these domains, I limit the philosophical description. How they relate to the worlds in front of and behind the text may be interesting, but referentiality in this sense is not my present concern. Let us look briefly at each type of analysis.

1   Presupposition reconstruction (the worlds under worlds in the text)

According to the philosopher of religion Don Cupitt:

> In the long period dominated by Plato (roughly 350 B.C.E. to 1800 C.E.), when there was a sharp distinction between the sensuous world below and the eternal purely intelligent world above, it was usually thought that while science was concerned with the lower world of the senses and empirical fact, philosophy is concerned with the higher world of a priori, eternal truth. To do philosophy you raised your sights. A modern version of the old doctrine would have to say something rather different, like this: in philosophy, many of the toughest and most interesting philosophical questions have to do with matters that are very hard to get hold of because we are so deeply immersed in them all the time. We can't distance ourselves from them so as to get a cool detached and "scientific" view of them. Examples are time, being consciousness and language. Philosophy is nowadays very often not about things that are too high up and far off for us, but about things that are always presupposed, too close to us, so that we can't easily get them into focus. To find philosophy's space, don't climb *up*: step *back*.[27]

This process of "stepping back" is known by many names. Kant combined two senses of analysis in his work, one derived from Greek geometry, the other from modern physics and chemistry.[28] Both remain close to the original Greek sense of analysis as a "loosening up" or "releasing,", but each proceed in different ways. The former proceeds "lemmatically" by assuming a proposition to be true *and searching for another known truth from which the proposition may be deduced*.[29] More recently, there has come into being the concept of "expository philosophy." In *Thinking Philosophically*,[30] Richard Creel discusses

[27]   Don Cupitt, *Above Us Only Sky – The Religion of Ordinary Life* (Santa Rosa, California: Polebrigde Press, 2008), 33.
[28]   Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.
[29]   Beaney, "Analysis," http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/analysis.
[30]   Richard E. Creel, *Thinking Philosophically: An Introduction to Critical Reflection and Rational Dialogue* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

seven activities philosophers engage in: exposit, analyse, synthesise, describe, speculate, prescribe and criticise. Of these, what he calls "expository philosophy" might be interesting to biblical scholars with historical agendas who imagine philosophy to be critical only. This philosophical approach has the aim of trying to get into worlds "under" the worlds in the text.

> Expository philosophy endeavors to lay bare what is covered up, to make conscious the unconscious, to make explicit the implicit.[31]

Expository philosophy helps to bring to the fore people's (any people's) assumptions about reality, value and knowledge. Even if the biblical authors or characters were not conscious of having philosophical problems, they have philosophical assumptions. Most of these are unarticulated and unsystematic folk-philosophical "theories" they unconsciously took for granted, and which they have absorbed from their environment and their intellectual tradition. Since few of these theories are consciously held, they are philosophical prejudices, as they are not subjected to critical examination. They are *philosophical*, nevertheless, in as much as they pertain to metaphysical, epistemological, moral and other philosophical matters. Expository philosophy is an effort to become aware of and to reconstruct what these assumptions or theories actually involved.

In the context of a philosophical approach to the Hebrew Bible "stepping back" and a concern with prepositions can therefore be immensely informative. It involves asking of every text what the folk-philosophical questions it presupposes are. This is particularly obvious in aetiological myths, where the questions – even if not the answers – are the stuff philosophy thrives on. Some of these include curiosity concerning the nature of ultimate reality, the origin of the world, sufficient reasons for why reality is like this and not otherwise, the mystery of causality, the nature of good and evil, free will and determinism, teleology and the question of why things happen as they do, what the good life is all about, etc. So even if the final form of the overt textual discourse does not in itself constitute ready-to-eat philosophy, the questions presupposed as part of prior reflection are the perennial ones.

