**“Rational Rabbits and Semispecific Pigeons”**

***Dialogues of Reason: Dialogues from Within and Without,***

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How does any human being, only partially self-aware of all that has shaped her worldviews, come to change her mind? This is the central problematic of Fisch and Benbaji’s *A View from Within*. Situated at the intersection of multiple leading ethical and philosophical bloodlines, the book’s argument consistently pulls up, like a champion jumping horse, at the same Normandy bank: “If to criticize one’s norms is to prove an argument proving those faults, what could serve as its premises? What notion of normative failing is available to such an account, if the existence of external normative yardsticks is denied—both absolute and relative?” (Fisch and Benbaji 2011,195). Most serious, and most ultimately generative for the book’s project, is the alleged failure of Robert Brandom’s inferential normative pragmatism, lacking “a dynamic account of rationally becoming, being, and ceasing to be committed.” (Ibid.). The simple act of changing one’s mind turns out to be infinitely more complicated than we think: in fact, it should be impossible. We humans have, as it were, no legitimate epistemological “place to stand” when it comes to evaluating our own beliefs. “By what standards is this feat to be performed?” (Ibid.)

The remedy, the authors argue—the only true rational transformation of one’s “higher-order frameworks”—must necessarily come from without, through exposure to, and application of, a comparative metric. It is the thought of the other, from outside one’s tribe, religious tradition, or home discipline, the other who stands outside the loop of one’s foundational, yet chronically self-justifying paradigms, thus beyond one’s cognitive and cultural boundaries, who holds the key to that elusive changed mind. “In the light of what can one expose one’s own norms as normatively lacking, if not in the light of a better alternative? By what standard can one judge one’s standards, if not by comparison? (Except, of course, to be circularly judged favorably!)” (Fisch and Benbaji 2011,195).

In Peter Galison’s idea of interdisciplinary “trading zones,” the authors propose that there may be a way out of the maze of the limits of self-criticism: not one of elegant translation, but rather, of imperfect, perhaps fractious, but nonetheless functional understanding of terms from entirely different lexica, “working translations” that have the ability to rebound on both starting frameworks and destabilize them, thereby partially transforming both. Minds can be changed through encounter with the other, but only if such rapprochement is coupled with the necessity of also somehow communicating for the sake of a mutually shared goal. Galison’s original paradigm is very different from the rhetorical service into which *The View From Within* presses it, this service itself representing a kind of intellectual trading zone. In *Image and Logic: A Material Culture of Microphysics* (1997), Galison considered the increasingly unmanageable scale and complexity of experimental physics, and proposed that within that enterprise, instrument makers and theorists have developed vernacular ways to share knowledge, thus overcoming the alienation one would have been expected between them.

Two groups can agree on rules of exchange even if they ascribe utterly different significance to the objects being exchanged; they may even disagree on the meaning of the exchange process itself. Nonetheless, the trading partners can hammer out a local coordination, despite vast global differences. In an even more sophisticated way, cultures in interaction frequently establish contact languages, systems of discourse that can vary from the most function-specific jargons, through semispecific pidgins, to full-fledged creoles rich enough to support activities as complex as poetry and metalinguistic reflection. (Galison 1997, 783).

The “trading zone” is a metaphor drawn from the concrete particularity of the ancient Athenian *agora* or the modern Damascus *suk*, the osmotic marketplace that allows for trade to occur in a pluralistic environment where goods must be bought, sold, or bartered among merchants of diverse affiliations and languages. Because they need to conduct ad hoc business with one another, traders develop rudimentary *linguae francae*, “semispecific pidgins.” In any given exchange, neither member deploying the pidgin developed by both can bring to bear upon such a conversation the full semiotic wealth of her native tongue. Conversely, a word or phrase in the pragmatic “contact language” can never be spoken or heard with the same depth of understanding as a “fully-fledged” word; the marketplace pidgin, at least at the outset, cannot bring to bear the same multivalency or historical depth as either primary language.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nevertheless the working argot of the marketplace allows the merchant to exchange the copper ox-hide ingots she has brought from Malta for their equivalence in silver from the Laurian mines, or the persimmons and cedar she has brought from Aleppo to trade for dried fish and salt from Joppa. Galison borrows from the marketplace economy and its shared vernaculars (which, as performance theory has shown, must include not only vocabularies but gestures, tones of voice, body languages and proximities, see Bell: 1997) to show how scientific development can occur despite vast differences in disciplinary frameworks. Fisch and Benbaji in turn re-purpose Galison’s appropriation of the metaphor to argue that in the realm of normative beliefs, exposure to the “trading zone” can effect real dialogical reasoning. Participation in its mediative languages can affect the originary, stable, but detrimentally reflexive frameworks of the discussants. Ultimately and more radically, such participation can change their minds, even about core principles of interpretation.

