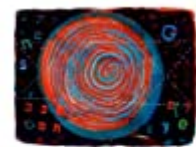




**Howard K. Wettstein.** *The Significance of Religious Experience.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xii + 223 pp. \$69.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-984136-3.



THE SIGNIFICANCE OF  
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE  
Howard Wettstein

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**Published on** H-Judaic (March, 2016)

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## Wither the Analytic Philosophy of Judaism?

I apologize for the lateness of this review, but the book under consideration merits serious attention. It is rare that the publication of a book consisting mostly of essays already in print should be a noteworthy event. But among the exceptions belongs Howard Wettstein's *The Significance of Religious Experience*. The book contains eleven chapters as well as an introduction and a brief conclusion. Of these, ten were previously published, and some of those ten have even appeared in multiple places. Why, then, should the book's release be viewed as anything more than a convenience for those who might wish to own pieces that, while scattered in academic journals or edited volumes, are still largely available readily enough to anyone with access to a university library? First, for reasons that I will discuss below, the various pieces do reflect a unified position whose coherence the new chapters in particular make evident. Second, and more important, the book represents, as far as I can tell, the first single-authored manuscript addressing contemporary issues in the relatively new and steadily growing field of analytic philosophy of Judaism,[1] a field within

which Wettstein has been identified as one of earliest and exemplary practitioners.[2]

And yet, for better or worse, the book is philosophically quirky and thus not obviously representative of any wider trend. It can be described no more aptly than as a species of analytic philosophy of Judaism or, perhaps more generally, analytic philosophy of religion; but the description fits the book somewhat uncomfortably. One reason for the poor fit we learn from Wettstein. He has serious reservations about certain tendencies within analytic philosophy, foremost among them its neglect of religion as a topic and its inadequate conceptualizations of religion in the rare instances when the topic is addressed. But my main hesitation comes from another consideration. If, as is often supposed, analytical philosophy is distinguished by its emphasis on arguments, specifically arguments intended to force their audience to prefer a particular position over any of its closest rivals, then Wettstein often does something importantly different from what analytic philosophers typically set out to do. In this review I propose to highlight what he is doing

instead, why some might sympathize with it, and why it might also disappoint certain readers. By doing so I hope to clarify the kind of reader whom Wettstein has likely targeted and to advise another kind of reader either to steer clear of the book or—hopefully—to approach it differently from how she otherwise might.

The chapters in *The Significance of Religious Experience* cover diverse topics, among which are awe, theodicy, evil, anthropomorphisms, religious commitment, exile, and forgiveness. They are linked to one another nevertheless by a few, basic philosophical concerns and commitments. In particular, Wettstein's opposition to the centrality of belief in most philosophical considerations of religion and his admittedly atypical version of naturalism comprise the book's philosophical core. In virtually all the pieces, the earliest of which date back to 1995, Wettstein voices this anti-epistemological naturalism. This "naturalism" rejects the aims of contemporary analytic philosophy, which generally uses the term to express an interest either in reducing non-natural entities and properties to natural (or physical) ones or in eliminating references to these altogether, in favor of a far more supernaturalist naturalism that features a naïve (natural) acceptance of the world and a personal God available in it through such things as prayer, experiences of awe, study, or ritual blessings.

The chapters are united in another way, however, by Wettstein's narration of his own life as a professional philosopher and an observant Jew. As he puts it, his "project is at once personal and philosophical" (p. 210). Wettstein expressly relates his philosophical position to his autobiography in the introduction, the first chapter ("Man Thinks; God Laughs"), and his "Concluding Remarks: Religion without Metaphysics," all of which are new. But even in the chapters where his philosophical claims are advanced without references to his journey back to religion, the personal side of the project is unmistakable. The book reads as an attempt to articulate from within the sense of a particular sort of religious life, the life that its author actually has come to live again, rather than as an attempt to convince those who live a different sort of religious life or who reject religion altogether that they should change either their minds or their ways. The book, in short, is confessional rather than polemical or apologetic.

Many philosophers, I imagine, will find Wettstein's goal and technique strange. As typically played, philosophy is a game in which two sides compete until one wins and the other loses, if not once and for all time then at

least till the next round of play. A slightly less typical and significantly less antagonistic version of the game is to advance philosophical arguments not so much in order to defend or defeat a position as to elucidate the contents of a position whose viability—which consists of the availability and force of its potential responses to critics' likely objections—can then be assessed.[3] But even when not outright agonistic, philosophy is characteristically a struggle with alternative positions and the reasons why someone would or should prefer one view to another.

Wettstein, by contrast, is simply not playing this game in any clearly recognizable form. He presents his position not as one would if trying to convert to it—all or at the very least a particular subset of all—those who don't share it, but instead as if trying first and foremost to relieve the frustrations of those who are like-minded. The philosophical as well as personal struggles that to him once seemed unavoidable (paradigmatically: "How do I know that God exists?") have now apparently lost their earlier force, but not under the greater force of some philosophical argument that Wettstein here shares. On the contrary, his metaphysical worries and anxieties have simply dissipated, we learn, thanks to a clearer understanding of the confusions at their root: belief in God need not be assigned a foundational importance, indeed any real importance, within a religious form of life. This philosophical therapy—the source of which is Wittgenstein—has been of benefit to Wettstein, and so he makes it available to readers who might come to experience similar relief.