Where then are the data located in the non-philosophical discourse? Here we build on the metaphor of expository philosophy and Ricoeurian notions of the world in the text, and introduce the concept of "the world(s) *under* the worlds in the text." By this is meant folk-philosophical presuppositions in the text which need to be reconstructed precisely because they were not spelled out. Because they were operative in the heads of the biblical people and not necessarily shared by us, they provide a context of meaning, the divorce from which ends up distorting the meaning of the text itself. The presence of these assumptions in the Hebrew Bible can be illustrated with reference to the four standard philosophical categories.

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[31]   Creel, *Thinking Philosophically*, 54.

Firstly, there is *metaphysics*: the Hebrew Bible is not a metaphysical treatise. Yet its discourse does contain taken-for-granted assumptions about metaphysical issues. Included here are presuppositions about the nature of existence, reality, being, substance, mereology, time and space, causality, identity and change, objecthood and relations (e.g. subject and object), essence and accident, properties and functions, necessity and possibility (modality), order, mind and matter, free will and determinism, etcetera. There is therefore nothing hermeneutically wrong with the following questions:

(i)   What does a text in the Hebrew Bible assume about cause and effect?

(ii)   What does a text in the Hebrew Bible assume about the whole and the parts?

(iii)   What does a text in the Hebrew Bible assume about generality in relation to specific individuals?

(iv)   What does a text in the Hebrew Bible assume about properties and substance and their relation and inherence?

(v)   What does a text in the Hebrew Bible assume about the relation between power and the its possessor?

The possibility of discerning the metaphysical assumptions of ancient Israelite religion is becoming more and more obvious in the writings of some biblical scholars who do happen to think one can talk about metaphysical assumptions in ancient Israelite religion. Thus according to Rolf Knierim, we find in the Hebrew Bible folk-philosophy of a specific kind:

> It is the so-called dynamistic ontology which says that reality is a dynamic process from beginning causes to their corresponding ends. The fact that the ontology had in the Old Testament already become subject to contestation, modification and complementation means neither than it has been abandoned in the wake of the historical development of philosophical discourse, nor that it is not also, alongside complimentary alternative propositions, empirically verifiable, then and today.[32]

Another reference to biblical metaphysics is found in the remark by Mark Smith:

> For the ancient Israelites their texts contain an ancient form of metaphysics. To be sure, these texts do not use the ontological language of

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[32]   Rolf Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology*, 410; cf. 89, 115, 253, 430.

"being," found in the works of the great metaphysicians of later ages such as Thomas Aquinas. Instead, a fundamental ontology used in the ancient world is embodied in language about power. [33]

Smith goes on to speak of different metaphysical "paradigms" and of alternative ontologies and metaphysics in the Hebrew Bible. See also the paper read at the 2007 IOSOT conference by Zioni Zevit entitled, *Seeing Yнwн in Shamayim: A Problem in Ancient Israelite Metaphysics*. All three examples given here are a long way from the older biblical-theological idea that the Hebrew Bible has nothing in common with philosophy. The possibility of a philosophical rendering was recognised by Smith in a later publication on the translatability of religious language.[34] Here he actually makes use of Assman, and notes that philosophy was one of the genres for elucidating representations of the divine. Yet it is all about past attempts by philosophical minds to do so, rather than a philosophical translation in our own time of the non-philosophical god-talk of the Hebrew Bible.

If Smith is right and the ontological language differs from medieval metaphysics, this does not rule out a philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion. On the contrary, research to determine the difference between the Hebrew Bible's views on a given matter and those of Greek philosophical perspectives is actually already a form of clarifying comparative folk-philosophy of religion. One cannot even know if or how biblical perspectives differ from any other perspective (or in themselves) unless one actually describes the folk-philosophical metaphysical assumptions of the Hebrew Bible. In doing so, one grants the legitimacy of a descriptive philosophical account of Yahwism and the presence of folk-philosophy in the text. Contra someone like Walter Brueggemann[35] and more like the assumptions of Knierm, there is a place for ontology in the study of ancient Israelite religion - not in the sense of a concern with what is really real, but in the sense of asking what texts in the Hebrew Bible themselves assumed was really real, whatever that may be.