Alfred I. Tauber has criticized *The View from Within* for the overly circumscribed arena (i.e., moral philosophy) in which the book wrestles with its challenges (Tauber 2012, and in his essay in this volume). *TVFW*’s pessimism about our human ability to change our minds within the confines of self-criticism, and its optimism about the potential of comparative exposure to do effect such change, finds important support, however, in other disciplines—for example, in recent developments in both neuropsychiatry and jurisprudence. When, against all odds, minds are actually changed in these comparable fields, this seems to occur through processes of oscillation and ambivalation analogous to those identified by *TVFW*.

**How minds are changed: accounts from other fields**

For all of its blindness, Freud’s famous 11-week treatment of 18-year-old “Dora” (Ida Bauer) in 1900 revealed the important psychological principle that human beings transfer to new situations powerful encoded patterns from the past (Freud [1901] 1905). This is especially true of how we initially respond to new people: “What was true for Dora, Freud realized, is true for us all: We are all defined by our earliest imprints, fated to make sense of everyone else in the limited terms of what we already know.” (Schwartz 2015). Through scanning technology, neuroscience can now map the loci of clusters in the brain that are the sources of particular emotions, suggesting how we react as we do, but also how such responses might change (Gerber *et al.*, 2008). Especially provocative is the early research of neuropsychiatrist Andrew Gerber into the question “How, exactly, do our ailing minds ever get better?” (Schwartz 2015). Gerber comments, “‘I had the sense that we had this amazing tool.. . . . An analyst sits with a patient, and over the course of weeks, months, years, the person changes. It’s not just behavioral change. Something changes about the person’s structure — their psychic structure, their character structure. Their personality changes. Every therapist feels confident in that and says they know it when they see it, and every patient who has experienced it says to you: Something shifted inside me. But we don’t know what they mean.’’ Gerber asked his colleagues to fill out extensive questionnaires about their patients, documenting on weekly basis even their slightest changes in outlook.

Over the decade it took to complete this study, Gerber saw a pattern in the patients who progressed the most. They didn’t move in a linear way from worse to better, from neurotic to not neurotic, as Gerber had supposed at the outset. Rather, roughly in the middle of their treatment, they went through a period of intense flux, oscillating between extremes of behavior, before they began to improve. Gerber uses a term from chemistry to capture what he saw: ‘‘annealing,’’ the act of heating something so that all its molecules dance around wildly and then slowly cooling it back down so that it assumes a new and more stable state (Ibid.).

In sum, what turned out to characterize significant progress was *not* gradual psychological evolution. Rather, it was a sudden period, during the course of the analysis, of polarized flux between behavioral and emotional extremes: a kind of intense ambivalation, externally manifested in action, that had the effect of internally changing “stuck” frameworks of reasoning.

Like many high courts throughout history, the U.S. Supreme Court has been notoriously unwilling to change its collective mind, partly due to its self-conceived foundation for its rulings on past precedents: the principle of stare decisis, “to stand by the things decided.” As Yale legal commentator Emily Bazelon has observed of the judicial profession as a whole,

Judges rarely change their minds. They often feel they can’t. When they put on their robes, they wrap themselves in a mythos of authority and certainty. They’re supposed to be distant, neutral and wise. They’re supposed to have all the answers. ‘Lawyers and litigants project infallibility onto judges,’ says Jeremy Fogel, a federal judge in Northern California who directs the Federal Judicial Center in Washington, which provides training for every new federal judge that addresses the formidable social expectations that come with the job. Among those expectations is one that judges get it right the first time. And so they hesitate to reverse a position they have previously taken. There’s an additional reason for this reluctance: The law makes the rules for how people order their lives. If courts are too quick to tear pieces of it down, people start wondering if it’s safe to build anywhere. More than anything else, we look to courts and judges for stability. (Bazelon 2015).

In the cases where the Supreme Court finds it necessary to correct its mistakes, the question of whether it can overrule its own precedents is far more complicated than it would appear; the simple answer, as it turns out, is “no.” In 2002, Constitutional law scholar Kenji Yoshino considered the notorious 1986 case of *Bowers v. Hardwick*, in which the Court did not find the constitutional right to privacy to extend to private consensual sexual conduct under a Texas anti-sodomy statue. The decision was publicly denounced by many, as well as openly regretted several years later by Justice Lewis Powell, who cast the deciding vote in the 5-4 decision. As Yoshino noted, “The American judicial system requires lower courts to follow Supreme Court pronouncements even if they believe they are wrongly decided. Judge Stephen Reinhardt, who serves on the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, complied with the Bowers decision in a 1988 opinion — even though he likened Bowers to Plessy v. Ferguson, the infamous 1896 case that upheld the constitutionality of ‘separate but equal’ accommodations on the basis of race. The question then arises whether there are any practical constraints on the capacity of the Supreme Court to overrule itself. Can the court overrule a precedent simply because it believes the prior case to have been incorrectly decided?” (Yoshino 2002).

In a 1992 case, Planned Parenthood v. Casey, the court answered no, stating that “a decision to overrule should rest on some special reason over and above the belief that a prior case was wrongly decided.” The court went on to outline four factors to be considered in making the decision to overrule itself: the workability of the rule, the extent to which the public has relied on the rule, relevant changes in legal doctrine, and changes in facts or perceptions of facts. (Ibid.)

