

REVIEWS

Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013. Pp. xxi+242. ISBN 13:978-1-61097-726-5. \$29.00.

Dru Johnson's *Biblical Knowing* challenges sedentary thinking about epistemology within theology. The book is unique because its diachronic approach (emphasizing a *through time* process of knowing) dares to object to the synchronic approaches (emphasizing *point in time* justification) typical of analytic philosophy. Trained in analytic philosophy and theology, Johnson is just the person to help to initiate this healthy turn in theological epistemology.

Johnson's stated goal is to "lay the groundwork for a biblical theology of knowledge—how knowledge is broached, described, and how error is rectified within the texts of the Protestant Christian canon" (xv). And yet, modestly, he admits that this book can only be a "pry-bar, a tool to open the lid on the neglected idea that Christian Scripture might be developing robust descriptions of knowing that can direct us today" (xvi). The idea that Scripture itself presents a "robust" description of knowing seems a bit implausible on the surface, especially given the diversity of perspectives within the Christian canon and seemingly anachronistic notion that ancient Near Eastern people were concerned with such matters. But he sees "significant points of contact" within the canon which are "fundamentally consistent with each other" (xvi).

Johnson begins his analysis with some preliminary comments on knowledge and error. Helpfully, he speaks of error not as insufficient information or superficial mental mistakes, but rather deeper patterns "in embodied performance." Further, Johnson makes the contentious claim that "we can discover a *general* theory of knowledge that is persistent in the minds of the authors of Scripture" (16). I will comment briefly below on the success of this endeavor.

Chapters 2 through 6 form the core of Johnson's argument. Here he guides the reader through various kinds of errors made by people in Genesis

2-3, Exodus, Numbers 12 and 16, Deuteronomy 13 and 29, as well as various passages in Mark, Luke and John. His treatment of Genesis 2-3 is notable in that he sees the passage as an epistemological process whereby the knower is led by God himself to discover his own mate. From this text, Johnson emphasizes that knowledge is social, learned by differentiation, situated, embodied, diachronic, and reliant on authoritative, accredited guides. The influence of Michael Polanyi on this scheme is pervasive. Further, his account of error in Genesis 3 relies on the idea that the woman listened to an illicit authority, the serpent. He states that "we should conceive of knowledge and error as two types of epistemological outcomes, so that error is a form of knowledge—erroneous knowledge—contingent upon which authorities we heed" (47).

Johnson continues his development of the importance of an accredited authority by demonstrating two types of errors in Exodus: failure to listen to the accredited authority (first order error) and failure to embody the authority's instructions (second order error; 65). In Exodus, knowing is not *brute seeing*, but rather *understanding* what has been *seen*. But the error in Exodus goes beyond the first order task of listening to the proper authority; error is also possible in "failing to participate in the instruction to the degree required" (72).

In addressing Deuteronomy, Johnson takes up the question he raised in his treatment of Exodus, by what means is a prophet authenticated as an authoritative guide? He admits that "authentication of the prophetic voice who speaks on behalf of YHWH will always require special means of authentication" (85). But, he argues, the situation for Israel is no different than our own in this regard. He says, "For Israel (as for us today), epistemological ventures inherently involve risk, even ventures of divine communication with special authentication" (87). In Deuteronomy, listening and obeying are important prequalifications for being able "to see."

Next, Johnson investigates the disciples' knowing in Mark, Luke, and John. The gospels present a

picture of them “getting it wrong” quite often and being dull of seeing and hearing (98). “Brute *looking* and *hearing*” cannot rescue the disciples, but only listening to Jesus as their authoritative prophet.

In Chapter 6, Johnson turns especially to the work of Michael Polanyi, offering insight as to why his book makes use of Polanyi’s epistemology. Particularly advantageous to the theologian are Polanyi’s notions of embodied participatory knowing and its inter-personal elements. Among the highlights of this chapter is Johnson’s discussion of maximic language (aphorism) which “only attains meaning in praxis” (140). He cites wisdom literature and Ephesians as examples of maximic instruction that becomes clear through participation. To summarize, Johnson has woven the following topics into his discussion: authority, authentication, embodiment, participation, and maximic direction (149).