Secondly, there is also folk-*epistemology*. The Hebrew Bible is not an essay in epistemology, yet its discourse does contain assumptions about the nature of knowledge, belief, truth, interpretation, understanding and cognitive processes. Ordinary language about cognitive processes will have something implicit on what knowledge was assumed to be, how it is acquired, what types of knowledge there are, how it is justified, what its limits are, what it amounts to, what its purpose is, etc. These are implicit in the text and again pluralism may be

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[33]   See Mark Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory and Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 2004), 161-162.

[34]   Smith, *God in Translation,* 21. Smith recognises that philosophy of religion is a second-order discourse, just like comparative religion (p. 18).

[35]   See Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology*, 118.

present. A related concept in philosophy is ethno-epistemology;[36] something related to *ethno-philosophy*, a concept derived from African philosophy which can be seen as a possible analogy to a philosophical approach to the study of Israelite religion.

The admission of epistemology in the text and the allowance of epistemological perspectives on the texts are no novelty. To be sure, such are rare, yet there is no reason why it cannot be done. For example, an excellent recent study with a concern in between epistemology and psychology and focused on ancient Israelite conceptions of the mind, and thoroughly debunking the idea of the structures of Hebrew thought as *sui generis*, is that by Michael Carasik.[37] A conservative and rather superficial approach to Old Testament assumptions about knowledge, motivated by the same fundamentalist concerns that drive the epistemological obsession in philosophy of religion, is however evident in some contributions to the study on *The Bible and Epistemology*.[38]

Third, *ethics.* The fact is often overlooked that here biblical scholarship is already engaged with a potentially descriptive philosophical subject that somehow managed to sneak without too much fuss. But we need more than – and the texts contain more than - substantive ethics. The Hebrew Bible is not an ethical treatise, yet its discourse does contain assumptions about *meta*ethical issues such as the meaning of good and evil, the nature of right and wrong, criteria for moral discernment, valid sources of morality, the origin and acquisition of moral beliefs, the ontological status of moral norms, moral authority, cultural pluralism, etc. There are also axiological and aesthetic assumptions in the text about the nature of value and beauty. These ideas will be implicit in the text, and the theo-

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[36]   James Maffie, "Ethnoepistemology," n.p. [cited 29 January 2010]. Online: http://www.iep.utm.edu. Indeed, the customary use of the terms "ethno-philosophy" and "ethnoepistemology" by Western philosophers is objectionable, since it assumes that Western philosophy is the standard by which all other cultures' philosophies and reflective activities are to be understood and measured, and that Western philosophy is philosophy *simpliciter*, rather than one among many ethnophilosophies. The more broadly ecumenical and non-ethnocentric use of the term "ethnoepistemology" employed here, however, avoids this shortcoming since it includes all epistemological activities, whether they be African, East Asian, European or Latin American. In this spirit it examines the entire gamut of human epistemological activities ranging from those of ordinary folk and cognitive specialists (for example, diviners, shamans, priests, magicians, and scientists) to those of epistemologists themselves. Ethnoepistemology includes both domestic and non-domestic epistemological practices, and accordingly regards Western epistemological practices as simply one among many alternative, contingent epistemological projects advanced by and hence available to human beings.
[37]   Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).
[38]   Healy & Parry, *The Bible and Epistemology*.

logical pluralism in ancient Israelite religion may well presuppose metaphysical pluralism as well.

Fourth, *logic*: the Hebrew Bible is not a textbook on logic, yet its discourse does contain assumptions about valid arguments, about the nature of language and its relation to reality, about the nature of reasoning in religious thought, the warranting of beliefs, the justification of religious experience, strategies in polemical arguments, the nature of rational thinking, the logic of belief revision, etcetera. These are implicit in the text and whatever we make of them in view of contemporary ideas on the matter, they can and should be described for what they were. Moreover, if it could be shown that the Hebrew Bible has a logic differing from, say, Aristotelian logic, this is no reason to avoid philosophy. On the contrary, it is all the more reason to describe biblical logics as folk-philosophy and engage in a philosophical clarification of ancient Israelite folk-philosophical assumptions on the matter.