How many will find Wettstein successful in relieving their metaphysical worries without receiving answers for their metaphysical questions I cannot say. But anyone who knows virtually anything about the modern (Jewish) experience will recognize familiar patterns of estrangement and return in Wettstein's autobiography. And perhaps because in its broad outlines his story is so unexceptional, his narrative works exceptionally well as a substitute for philosophers' more conventional polemical style of persuasion. Those who appreciate the appeal of Jewish tradition, who are exercised by philosophical questions, and who feel the tension between the two might find it helpful to learn how Wettstein, in his late forties, reconsidered the nature of, and made his way back to, traditional Judaism more than twenty years after philosophy first began to trouble the beliefs that he took, in his early twenties, as the necessary foundation for his life as an observant Jew.

Of course, more than a few will not be helped by this

story, as Wettstein clearly knows but does not especially care. He expects that, if his readers are anything like his usual interlocutors, they will think that he gets his views on religion and his religious life *à la* the cheap (p. 210), that is, without the sorts of convincing arguments by which, according to most philosophers historically, human beings honestly acquire their theoretical and existential commitments. And I expect that Wettstein's reaction to such readers will look much like his reaction to his friend: happy to go on talking about the issues without being bothered enough by the differences to want to find arguments forcing others to revise their views or to feel compelled to revise his own.

I have accordingly proceeded here on the assumption that it makes little sense to raise the usual kinds of philosophical objections to Wettstein's book that one might put to a book that wants to impose its position on readers who disagree.<sup>[4]</sup> He surely has already heard these objections from his many philosophical interlocutors and chosen not to reply in the way they surely demanded he must. Instead, therefore, I have tried to represent as sympathetically as I can what impresses me as the core of his project, namely, the intuition that, if the skeptical arguments which often undermine religious beliefs and with them religious lives rest on a picture of religion unrecognizable within a form of religious life, then one may cease to worry about or even have a response to that challenge. If the worries persist for some readers, then presumably it is because they remain in the grip of the skeptical picture. Although *The Significance of Religious Experience*, as a personal story in which Wettstein extricates himself from this picture with the help of philosophy or of something near enough to it, does not supply any of arguments that some require in order to follow suit, it might provide all the encouragement others need to stick with their religious lives.

Regarding the question of whether this feature of the book should be counted a strength or a limitation, I remain agnostic. I am even less sure about whether the book will end up serving as a model for the new generation of analytic philosophers of Judaism. Wettstein has prioritized potentially like-minded religious readers over his usual philosophical interlocutors, and he comes to that priority in part from an appreciation of the irrelevance of syllogisms to most people of faith historically. That fact, of course, did nothing to interfere with the

theological enterprise of devising new and better proofs for the existence of God. So it will be interesting to see whether those currently involved in the analytic philosophy of Judaism promote religiously meaningful lives or philosophically interesting arguments or, in the ideal scenario, some combination of both.

#### Notes

[1]. Analytic philosophy of Judaism should be seen as emerging in opposition to the regnant tendencies to consider Jewish philosophy within the framework of either medieval philosophy (where the enterprise can sometimes become largely of historical significance) or continental philosophy. One risks severe distortions, however, unless one understands these names to refer to ideal types rather than impermeable divisions, for they are frequently crossed by representatives of all three ideal types. What matters, I would argue, is that some contemporary scholars interested in Jewish philosophy now understand what they are doing in relationship to a different intellectual tradition than the one that they imagine having dominated Jewish philosophy for the past century, though not the one that has dominated mainstream academic philosophy.

[2]. Wettstein's *Doctrinè* (*Faith and Philosophy* 14, no. 4 [1997]), which appears in the present volume as chapter 5 under the title *Theological Impression*, was selected as the focal text for one of the first symposia hosted by the Association for the Philosophy of Judaism (<http://www.theapj.com/symposium-on-wettsteins-doctrine-theological-impressionism/>). The symposium's topic, appropriately enough, was *The Relevance of Analytic Philosophy to Judaism*.

[3]. I am grateful to Gabriel Citron for pointing out this alternative and more generally for discussing the ideas in this review.

[4]. If I had proceeded in the typical fashion, my primary demurral would have inquired about how Wettstein's God-talk without belief could avoid metaphysical or ontological commitments on a behavioristic account of belief (e.g., even without any mental picture or representations, one might reasonably be understood to *believe* a certain chair exists—and with it perhaps the external world in its entirety—whenever one goes to sit down on a chair).

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**Citation:** Sol Goldberg. Review of Wettstein, Howard K., *The Significance of Religious Experience*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. March, 2016.

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