On the 1992 criteria, Yoshino remarked that “there is something puzzling about requiring more of the court than a frank admission that it incorrectly interpreted the Constitution in a prior case. No court can be infallible, and public confidence in the court will not diminish if the court admits this fact.” (Ibid.). The linchpin of possibility for change in the “mind” of the court, a collective body of fallible human beings, is something of a Kantian premise: “Changes or facts *or perceptions of facts*” (italics mine). The Court can overrule itself — change its mind —“whenever the justices come to see things differently. (Ibid.)”

And how do justices come to see things differently? Essentially, through observing the consequences of their rulings in the real world — in the volatile marketplace of lived experience. Along these lines, rare individual judges who change their minds constantly check principles (Fisch and Benbaji’s “higher-order frameworks,” in this case, the tenets of the Constitution as interpreted to date) against empirical facts on the ground, the “trading zones” of the pragmatic effects of their rulings. In 1940, in *Minersville School District v. Gobitis*, the Court rejected the request of Walter Gobitis, a Jehovah’s witness, to exempt his children from their Pennsylvania public school’s requirement that they recite the Pledge of Allegiance with their classmates each morning, resulting in what Watch Tower Society president J. F. Rutherford in 1935 called a violation of faith by “ascribing salvation to an earthly emblem” (the American flag). In its ruling, the Supreme Court required all American public school children, in the name of “national cohesion” at a time of war, to say the Pledge of Allegiance. The results were horrific, including the burning of churches and the expulsion of Jehovah’s Witness children who refused to salute the flag. “By 1943, when [a similar case](https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/319/624) [*West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*) came to the court, three justices — Hugo Black, William O. Douglas and Frank Murphy — voted with a new majority to overturn the 1940 ruling. Writing to explain ‘the reasons for our change of view,’ Black and Douglas said the nation’s war effort did not ‘depend on compelling little children to participate in a ceremony which ends in nothing for them but a fear of spiritual condemnation.’ Seeing the concrete effects of the law, the justices treated the principles at stake not as absolute, but as pliable.” (Bazelon 2015). The all-too-human world of religious persecution and innocent suffering provided the marketplace whereby the Supreme Court, unable through any process of *its own* self-critical reflection on Constitutionally-based legal precedents, could change its mind. (As *TVFW* poses it, “What could serve as [the] premises [for such self-criticism]?”)

The day of this writing, June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court ruled on the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, brought by a plaintiff who had flown with his dying same-sex partner to legally wed at an airport in Baltimore, Maryland, but was then unable to apply for spousal survivor benefits after his husband’s death in the state of Ohio. By a 5-4 margin, the Court found that marriage bans in fourteen states were unconstitutional, making same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states. The Court overturned its prior decision in 1972 to dismiss the same-sex marriage claim in *Baker v. Nelson* “for want of a substantial federal question,” the precedent invoked by the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals in 2014 when it ruled that Ohio’s ban on same-sex marriage did not violate the Constitution. The majority opinion written by Justice Anthony Kennedy held that the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, addressing citizenship, due process, and equal protection under the laws, requires a State both to license a marriage between two people of the same sex and to recognize a marriage between two people of the same sex when their marriage was lawfully licensed and performed out-of-State: “The Constitution promises liberty to all within its reach, a liberty that includes certain specific rights that allow persons, within a lawful realm, to define and express their identity.” (*Obergefell v. Hodges* 2015, 1).

Crucial to our application of the paradigm of *TVFW*, while the Court’s mind had clearly been previously determined by heteronormative views of marriage (“The Court, like many institutions, has made assumptions defined by the world and time of which it is a part” [*Obergefell v. Hodges* 2015, 11-12]), and had just as clearly been changed by the “trading zone” of lived social reality, Justice Anthony Kennedy’s majority opinion was an argument about that the Fourteenth Amendment, the originary framework. He wrote that it had not been understood in its full depth: “The nature of injustice is that we may not always see it in our own times. The generations that wrote and ratified the Bill of Rights and the Fourteenth Amendment did not presume to know the extent of freedom in all of its dimensions, and so they entrusted to future generations a charter protecting the right of all persons to enjoy liberty as we learn its meaning.” (Ibid., 11). It is telling that the Court’s new interpretation to the higher-order framework, the U.S. Constitution itself, is not self-represented the Court as a change to that framework, but rather as correcting a previously incomplete understanding of it. This is the case even though this change has clearly resulted from ambivalation resulting from comparative exposure to changing social realities, rendering the framework now “discordant” with those realities:

Changed understandings of marriage are characteristic of a Nation where new dimensions of freedom become apparent to new generations.. . . . When new insight reveals discord between the Constitution’s central protections and a received legal stricture, a claim to liberty must be addressed. (Ibid., 2).

The model proposed by *TVFW* may illumine how the Supreme Court moved in nineteen years from the judicial philosophy in *Bowers* to the capacious theory of *Obergefell*. It may also however unexpectedly shed some light on the Court’s own self-representation of its moral reasoning, i.e., that the SJC did not actually change its mind but instead discovered and applied a deeper understanding of its originary higher-order framework.