Finally, in Chapters 7 and 8, Johnson challenges the assumptions about reality of analytic philosophers and theologians, especially concerning the role propositions play in knowing. He criticizes analytic theology’s emphasis on propositional knowing in particular, arguing that a proposition is simply a tool for coming to know broader external reality. “There is no informational content to a proposition” (160). In other words, “[A sentence’s] significance is only between the human knowers and the role it plays as a transparent tool in epistemological process” (161). In light of this, Johnson argues for a phenomenological approach to epistemology, rather than an analytic one. A phenomenological approach recognizes creaturely limits and better reflects how knowing is *described* and *prescribed* in Scripture. In this way, Scripture is allowed to be “the epistemological guide for our theological prolegomena” (200).

Johnson does a good job of uncovering clear Scriptural epistemological themes which have been overlooked. Moreover, Johnson enacts his theory of knowledge by being the reader’s authoritative guide in *seeing* the epistemological framework that is in the text. His use of Polanyi is sufficiently *ministerial* in that it illumines the text, rather than *dominates* it. There are clear coherences between Polanyi’s scientific epistemology and biblical knowing.

And yet, while Johnson claims that his account

is *general* in the sense that it accounts for all varieties of knowing, the *special* elements that are still present in his scheme are significant. He says that “the constitutive factors [of epistemology] remain the same,” but the objects of knowing are different (17). And again, while the process of knowing is *general*, “the prophetic authentication is often *special*” (17). These differences seem significant enough to chasten any possible grand apologetic hopes in positing a *general epistemology*. In other words, for those who think religious belief is irrational in some sense, the problem of a special epistemology finally remains.

But, in the end, Johnson probably does not have these grand apologetic aims. As a necessary corrective to recent thinking on epistemology within theological studies, this volume is a valuable contribution.

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Menachem Fisch and Yitzhak Benbaji, *The View from Within: Normativity and the Limits of Self-Criticism*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2011. Pp. xiii+394, ISBN 10: 0-268-02904-0. ISBN 13: 978-0-268-02904-3. \$50.00.

The View from Within begins with the view now current in analytic philosophy that rationality and its frameworks are inherently normative in character. The authors then inquire into what this view implies about learning from critical discussion. To what extent can one distance oneself from one’s norms in order to be innovative and improve the thought of one’s self and one’s community by way of *critical interchange*?

First, the authors argue that differences in culture (“Normative Diversity”) imply the incommensurability and incomparability of cultural standards or norms (“Comparative Irrrealism”). Second, the authors argue that Normative Diversity and Comparative Irrrealism imply that rationality can either provide no effective grounds for critically evaluating the norms of a framework, since rationality can only operate within a framework, or at the most, only provide grounds for rationally fine-tuning the norms of a framework.

For the authors admit, along with other analytic philosophers, that the framework cannot be evaluated holistically so as to include the norms inherent to the framework: all internal arguments about norms must already presume our *normative commitments*. Even though we can evaluate the thoughts of other cultures, we can only understand them within our own ongoing *normative commitments* (327, n. 32). “The problem of rational norm revision...is a major one, deemed by most insurmountable” (21). However, the authors claim to provide a means within analytic philosophy to substantially improve the norms of one’s framework *through critical interchange*.

The authors’ style of philosophizing is polemical. They point out the failings of their “rivals” both as a launching point for developing their theory and as a “remedy to the failings” of their “rivals.”

The first two parts of the book present the context of the book. Philosophers influenced by Wittgenstein or his disciples, such as Rorty, Walzer, Kripke, Brandom, Kuhn, Friedman, and others, are discussed at varying lengths with a singular upshot: they do not solve the problem of rationally changing frameworks, norms and standards. Those influenced by Wittgenstein have failed to see that the speech-act of criticism performs the function of “rebuke:” “all criticism, even the most technical, involves an inherent and defining element of rebuke, an element of *normative* criticism, if you wish; a call, not merely to mend or abandon the system in question but also to *amend or abandon one’s ways*” (221). Given that one’s reasoning is anchored in certain normative commitments, how can rational self-transformation take place?

In Part III of the book, the authors develop their novel theory of internal criticism largely through a polemical discussion of Harry Frankfurt’s work, exploring the self-transformative effect of self-criticism on the level of the individual. The authors also polemically discuss the transformative effect of self-criticism on the level of the community by examining the philosophy of science of Michael Friedman and Peter Galison. However, I hope I can enhance and sharpen the book’s theory of internal criticism by

making explicit some of its Polanyian aspects.

