



David Novak, 'God-Talk: The Heart of Judaism'

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David Novak. *God-Talk: The Heart of Judaism*. Rowman & Littlefield 2024. 148 pp. \$70.00 USD (Hardcover 9781538187135); \$25.00 USD (Paperback 9781538187142).

My reaction when observing the title “God-talk” of David Novak’s latest book in theology in and of Judaism, was bewilderment and amazement. It was a different sort of bewilderment and amazement than that described by one of David Novak’s teachers, the eminent philosopher of Judaism, Abraham Heschel: amazement when beholding and confront the word--what a creation of God! Rather, my bewilderment and amazement were at the ‘chutzpah’, boldness of being able to talk and write about God’s talk: how can one understand let alone be privy to God’s talk and especially God’s inner talk and self-reflection? What nerve this distinguished philosopher David Novak must talk about God’s inner talk! How does David, and I say David, because I have had the honour of talking face-to-face as well as in email epistolary exchanges with David--a friend for whom I respect as a ‘*mensch*’ with *menschlichkeit*—a gentlemen and a scholar of repute. In what follows, I address my bewilderment and amazement with David’s book in the form of an interview or dialogue.

Sheldon Richmond (SR): When I pray, when I ‘talk’ to God, put on phylacteries, sit in synagogue...there is another Sheldon outside my head/body, as it were, observing me, and wondering what am I doing; how does this make sense: how can a usually rational, that is critical thinker that I supposedly am, carry on with these a-rational actions?

I vaguely remember Hume’s answer in his *Treatise*—the skeptic leaves his study, or drawing room, and joins society leaving his scepticism behind. I find that hard to do—my sceptical self hovers around me especially when I am attending synagogue...

David Novak (DN): My book, *God-Talk*, provides a response to the background problem of the schism between rationality or reason and faith or religion. The schism is due to keeping religion out of the public sphere and placing it into a private sphere. Once in the public sphere, religion becomes part of everyday life and subject to the rationality that is part of everyday life.

SR: For the sake of clarity—are you proposing the following in your book?

The basic frame problem is how to get prayer and religion back into the public sphere from the privacy of the self-imposed ghetto of houses of worship, and homes. Within that frame how can we understand prayer, and God’s revelation in Torah, Talmud, rabbinical discourse, in terms of a completely and thoroughly rational enterprise rather than as a socially constructed performative game?

Solution: reconstruct the correct meaning or understanding of God-talk in all its dimensions including God’s internal or self-talk. The public sphere for God-talk will be drawn into the discussion with a space for Jews.

Where and how is my bird’s eye view or summary wrong?

One proviso on my part: your chapter on God’s ‘inner thought’. Suppose we could discern that God does engage in silent internal conversation, could God use a private language that is beyond human comprehension? I have heard that Wittgenstein and other notable philosophers argue there could be no private language for humans, that is: but for God?



DN: Your summary of the book is correct.

As for your question regarding God's internal conversations, it can be assumed that God's thoughts are not confined to his relations in and with this world. However, we can only speculate about what God's thoughts are in and with this world, in which our thoughts are certainly contained. Nevertheless, I think Wittgenstein's point about the impossibility of private languages in that language is interpersonal (i.e., public) communication. Even schizophrenics speaking 'to themselves' are speaking to either real or imagined 'others.'

SR: My proviso, I think rests on the philosophical views of Chomsky and Jerry Fodor on the 'language of thought', as well as the computational theory of 'thinking'. Basically, how thinking works on the Chomsky-Fodor model is that thinking is a form of inner speech, but at a level deeper or more fundamental than spoken language. Computationally speaking, thinking involves syntactical operations, that result in speech. Supposedly, multiprocessing, distributed, computational operations mimic the workings of the brain's cognitive functioning. We can contra Wittgenstein, call thinking—if the formalistic/syntactical view of thinking is correct—a private language.

Why not attribute this form of thinking—computational/formal/syntactical processing at the deepest level working at speeds faster than light—to God?

DN: The essential question is whether language is prior to thought or thought is prior to language.

- (a) If language leads to thought: we are first hearers of an intelligible spoken language, we then internalize it in our minds (i.e., thinking) preparing us to be intelligent speakers of that language: first in response to those who so spoke to us (parents, teachers); subsequently with others, more or less our equals (siblings, friends, fellow members of our community), who are similarly intelligent speakers of our common (i.e., public) language. That is the basis of my interpretation of the rabbinic dictum 'the Torah speaks according to human language.' It is first what God speaks to us intelligibly in revelation, then what we who have been so spoken to can intelligently say to each other in theological discourse.
- (b) If thought leads to language, we are first thinkers of thoughts, some of which can be expressed in language, but some of which can only be ineffable. (a) Socrates, Wittgenstein, Rosenzweig, Heschel. (b) Plato (esp. 7th Letter), Maimonides, Kabbalah, Descartes, Kant, Hermann Cohen. Therefore, siding with (a), speculating on what God's thoughts are – in relation to us humans -- can only be by analogy to the way we think of our relations with each other.

Furthermore, following (a), only feelings and sense impressions are ineffable, only expressible in words by analogy to objects which we humans can describe in words or acts which we humans can prescribe in words. Feelings accompany our significant (i.e., to which we can't be indifferent) descriptions and prescriptions as motivations, either positive or negative. Reasons, though, as causes of objective events, or as purposes of subjective actions, are directly expressed in words.

Now we deliberate on our responses to others (whether verbal or practical), who are already there before us asking for our responses a posteriori. However, since before creation, no one was already there before God, it would seem that God first thinks of what God will respond verbally

and practically to God's creatures a priori (i.e., what God will say to them and do for them). Nevertheless, what God could say or think in other worlds ("parallel universes"?) is beyond even our speculation. It is useless fantasy. -- Philosophically, this is what I try to say in the "Inner Life of God" chapter.

The bird's eye view of my interview, epistolary exchange with Novak, resolves my amazement and bewilderment with David's chutzpah in thinking that David could grasp let alone merely describe the depths of God's talk, both outer and inner. Rather, we don't even understand how our own thinking and talking works. We still have not conclusively resolved the question—does human thinking precede our language/speech or is it the other way around? I know that I am dissatisfied with the syntactical and computational approach to thinking and mind; but I am not happy with the other side of the story, that thinking is silent speech. We have observed that the invention of writing, of scripts both alphabetic and ideographic, changed everything; and now, we are observing that the invention of electronic media—in the forms of tweets, instant messaging, and even email—changes everything again. The rug has been pulled out from under us, and we are tripping over the fundamental issues once again that struck Socrates and Plato: can we trust our media, whether writing or messaging, to help us discover the truth about the nature of our human thinking, let alone society and world?

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