**“The trading zone” as metaphor and concrete place**

It is a symptom of post-Enlightenment discourse that the move from the world of concrete, lived experience to abstraction, including metaphorical thought, is seen as equivalent to greater philosophical differentiation and sophistication. Building from Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* countered this binary, as did George Lakoff in his defense of the “embodied mind,” one that is incapable of conceptualizing without reference to the concrete details of mental implementation, including human emotions, the affective states they produce, and the world of sensorial and motor experience. In an interview on his 1999 *Philosophy in the Flesh*, co-authored with Mark Johnson, Lakoff reflected, “We are neural beings. Our brains take their input from the rest of our bodies. What our bodies are like and how they function in the world thus structures the very concepts we can use to think. We cannot think just anything — only what our embodied brains permit.” Normative limits indeed!

To reveal the concrete, historical, sensorial heritage of only one metaphor, one similar to Galison’s “the trading zone,” but with far greater range: “Beyond the pale” means something that is outrageous, beyond the limits of mutually-agreed upon limits of morality, cultural norms, or rationality. From the Latin *palus*, a support stake for a fence, the English “pale” implied as well an area in which local laws were valid (compare normative views within a cultural group). “The Pale,” however, once designated a very real boundary around late medieval Dublin and many surrounding lands in Eastern Ireland (Gaelic *An Pháil*; *An Pháil Sasanach* [“English”]): a fortified ditch ten or twelve feet high with a thorn-hedge built by the English crown in the wake of the Norman invasion in 1169. “The Pale” enclosed a legally, linguistically, and culturally English world. “Beyond the Pale” was where Irish laws, language, and customs were sovereign: hence, the place where in English eyes, outrageous, wild, and anti-nomian beliefs held sway.

As in the case of The Pale, the symbolically burdened biblical image of the incomplete tower of Babel, may have well been modeled on an historical structure in Mesopotamian memory, then retrojected into deep time by the writer of the Genesis account. The text itself interprets the building in Shinar of the Tower of Babel (Akkadian, “The Gate of God” [*bab* plus *ilu*], from the Hebrew *balal*, “to jumble, confuse, mix up,” according to Gen 11:4-9) by a post-diluvian human race who shared one common language as an etiology of the world’s plural languages. God responded to a structure that threatened heaven in its height: “And the Lord said, ‘Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.’” (Gen 11: 6-7, RSV). In Jewish histories and sacred histories (e.g., Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews*; *Third Apocalypse of Baruch*; Gen. R. 38:7; BT *Sanhedrin* 109a) and later in Christian writings (Gregory of Tours 1, 6) and Islamic texts (Q. SS. 28:36 and 40:36-37; al-Tabari), the fate of the Tower of Babel represents a divine correction of hubris and the cause of shared global unintelligibility; but its initial, unilingual construction stood for a kind of utopia. Just as Christian patristic theology saw the coming of Christ as the redemption of Adam’s fall, so the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles at Pentecost in Acts 2:1-13 explicitly restores this ideal world of one language, an undoing of the confusion at Babel:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tonguesas the Spirit enabled them.

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. (Acts 2:1-7, RSV)

The Tower of Babel may have been anything but symbolic, its prototype having quite possibly been the ziggurat named Etemenanki (Sumerian: “house of the foundation of heaven on earth.”). In the 7thc.- 6th c. BCE, the neo-Babylonian dynasts Nabopalassar and his son Nebudchadnezzar II rebuilt the tower temple for Marduk that the former claimed an earlier king had begun, but who “did not complete its head. Since a remote time, people had abandoned it, without order expressing their words.”[[2]](#footnote-2) A much earlier Sumerian legend (21st c. BCE), *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*, gives a similar account, whereby the king, seeking to levy tribute payments for the construction of the great Abzu temple to the god Enki at Eridu, importunes him to restore unity in the confusion of tongues among the regions of the world, including the peoples of Shubur, Hamazi, Summer, Akkad, and the Martu land, that Enki “shall change the speech in their mouths, as many as he had placed there, and so the speech of mankind is truly one.. . . . The whole universe, the well-guarded people — may they all address Enlil together in a single language!” (*Enmerkar* 134-155).[[3]](#footnote-3) The black stone *Tower of Babel Stele* in the Martin Schøyen Collection, dating from the first half of the 6th c. BCE, the time of Nebudchadnezzar II, represents the rebuilt Entemenaki, which would have been 91 m. (300 ft.) in height, and it is almost certainly the “sacred precinct of Zeus Beleus [Akkadian Bel]” described by Herodotus in his *Histories* (1.181) in 440 BCE. The Biblical Tower of Babel had a long symbolic afterlife in reception history, but it was a symbol shaped by human experience of materiality, a monumental structure that existed in time and space.

Encouraged by Lakoff’s anchoring of thought and therefore, of opinion, in concrete histories and embodied experience, we can turn to the kind of “trading zone” that changes minds recommended by *The View from Within*: ritual space and its complex traffic of votive action. In theory, built sanctuaries and their associated periphera are dedicated to particular forms of worship; as Moshe Halbertal said of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, ““When you bring the religious dimension, it absolutizes the conflict — you can divide land, you can divide security, but the sacred is indivisible.” (Rudoren 2014).