The irony of self-criticism is that we need others, a *trusted* friend, a *mentor*, to help us see our flaws. Once our mentor points out our flaws, then four questions emerge, the last two of which are the most difficult to answer. First, why do we not just ignore the mentor’s critical remarks, especially if they call into question some of our norms? Second, on what basis can we use those critical remarks to transform ourselves? Third, while we typically seek as mentors those who are members of our own community, how can we find a mentor who is able to make critical remarks about the shared framework and norms of our community? Fourth, how do a few critics get a whole community to change its frameworks and norms?

I think the book solves all four problems with its theory of internal criticism. We should seek trusted mentors who themselves are ambivalent about the frameworks and norms of our shared community because they have gone outside the bounds of the community and explored other communities. When their ambivalence is spread to those who trust them, eventually the framework and norms of the home community shifts. In other words, internal criticism creates ambivalence within the individual and community when those we trust reveal their ambivalence to us through communicating to us their experience and understanding of the norms and standards of a different community. “Individuals can be transformed at home, from within, by members of standing and voice whose work not only reflects their own personal ambivalence, but is taken seriously enough within the community to have a corresponding ambivalating impact on a critical mass of their colleagues”(293).

Whom should one trust in a community comprised of those in a scientific discipline structured by specific assumptions? This is where the terminology of Polanyi’s theory of personal knowledge can provide some clarity. Those persons who function as mentors must be those who have been granted an *authoritative* role in a scientific community, as Polanyi suggests in speaking of the importance of apprenticeship and authority in science. More generally, usually only the criticisms of the “sages” of our communities are accorded the

power to transform the frameworks and norms of our communities. No individual and no community can transform frameworks and norms holistically. Rather, we make transitional steps with the help of piecemeal changes until entire frameworks and norms are transformed, without anyone really noticing this during the stage of transition. The complete transformation occurs by sliding our changed frameworks and norms into our *tacit knowledge*, while the old frameworks and norms become the focal point of critical discussion from the internal point of view of the new *tacit knowledge*.

In their critique of Karl Popper's approach to scientific procedure, the authors seem to take a position close to Polanyi's attention to the limits and inadequacies of frameworks:

With regard to normative commitment, the truly transformative moment of rationality...is not one of bold conjecture or keen refutation but one of disturbing, destabilizing ambivalence; a moment characterized by indecisive dithering—a state of mind not usually considered the most inspiring and motivating and therefore, not usually associated with rationality. But if there is any truth in our analysis, then the creative individuals initially responsible for rationally transforming a field are to be sought among those who were lucky to be exposed to the ambivalating challenge of trusted external critics—real or imagined. (292)

The “trusted external critics” are those authoritative mentors from outside our home community who have influenced our own authoritative mentors (“creative individuals”) if and when they open themselves to insights from outside communities or outside disciplines. The “trusted external critics” interpret their frameworks and norms to our authoritative mentors, who become intermediaries for us of the frameworks and norms of the outside communities and disciplines. When our authoritative mentors return to lead and teach us, we follow, though hesitantly and sometimes rebelliously.

In sum: the authors of this book take a view-

point of criticism generally consistent with Polanyi's emphasis upon tradition and authority, yet also acknowledge the need to break out of constricting frameworks. To make any change with the use of internal criticism, a person needs to become enmeshed in a network of *authoritative* thinkers, being especially attentive to those open to outside influences. By *indwelling* the terminologies of alternative traditions and frameworks and merging those terminologies with their own terminologies, *creative individuals* create hybridized terminologies that modify various normative outlooks and expand various traditions and frameworks. In other words, only by being acknowledged as an authoritative speaker in different communities, can you too hope to have your internal criticism taken seriously so that you can contribute to making piecemeal changes to the current frameworks and norms of your community.

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Stenmark, Lisa L., *Religion, Science and Democracy: A Disputational Friendship*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013. Pp. 230. ISBN 978-0-7391-4286-8 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-73911-4288-2 (electronic). \$70 (£ 44.95).

Stenmark's book is an analysis of and prescription for the current state of “the science and religion discourse (SRD)” (2), a public conversation in which some participants (e.g., Ian Barbour, John Polkinghorn, John Haught) have taken Polanyi to be a thoughtful resource. Stenmark does not mention or draw on Polanyi in any way, but her book is an interesting if at times dense, convoluted, and not altogether convincing discussion. Her argument has both critical and constructive elements, which unfold in eight chapters. To this reader, Stenmark's critical perspective on the SRD is more illuminating than her constructive argument, which calls for expanding the scope of SRD interests, drawing into the conversation a broader range of topics and some resources she thinks have been under-

utilized. She proposes essentially to democratize the SRD and create what she calls “a disputational friendship” between science and religion.