The rationale for presupposition analysis should therefore be clear. The words of the text only obtained meaningfulness for the author given a lot of other assumptions that were left unsaid. When we come to the text, we encounter only the words and not all those (folk-) philosophical assumptions, instead making sense of the texts by reading the words in the context of our own assumptions. Presupposition analysis as a form of corrective historical inquiry therefore also involves phenomenological reduction in that, when attempting inferences, we ought to bracket our own ideological assumptions to become open to just how alien those favourite texts we have been domesticating for millennia might actually be.

2   Conceptual analysis (the worlds within the worlds in the text)

If presupposition analysis shows the need for phenomenological reduction, the second task also connects with the analytic traditions. Indeed, the most popular form of philosophical analysis is *conceptual analysis*. Biblical scholars often use the term "concept" in a non-technical or non-philosophical sense, without realising that in philosophy it is a technical term, and that concepts have been primary targets for *philosophical analysis*. One of the traditional tasks of analytic philosophy is that of providing analyses of concepts, but an important question is that of what an analysis itself is, and whether or not there are such things. Most commonly discussed in the contexts of philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, concepts and their analysis are found in every philosophical discipline. Different philosophical disciplines have different concerns with concepts, which in turn differ from concerns with concepts in cognitive science, linguistics, psychology, computer science and elsewhere.

At the outset, however, a distinction should be made between the *philosophical theory* of conceptual analysis and the historical movement. The movement became defunct in the seventies of the previous century, but conceptual analysis

(also called philosophical analysis) is as old as philosophy itself. Much of twentieth century analytic philosophy of religion has focused on linguistic analysis for the purpose of conceptual analysis. If we can agree that there are concepts in the Hebrew Bible and in biblical theology, then we have to admit that those concepts can be subjected to philosophical analysis and clarification. This should not be difficult, given the fact that research concerned with conceptual analysis is not altogether absent from biblical scholarship.[39] What should be done in this section is to gather the loose strings into an independent and officially recognised method, with philosophical interests beyond merely semantic and linguistic ones. Something very much like this can be found in one of the sessions headed by Won W Lee at the 2008 SBL International meeting in Auckland, New Zealand, entitled "Concept Analysis and the Hebrew Bible:"

> **Description:** The unit examines concepts that unify particular textual units or books in the Hebrew Bible and the interrelationship of competing concepts within the same book or corpus in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., God's love and hate; peace and violence; wealth and poverty).
> **Call for papers:** The unit calls for papers addressing one of the following two areas: 1) methodological considerations (what constitutes "concepts" in a given text or book? How to compare different concepts within textual units? What contributions that this method makes in the contemporary landscape of biblical interpretation? What roles does a particular culture and societal ethos play in conceptualization and production of texts); and 2) interpretations of concepts that unify particular textual units or books in the Hebrew Bible and the interrelationship of competing concepts within the same book or corpus in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., divine justice and mercy, election and non-or/and anti-election, covenant and suffering).[40]

I am not exactly sure if those participating here think of the matter from a philosophical-religious perspective, since conceptual analysis is most familiar from the context of linguistics and cognitive studies, which have already had a great impact on research in biblical scholarship. However, a more specifically philosophical interest is not altogether absent, and is found in the work of Christine Helmer when she wrote:

> One key task of biblical theology is the clarification of its key concepts. If biblical theology leaves unexamined its philosophical pre-

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[39]   As is evident from doing a word search with "conceptual analysis" on the SBL forum, e.g. Randall Argall*, 1 Enoch and Sirach: A Comparative and Conceptual Analysis of the Themes of Revelation, Creation, and Judgment* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1995), or Deborah L. Ellens, *Women in the Sex Texts of Leviticus and Deuteronomy: A Comparative Conceptual Analysis* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008).
[40]   2008 International Meeting, Program Units, "Congresses," Society of Biblical Literature, http://www.sbl-site.org/meetings/Congresses_ProgramUnits.aspx?MeetingId =13.