In practice, such spaces, even those that are of central religious significance, are often porous, heterodox arenas of shared religious activity and multiply interpreted meanings. They are non-metaphorical trading zones, extending to the theaters of lived religious experience Galison’s idea of shared, self-translating, imperfect discourses among diverse constituencies.

For example, the tombs (*dargah*s) of the Chisti saint Nizamuddin Auliya (1239-1325) and his disciple Amir Kusrau in Dehli are sought by Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, and Christian pilgrims from all over India and the world; they visit the saints (*’awliyah*, “helpers of God”) and ask them for healing and intercession for themselves but far more often, for loved ones. Increasingly deep theological fissures within Islam have made the largely Shi’i and Sufi traditions of veneration at *dargah*s, long deemed heterodox by Sunni Muslims and heretical in Wahabi eyes, increasingly controversial and even dangerous.

Saints and their tombs, where they are believed to be, in a sense, alive and praising God, are so interchangeable that in Palestine, *wali* is used both for a holy person and his or her tomb. Pilgrims visiting the saints pray out loud, hands open, palms upturned, for the intercession and help of Hizamuddin and Kusrau, often tying written requests on paper, strings, and pieces of clothing to the metal grille surrounding the tombs. In Galison’s terms, one might say they share an agreed-upon lexicon of ritual gestures for attracting the pity of the holy ones, “function-specific jargons” deployed in the interests of ritual efficacy — bargaining with God, attracting His attention, entreating Him to change the course of events as they are currently unfolding, sickening the beloved child, parent, or sibling.

If this in fact the case, if ritual spaces are non-metaphorical “trading zones” of the first order, the question might then be: does ritual space introduce the possibility of ambivalation to religiously orthodox (closed) ideologies? Can it, as Fisch and Benbaji suggest, offer an arena for minds to “become ambivalated,” to shift from normative, self-ratifying religious positions to ones that are differently inflected, perhaps even by multiple perspectives that contradict former opinions as well as one another? In his “Dictionary of Unendurable English,” Robert Hartwell Fiske calls “ambivalate” “another stillborn word from the social sciences.” “It is meant to mean ‘to vacillate between opposing interests, desires, or views,’ which of course is what the flourishing ‘be ambivalent about’ has long meant.” (Fiske 2011, 44). Poet Christopher Kelen takes a less curmudgeonly view of the neologism, seeing it as a way to “contradict yourself creatively”:

[Whereas] for most purposes in writing, we use the logic of yes or no, in poetry there’s a logic of yes *and* no. How to ambivalate? It’s as simple as thinking two conflicting things at the one time. . . as simple as having two conflicting desires . . . as simple as being of two or more minds at once, like Wallace Stevens’ tree of three minds in which there are three blackbirds . . . Ambivalating could be the expression of a failure to decide. Or it could be the result of a conflicted decision, of having decided two opposite things at once. . . . Without that kind of conflict within, a poem lands in the dull realm of the already known. *The way things are is what poems are written against. The openness of the possible is about a doubt as to all of that.* Engaging that doubt, poetry gets to be decided and not at the same time. Look at the way ambivalence is expressed in Sándor Weöres’ poem, “Orpheus Killed.”[[4]](#footnote-4) . . . This is a poem about not knowing who you are or how you came to be. *If you can see things from another point of view, if you can see the other side of the story, then often it’s hard to get your mind made up. Affinity with ambivalence is what makes most modern poetry more or less the opposite of an argument. Which is not to say it can’t be persuasive.* (Kelen 2011, 166; italics mine).

“The way things are is what poems are written against. The openness of the possible is about a doubt as to all of that.”

There is perhaps no more continuously ambivalated entity in religious tradition than the God of the Hebrew Bible, who, in response to human actions and the shifting loyalties of human hearts, acts and then regrets; who declares His intent and then does the opposite; who can be argued with, cajoled, persuaded to change His mind by 180°. God’s double-mindedness can be said to pour itself into the ambivalated discourse of the rabbinical literatures, even while the rabbis debate the meaning of His Torah along with His ability to interpret it, as Menachem Fisch examines with delighted precision in *Rational Rabbis: Science and Talmudic Culture*. Fisch observes how often a heterodox (which he calls “anti-traditionalist”) theological position will be set forth and vigorously defended in rabbinical discourse, producing an acute tension with normative lines of interpretation—only to have that second voice, that of the “devil’s advocate,” muted by the end of the discussion. What Fisch calls “second-order polyphony” in rabbinical texts, he argues, is comparable to the creation of scientific inquiry, and the process of reflection on human achievement. He characterizes the entire enterprise of the Talmud as one “in which an astonishingly broadly conceived horizontal dialogism, extending far beyond the world of rabbinic disagreement to include even the prostitutes of Rome, can be shown to be pressed into the service of a radically confrontational engagement of all four of Judaism’s main vertical sources of religious authority: Scripture, the law, the institutions of law, and the Almighty Himself.” (Tirosch-Samuelson 2014). Similarly, Fisch locates in Maimonides’ *Hilkhot Tshuva* the impossibility of private self-examination and its corollary, the necessity of public self-examination:

Like the Talmud’s understanding of the Hillelite approach, Maimonides also clearly senses that such feats of self-alienation are humanly impossible; that we can only ever achieve a truly reflective grip on our own heartfelt commitments when challenged normatively by people differently committed. For rather than describe *tshuva* as a painful inner process of private self-grappling, as one might have expected, Maimonides insists repeatedly on *tshuva*’s public dimensions. Thus he insists that one should articulates one’s failings publically, move out of the comfort zone of one’s consensual community, change one’s name, and most importantly, cease to be defensive and expose oneself willingly to the rebuke of others.

(Ibid.)

Ritual is often accused of artifice and insincerity, but that is because it is misunderstood as intending an indexical, albeit mystified, representation of socio-religious reality. In fact, as Seligman, Weller, Puett, and Simon argue in *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (2011), ritual intends no such thing (see Seligman et al. 2011). The compelling power of ritual lies in its ability to create a subjunctive world, an “as-if world” that does *not* ideally represent or even recombine real elements, but instead sublimates this world and creates a transcendent, parallel one. This is an unreal reality where what has been torn asunder can be put back together, and where the paradoxical tension of opposites can be presented as entirely harmonious: because it is, in fact, harmonious with God’s eternally ambivalated essence.

God is nothing if not multidimensional, polyphonous; He is His own Tower of Babel prior to its fall. His essence can be expressed not in only a few of His myraid creatures, but in any of them, as Father Thomas Hopko reminded me once of Thomas Merton’s words: “And when you go out in the morning, and see the rabbits upon the green sward, you should contemplate the rabbithood of God.” (Patton 200, 401). God is at the same time of one mind, two minds, or many minds. He constantly changes His mind in scriptures and holy literatures. In Islam, He has 99 names, describing divine qualities many of which contradict one another: He is Az-Zahir (the Manifest, the Outer) and Al-Batin (the Unmanifest, the Hidden); Al-Khafid (the Abaser, the Humiliator) and Ar-Rafi (the Exalter). In the medieval *Mir’aj Nameh*, the account of the Prophet’s ascension to the seventh heaven, Muhammad, after descending from a fiery face-to-face audience with God on His throne, encounters Moses who urges him to go back to the table on the requirement of 50 prayers a day for Muslims; the Prophet bargains God down to five. In the Talmudic tractate *Berakot,* God regrets His destruction of His own Temple, and bewails it loudly thrice nightly, defying the angels who praise His nature. In *Avodah Zarah*, He ambivalates mightily on a daily basis, sitting on the seat of justice, where He judges the world and finding it wanting in righteousness — deciding to destroy it, then switching to the seat of mercy, where He decides instead not only to spare the world but to feed every living creature in it. In the book of Jonah, He sends the reluctant Jonah to preach the destruction of the Nineveh; when every inhabitant of the city repents in fasting and sackcloth, even the animals, He spares them all, much to Jonah’s disgust —since his prophetic credibility is shattered. God does not apologize for it, either: “And should not I pity Nin’eveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (Jonah 4:11). What, in the terms of the religious imagination, causes God, who as “creator, creating, becomes. . . in singular plurality” (Keller 2003, 182) to change His mind?

An extension of the framework of *A View From Within* might show that engaging in the “foreign” rituals of another tradition, in advocacy for the sake of another person from that tradition who suffers, has a transgressive and sacrificial power that transcends the efficacy of more familiar intercession. When one speaks in a language that is not one’s own, or performs religious actions that are foreign, one does not bring the rich Geertzian wealth of nuance to the words one uses or the ritual actions one performs as a native would bring to bear. One uses the language or performs the ritual only in order to be effectively understood. But the hearer of those same words spoken by a non-native speaker brings to bear in her or his hearing their entire heritage of resonance and meaning. For the performer of the ritual that is foreign to her, the ritual is a foreign language. For the sufferer on whose behalf she performs it, it is a rich gesture full of familiar meaning. And this sacrificial discomfort is especially likely to take place in a religious sanctuary or other liminal space, the “trading zone” of variant ritual actions.

In God’s case, the use of intercessory prayer or ritual for the sake of someone who is from another tradition may work in an analogous way. For God, the ritual action of one religion performed by a member of a different one, especially one that is performed in the hope of alleviating suffering, is a semi-specific pidgin, one that shocks in its awkwardly subjunctive idealism. As the original polyglot to whom no language and no ritual is foreign, God may especially treasure the sacrificial effort made by the speaker to use another’s ritual language. As Stanley Tambiah has noted, magical formulae in texts may be an attempt, like a legal brief presented to a judge, to translate the petitioner’s claim into language that would be appropriate to the court, and thereby efficacious (Tambiah 1973). We might imagine that a self-sacrificial gesture, performed in the heavily accented *lingua franca* of a non-native, could ambivalate God’s usual syntax of meaning, perhaps changing His mind.