The current SRD is largely academic discourse configured in a way that resembles the model of so-called democratic discourse promoted by John Rawls. Stenmark call this a “doctrines and discoveries” (2) approach that focuses on truth claims as a way to discern areas of agreement and establish a firm foundation for the relationship between religion and science. The presumption of this approach is “that there are ‘hard facts’ and ‘objective knowledge’—as opposed to embedded and subjective knowledge—which can help us adjudicate our disagreements” (2). It, in short, presumes a dualistic framework and this works out in practice for scientific reasoning—giving to trump religious reason-giving; this merely increases conflict between partisans for religion and science.

Stenmark clearly recognizes that such a dualistic framework is not acceptable (and she notes that early SRD figures like Barbour said just this) and she proposes moving away from it. This move includes broadening the SRD conversation—i.e., moving from a largely academic conversation to a more public kind of discourse, which is not so fixated on truth claims and which considers a broader range of issues. Part of this move is to put to work resources whose appropriateness to the SRD have not been recognized, especially the thought of Hannah Arendt. Stenmark proposes that “the range of Arendt’s writings ultimately covered all of the relevant issues relating to the role of religion and science in public life . . .” (3). Arendt, Stenmark contends, has a method that shows “she wanted to find a way to achieve a critical position, and a mode of discourse, that did not privilege any particular authority or tradition,” a mode of discourse that valued plurality and “did not attempt to substitute itself for public judgment. But instead enhanced it” (3). Arendt thus promises to be a resource that puts science and religion on an equal footing in public discourse about public life “without sacrificing their particular commitments” (3). And the Arendt-based model for the SRD that Stenmark proposes is, as I have noted, what she discusses in the final chapters of her book and identifies as “a disputational friendship.”

I find much of Stenmark’s discussion of the problems with the current SRD in her early chapters to be insightful. She shows how increasingly pluralism draws the conversation between science and religion into the culture wars; she makes plain how the model for discourse in a pluralistic context is scientific. She calls for a new understanding of discourse which is grounded in a different understanding of authority in public discourse. She wants to link authority to belief, action and tradition and show that tradition provides both stability and a ground for growth, innovation and change. Stenmark makes some use of Arendt’s ideas in this discussion but she could, as any Polanyian will see, make her case adeptly with Polanyi.

The fourth chapter turns to a large scale explication of Arendt’s account of different spheres of human experience and activities; most of the succeeding chapters are also occupied with explaining in some detail Arendt’s positions and their relevance. Arendt’s distinctions and categories are quite complicated, and unpacking them was, to this reader, confusing. Especially this was the case because Stenmark draws into the discussion some of the criticisms and varied interpretations of Arendt’s scheme. Clearly, the author is a sophisticated Arendt reader attuned to many of the discussions in secondary literature, but her interest in the SRD sometimes gets lost in the extended discussions of Arendt. She at times seems very much engaged in shoring up Arendt, that is, in transforming Arendt’s ideas into something more useful. Stenmark intended to make a case that Arendt offers a nuanced account of politics and public life, but I don’t find this case clear.

In her fifth chapter, Stenmark, following Arendt, contends that since politics focuses on judgment and opinion, religion and science as truth-oriented, “need to be excluded from political discourse, except in limited circumstances...when people unthinkingly cling to a single truth or deny truth altogether” (141). It is clear that Stenmark wants to curtail dogmatism and premature closure in public conversations. She wants both to protect politics from truth and protect truth from politics as she later suggests. Nevertheless, is it sensible to in any way de-emphasize truth-seeking in science and religion or even politics in this postmodern, digital culture?

Stenmark's alternative is to promote storytelling as a strategy to explore disagreement in the SRD and to generate new stories. In sum, I found myself wishing Stenmark had taken a more metaphysical turn in her exploration of the problem of politics, science and religion, arguing perhaps, like Polanyi, that truth-seeking, fallible inquirers make contact with reality and come to understand reality but do not at any given time exhaustively grasp the depths of reality. Reality has indeterminate future manifestations.

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