suppositions or its theological categories, then it is prone to the charge of "dogmatic" imposition still haunting the discipline.[41]

With refreshing lucidity she continues:

> The clarification of concepts is a task that must be constantly checked with the empirical determination of these concepts if it is not to be divorced from the very data that it is called to conceptualize. By admitting the significance of this task, biblical theology underlines the essential historicity of its procedure. Paradoxically, conceptual clarification highlights historicity, rather than flying away from it... Furthermore, an orientation to the concepts highlights the essential hermeneutical determination of biblical theology. Concepts serve as transhistorical bridges facilitating the understanding of ancient texts and communicating results to one's contemporaries. Although these concepts are determined at some minimal definitional level and must be kept open as to possible revision, they function to mediate a transhistorical "something" that matters to both author and reader/hearer. Whether studied in terms of the philosophical question concerning reality, or the religious studies question concerning religion, or the theological question concerning the particular configuration of the self/world/God relation, the "something" of which the biblical texts make claims can be debated and discussed. [42]

And then,

> If biblical studies can be sensitized to conceptual-theological or philosophical issues integral to the text, then the close proximity to biblical scholarship by systematic theology is one that might prove to be enlivening for this field.[43]

Though philosophical, there is nothing sinister or potentially distortive in a conceptual analysis of Hebrew Bible discourse. It is a philosophical tool that can be utilized and adapted for purely historical and descriptive purposes. Of course, zeal without knowledge tends to be a dangerous thing, and if we are to concern ourselves with conceptual analysis as philosophical analysis in the narrow sense of clarification, we would do well to acquaint ourselves with the history of related concerns in philosophy proper.[44] A very thorough and informative summary is found in the dissertation of Lajos Brons, who concluded:

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[41]   Christine Helmer, "'Open Systems': Constructive Philosophical and Theological Issues in Biblical Theology," *SBL Forum*, n.p. [cited September 2004]. Online: http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=310.

[42]   Helmer, "Open Systems," http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=310.

[43]   Helmer, "Open Systems," http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=310.

[44]   Convenient philosophical introductions to conceptual analysis as philosophical analysis is found online: Dennis Earl, "Concepts," n.p. [cited 18 February 2010].

> Conceptual analysis (CA) in philosophy is over two millennia old. Nevertheless, its main theoretical development, its blossoming and its going out of fashion all took place in the twentieth century. Starting with Moore, analytic philosophers claimed that philosophical (and many scientific) problems are the consequences of how we use language. Philosophy, therefore, should analyse language primarily. The initial ('classical') approaches to concepts and CA in analytic philosophy were, in following decades, refuted by psychological research and philosophical analysis itself. Philosophers and linguists became increasingly aware of the complexities of concepts and conceptual analysis. During the twentieth century, analytic philosophy was not the only field interested in concepts and CA. Several other disciplines and philosophical currents dealt with concepts and meaning, including semiotics and semantics, heuristics, and significs.[45]

Brons[46] recounts the story in the context of philosophy (as opposed to linguistics or psychology); and there are a number of people and ideas in the history of conceptual analysis that biblical scholars interested in this type of interpretation would do well to take note of. By the 1970s, conceptual analysis had become extremely unfashionable in philosophy, following the flight from intensions, the death of analycity, the paradox of analysis, the scientific essentialist critique of propositions and the critique of transcendental arguments.[47] Since then, different opinions rule the field and the 1990's revealed a whole spectrum of views. Some philosophers argue that the method of analysis is endlessly problematic. Others argue that while analysis is largely a fruitful method of inquiry, philosophers should not limit themselves to only using the method of analysis.[48] Yet others still feel strongly that the analytic method (especially conceptual analysis) still defines what it is to do philosophy.[49]

Biblical scholars should therefore not be ignorant of the history of and the philosophical objections to conceptual analysis. I do not claim that conceptual analysis is a good thing in the context of philosophy proper. However, that de-

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Online: http://www.iep.utm.edu; Eric Margolis & Stephen Laurence, "Concepts," n.p. [cited 18 February 2010]. Online:
http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/concepts/2010-02-18.