Four cases of religious ethnography follow, which may gesture to some of these processes. They will show, I believe, not that Halbertal is wrong in principle—sacred space is indeed often claimed to be indivisible, unshare-able; in practice, however, ritual spaces often serve as liminal trading zones that can destabilize not only normative human frameworks, changing human minds, but perhaps also the Divine Mind itself. The question of their ultimate nature or their effiacy must remain a mystery.

**A crisis of birth**

Over twenty years ago, after years of barrenness, an Eastern Orthodox Christian priest and his wife finally conceived a child. As in the ancient Christian church, Orthodox priests are not only permitted, but encouraged to marry, unless they are called to the bishopric or a higher ecclesiastical office, in which case they must remain celibate. One night the presbytera awoke vomiting, with severe pain in her right abdomen and vaginal bleeding. Her pregnancy was ectopic, with the fertilized egg blocked in a damaged fallopian tube, prevented from entering the uterus. The zygote had implanted and grown there, rupturing the tube. Hemorrhaging, she was rushed by ambulance into emergency surgery at a leading urban research hospital. The Muslim obstetric surgeon on call operated all night to resect the tube and save her patient’s life. She did both. The presbytera survived and did not bleed to death; although one fallopian tube was lost, the surgeon determined that the other was viable and that she might still be able to conceive and bear a child in the future.

Covered with the priest’s wife’s blood, the surgeon came out of the operating suite to tell him this news. Weeping, he took both of her hands in his, and said: “May Allah bless you and the work of your hands.”

Praying in the liminal zone of a hospital, where doctors work as hard to save the life of a terrorist as the life of his victim in the next operating room, the priest asked God to bless the surgeon and her hands’ lifesaving work. Rather than using the Greek “Theos” or the generic English “God,” he used the name by which she would call God. Less than a year later, the presbytera, unable to conceive with two Fallopian tubes, went on to conceive a healthy son with only one.

**A crisis of life**

A Christian woman who had suffered a paralyzing bout of depression and panic disorder in her early twenties, an inherited condition, suddenly found herself twenty years later in the same terrible straits. The mother of a young daughter and pregnant with another, she lost the will to live. She wrote,

I have lost what small anchor I had in consciousness, in discrimination, in rationality. The past with its wild parade of unredeemed memories floods me as though I were pinned beneath a boulder at the bottom of a river. I cannot possibly surface. Regrets. Yearning for what I’ve lost, or in my ignorance destroyed. Vanished beauty: a face like an angel’s, a tree cut down. The ghostly touch of lost lovers. Unfinished projects. Cruelties I’ve committed. Pain I’ve caused, and pain I’ve borne. Complex, difficult stories I have lived out that will simply have no conclusion, nor even any real ending. My life half-gone. My soul half-dead. While the past drowns me, the future is roaring, just down river. I hear the great cataract of fear, the death-fall one no one can survive, so everyone portages around. I can’t think of how to portage. I am pinned at the bottom of the river, where the stones are rolling and knocking against one another in the deep currents. I am looking up through the boiling waters at the strange bright mirror of the sky. If I ever make it up there, up to the air, I will surely be swept over the falls. If I ever breathe again, I’ll die at once.

Unable to go on but also unable to end her own life, killing her unborn child and leaving her daughter motherless, she thought of the shrine of the Crucifixion at Golgotha at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. There, it is believed, Jesus’ blood ran down the Roman cross and deep into the rock beneath where the skull of Adam was buried, redeeming the sins of the world. It occurred to her that someone could light a votive candle for her at the altar there and pray to God to help her. But the Greek Orthodox nun she knew well, along with her abbot and entire community, had left the ancient Monastery of the Cross in Jerusalem years earlier and returned to Greece. The closest friend she had in Israel was an Orthodox Jew. She wrote to him and asked if he would do this: cross the threshold of a Christian shrine, not as a scholar or a tourist, but as a petitioner, to perform the ritual action of a Christian believer. This ritual action was not only unfamiliar to him; it was halakhically forbidden.

A few days later, wearing his *kippah*, the Jew nevertheless crossed the stone threshold of the Holy Sepulchre, climbed the stone stairs to the smaller sanctuary where the icon of Christ on the cross hung behind a marble altar, surrounded by a hundred or more lit brass lamps, and asked the hieromonk attending the shrine how he could light a candle for a friend. The Greek Orthodox priest handed him a beeswax taper and showed him how to light it from the central candle in the sand-filled candle-stand. He said a prayer for his Christian friend, a prayer performed with a ritual gesture so transgressively foreign as to be interpretable as an offense not only to God but to the Jewish people, especially those who had been persecuted by Christians in the past. But because he temporarily adopted the ritual language that was intelligible between God and his friend in her own tradition, asking God to change His mind and to lift her affliction in ritual terms that were hers and not his, the Jewish petitioner manifested the kind of sacrificial love that breaks open normative frameworks, including the usual transactional rules of ritual prayer.