[45]   See Lajos L. Brons, "Rethinking the Culture - Economy Dialectic." (PhD Dissertation, University of Groningen, 2005), 50. Online:
http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/1625/1/MPRA_paper_1625.pdf.

[46]   The following historical overview is derived from Brons, *Rethinking the Culture - Economy Dialectic,* 38-46.

[47]   "Conceptual Analysis," in Edward Craig, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1998), 518.

[48]   Wikipedia contributors, "Philosophical analysis," n.p. [cited 8 February 2010]. Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Philosophical_analysis&oldid=332404756.

[49]   Wikipedia contributors, "Philosophical analysis," n.p. [cited 15 July 2010]. Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Philosophical_analysis&oldid=362060006.

bate is irrelevant to the fact that conceptual analysis might be useful for biblical scholars seeking to do descriptive philosophical exegesis. Not that it will be able to deliver all possible meaning. One should not make a fetish of it. However, perhaps it can provide insights not available via other forms of exegesis. Every little bit helps.

3   Philosophical translation (the worlds above the worlds in the text)

This task links up with cross-cultural understandings in comparative philosophy of religion. Folk-philosophies can be accessed via philosophical analysis of a people's literature, whatever its genres. In other words, working with the relevant data, philosophers engaged in the clarification of the conceptual content of worldviews can derive "philosophy" from such discourse via a reconstruction of the implicit taken-for-granted worldview(s).

> It is possible to extract a world-view from a person's thinking and living, even when he or she is not mainly concerned with presenting a system.[50]

The object language is that of the Hebrew Bible and the target language is transacted in philosophical concepts. A philosophical approach to ancient Israelite religion is basically "philosophical translation," which involves a running commentary that expands the worlds under and inside the worlds in the text. As such, this task is concerned with the worlds above the text. Ideally, in this task what happens is roughly what someone with an extensive knowledge of the findings of linguistic, historical, literary and social-scientific research *as well as an extensive philosophical vocabulary and competence* would "see" in the latter background. What would the texts be "saying" to such a person, in philosophical terms?

Of course, it requires fluency in "*philosophese,*" and a little creativity to discern multiple translations from the perspective of a variety of philosophical areas, disciplines and loci. Thus one might say that in the language of metaphysics, the texts seem to be saying x, y and z; from an epistemological perspective they are saying p, q and r, and so on. Of course, many texts might not seem to be saying anything. The basic fields in philosophy only provide the backdrop: the real concern is what the texts seem to be saying or implying from the perspective of one of the loci on the agenda of issues in *philosophy of religion.*

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[50]   Ninian Smart, *World Philosophies*. Edited by Oliver Leaman (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7. For some of the challenges of Eastern vs. Western perspectives, see David Wong, "Comparative Philosophy: Chinese and Western," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2009 Edition), n. p. [cited 18 February 2010], (ed. Edward N. Zalta). Online: http://plato.stanford.edu/archives /win2009 /entries /comparphil-chiwes.

The folk-philosophies implicit in the ordinary language of the Hebrew Bible need to be translated into philosophical terms.[51] This has nothing to do with reading philosophy into the text in any distortive manner, but concerns the art of finding appropriate philosophical terminology to describe the metaphysical, epistemological, moral and other assumptions in the discourse. The idea is not to make the text philosophically relevant, but merely to give a philosophical account of its meaning and to repeat what the text is saying in philosophical terms. While presupposition reconstruction focuses on describing assumptions, translation is concerned with describing in the vocabulary of philosophy what the text says and implies.

In this regard Don Cupitt, showed how the philosophical contents of "religion" are built into the ordinary language that religious and non-philosophical people use.[52] This is a new and refreshing perspective, quite different from the popular belief that ordinary language philosophy is unsuitable for doing philosophy of religion. It also shows that philosophy of religion can work with any religious language, whether itself explicitly philosophical or not.

> ... at least since Plato, ordinary language's way of thinking has been regarded as low, confused, and simply mistaken. ... But the notion that the thought of ordinary people might be intellectually interesting, and might have a logic of its own quite different from the "academic" or "platonic" style of thinking traditional in high cultures of the west developed only slowly...considerations such as these have prepared us very slowly for the idea that there really is an interesting philosophy and set of ways of thinking embedded in ordinary language, and that it is about time for us to dig it all out and take a good look at it. When post-Nietzschean philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Dewey and Heidegger came along telling us that we must now learn to think in a post-Platonic, post-metaphysical way, then clearly the time had come for the philosophy that is in ordinariness to emerge. But even at this late date it is proving a difficult birth. Really, very difficult – and nowhere more so than in philosophy of religion.[53]

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[51]   The concept of translation is a technical term in analytic philosophy and can also be compared to explication and paraphrasing. Wittgenstein's idea of philosophical definition as translation was reintroduced by Quine, whose "radical translation" focused on the indeterminism of concepts in a foreign language. Jackson's recent defense of conceptual analysis is closer to Quine's notion of "paraphrasing". By contrast, *explication* is an expression of Carnap used in analytic philosophy for the process of "unfolding" and of "making clear" the meaning of things, so as to make the implicit explicit.

[52]   Don Cupitt, *The New Religion of Life in Everyday Speech* (London: SCM Press, 1999).

[53]   Cupitt, *The Way to Happiness,* 14-15.

Indeed, many imagine ordinary language analysis to be unsuitable for doing philosophy of religion.[54] Cupitt shows this is far from being the case, which is something biblical scholars who find no philosophical style arguments in the Hebrew Bible's ordinary language would do well to take cognisance of. One wonders what Israelite religion might look like when constructed from the folk-philosophical assumptions of the ordinary language of characters in the text.

What makes this a philosophical rather than purely linguistic exercise, is the exclusive concern with the translation of biblical words into philosophical terms. The frame of reference guiding the translation should come not from any philosophical field, but from the loci on the agenda of philosophy of religion. In this step, a philosophical account is given of the ideas of a given passage, to reveal the particular ideas in ancient Israelite folk-philosophy of religion the passage alludes to. In this sense my concept of philosophical translation is a mixture between Carnap's concept of philosophical explication and *explication de texte* as a method of close reading in literary criticism. It basically involves a line by line commentary of what is being said, in philosophical terms.[55]

In "Five Milestones" Quine explains that the meanings of words are abstractions from the truth conditions of the sentences that contain them, and that it was the recognition of this semantic primacy of sentences that gave us contextual definition. Quine traces the development of contextual definition, which he calls a revolution in semantics, to Jeremy Bentham's technique of "paraphrasis," which is a kind of paraphrasing or circumlocution. Contextual definition is definition in use, and shows how to translate sentences containing any term into equivalent sentences lacking the term. In "Russell's Ontological Development" (1966), reprinted in *Theories and Things* (1981), Quine says that our reward for the paraphrasis technique is the recognition that the unit of communication is the sentence and not the word. While Ayer claimed that all philosophical analysis is a matter of contextual definition, this is generally regarded as because it only reveals the logical structure of language and is applied only to linguistic complexes. Philosophical analysis, on the other hand, is applied also to mental and other complexes.

What we need is a running commentary about what, if anything, the text is asserting when translated into metaphysical, epistemological, moral and logical terms, and with reference to each of the loci on the agenda of philosophy of religion. While the idea of philosophical words *replacing* biblical ones may send many biblical theologians running for cover, it will involve nothing more than 'translating' (not reinterpreting) the Hebrew Bible's own ideas into something with a richer theoretical system. Any distortive philosophical vocabulary in any

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[54] Craig V. Mitchell, *Charts of Philosophy and Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 68.
[55] Wikipedia contributors, "Explication," n.p. [cited 18 February 2010]. Online: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Explication&oldid=298838610.

analysis says more about the philosophical analyst's incompetence than about philosophy being *per se* distortive. It is all a matter of finding the right concepts in the meta-language, and if one philosophical cluster of jargon does not do the job well enough, we should not dismiss philosophy, but rather look to other currents. Philosophy and its history are rich with terms, and it is all a matter of going in search for the best description.

Linking up with the previous section, we can find solace in the idea of Sellers's notion that conceptual analysis is already philosophical translation.[56] Sellars disputed what he called "the myth of the given," arguing that there is no intrinsically basic language. And since any language can be a "first language," there can be no absolute translation of concepts. Since conceptual analysis is translation rather than not reference, studying concepts or studying conceptual systems (or frameworks or cultures) implies learning a second language. Yet in analysis one's own first language contains concepts which remain extremely influential in the interpretation of similar second-language concepts, and when writing or speaking the target language, second language learners tend to rely on their native language structures to produce a response. Meaning in the second language is thus learned partly in terms of the meanings already learned in the first, and all learners assume that for every word in their own language there is a single translation equivalent in the second.[57]

In other words, done rightly, the philosophical concepts used will be no more anachronistic or distortive than the originally philosophically derived concepts already in use in our other approaches. Yet there is a world not behind, in or before, but *beside* the text, which the Hebrew Bible does not speak of and is therefore only implicit in the ordinary language of the Hebrew Bible. The problem therefore is not that a word, concept or category comes from the outside; the trouble arises when the particular concept or category is *presumptuous* and *distortive* of the biblical contents. This means that a descriptive philosophical theology of the Hebrew Bible is free to use philosophical concepts, yet should make sure that these are informative of what is in the text itself. One way of doing this is by doing philosophical theology that is phenomenological-reductive in orientation.

We cannot avoid using a meta-language, even if we can agree that the extent to which concepts overlap and differ in semantic scope might lead to distortive equivocation. However, using non-biblical terminology is not that big a deal – we are already anachronistic in using many concepts like "reality," "fact," "religion," "history," "culture," "monotheism," "theology," "literature," "society," etcetera. There are no Hebrew equivalent terms for these, yet few people have a problem with them. So to go along with biblical theologians who

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[56]   Harold Brown, "Sellars, Concepts and Conceptual Change," *Synthese* 68 (1986): 275-307

[57]   Brons, *Rethinking the Culture - Economy Dialectic,* 41.

assume radical incommensurability — the view that ideas and concepts in the biblical tradition cannot sustain meaningful restatement in philosophical terms – would border on conceptual hypocrisy.

In the end, the price of uncertainty is small to pay compared with the most obvious sin that can be committed in doing philosophical translation. Although distorting rather than clarifying the biblical rhetoric's meaning by way of assumptions, frameworks, and agendas is certainly a danger, unless we say what the texts say in philosophical terms, we actually have no way of controlling philosophical *eise*gesis and no way of determining to which extent philosophical concepts and categories are distortive to begin with. We must therefore engage in philosophical translation precisely to avoid reading our own Western folk-philosophical theological assumptions into the alien folk-philosophies implicit in ancient Israelite religion. Only philosophical translation can bring out what is there, to prevent projecting what is in here.

D   CONCLUSION

In this article, I have attempted to discuss three varieties of philosophical criticism as a form of commentary aimed at the clarification of meaning. As a form of philosophical exegesis exclusively concerned with a better understanding of the text, rather than with either apologetics or a theology, philosophical criticism should not be seen as something over against historical understanding. On the contrary, in as much as no understanding of any religion is possible without a clear view on its most fundamental assumptions, conceptual content and philosophical meaning, it is argued that without such an approach we have not made a beginning in coming to terms with the world in the text. Neglecting these kinds of philosophical analyses will not prevent us from anachronistic philosophical distortion, but leaves us without any method of controlling the reading of our own Western folk-philosophical assumptions into the biblical discourse. In this way, philosophical description is actually an aid to interpretation on the level of exegesis, and not a useless or irrelevant higher order activity that begins only after the basic work has been done. It is arguably the most basic of all forms of exegetical understanding.

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