From that moment, the woman did begin from then on to recover from her lethal depression. It seemed to her that because the lighting of the candle came at the cost it did, it worked, and changed the catastrophic trajectory of her illness. Perhaps because the candle was lit as an act of *avodah zarah* (foreign worship) for the sake of another — because, like the Christian priest’s prayer to God using His Islamic name, the Christian votive candle and prayer of the Jew was offered in a “contact language” born from necessity — it had gathered to itself a stronger and more persuasive power in God’s court. Perhaps, in its strangeness, its forbidden and halting ritual idiom that was deployed out of sacrificial love, it had changed God’s mind and the woman’s destiny.

**A crisis of death**

At the *dargah*s of the 16th-century Chisti Sufi saints of India and Pakistan, such as those of Nizamuddin and Kusrau in Dehli, or in the last century that of Hazrat Inayat Khan nearby, *pir*s, spiritual teachers who claim to be the direct descendants of the saints, sit at the shrines and meet their disciples there. The *pirzade* are also custodians who have authority to distribute the wealth of the saints to those who seek his help. Pilgrims of multiple religious traditions share an oddly common understanding and non-doctrinal use of the language of supplication. They come to seek cures for their own hopeless illnesses, or those suffered in their families, or the most mundane afflictions; they come to prevent, as the Jesuit anthropologist Desiderio Pinto wrote in 1985, “the recurrence of a calamity in their lives. . . one forty-year old man told me that seven brother and sisters before him were still-born. Fearing that he too would be still-born, his parents came and prayed at the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Thankful for sparing their eighth child’s life, the parents became annual pilgrims. The son continues visiting the dargah every six months, even though he lives in Calcutta. A Hindu woman told me she has been visiting the dargah for the last thirty years to ensure that her only surviving child continues to live.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Among Pinto’s accounts, this particular one is wrenching:

The pirs and pirzade are also approached for advice on all kinds of problems, both spiritual and mundane, and for monetary help. One poor Hindu who had just come to Dehli lost his five-year-old daughter in a road accident. One afternoon, when I was present, he approached the pirzade for help to release her corpse from the police morgue, and for money to conduct the funeral rites. To please the pirzade he even offered to have her buried like a Muslim. The pirzade told him to cremate her as per his Hindu custom and promised to pay all the expenses so incurred. Then they sent one of their own men to help him get the corpse released and to arrange the funeral (Pinto 1989, 116).

The poor father was willing, for the sake of giving his five-year old daughter the dignity —and Hindu religious obligation—of a funeral, to have her “buried like a Muslim.” In Hindu theological terms, this would have imperiled her soul’s ability to be freed from her body and reincarnated into a higher birth in the samsaric cycle, only possible on the cremation pyre. In representing the mind of the Muslim saint, “alive in his tomb,” as willing to pay for the Hindu funeral of the child of a Hindu father too impoverished even to bribe the police to surrender her body, the *pirzade* defied funerary prohibitions; in Islamic terms, cremation destroys the body, which then cannot be resurrected at the *Yawm al-Qiyāmah*. In the “trading zone” of the shrine, this exchange represented a quickly generated but functional language between the two men, one reflecting concessions from both of them for the sake of the dead child, transcending religious vocabularies and mortuary traditions. In any religious tradition, there is probably nothing more ritually conservative that the rules pertaining to the proper treatment of a corpse. Individual and community eschatologies depend on these rules. The common ground found by the *pirzade* and the bereaved father was holy ground; radical and heterodox, but efficacious in its power.

**Semi-specific pigeons**

In February 2000, for the first time, Muslim scholars in substantial numbers attended the annual meeting of the Osher International Theology Institute at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. For over fifteen years the conference had featured the close study of texts by Jewish and Christian scholars from Europe, America, and Israel; this time, at the opening reception, one heard Arabic amid the sounds of English and Hebrew, and in the week that followed, Qur’anic and Hadithic passages were studied alongside Talmud, Mishnah, the New Testament, Augustine, and Luther in the smaller hevruta groups. Midweek during each year’s conference the group traditionally took a field trip, in some way thematically linked to the chosen theme.

Six months before the second intifada was ignited on the Temple Mount, forty-five scholars visited the Haram al-Sharif, including the Dome of the Rock, the Dome of the Chain, and al-Aqsa Mosque. Many of us stepping into that space were transgressing all kinds of *haram*, prohibited, indivisible sacred space. Some were Orthodox Jews who, respecting the more conservative halakhic teachings that held that the site of the Jerusalem Temple could not be securely established, had never set foot on any of the Temple Mount; a number of the Jewish scholars in our conference stayed behind for that reason.

Entering the Dome, the light poured through the stained-glass windows on the course of the building supporting the great dome, illumining the enormous rough-hewn rock at the center with the footprints left by the Prophet as he ascended on the back of al-Buraq on the *mi‘rāj nāmeh*—the vast, rough rock traditionally believed to be the site of the *aqedah* and the capstone of the watery Abyss, the rock that once undergirded, as archaeological analysis strongly implies, the Holy of Holies. The archaeological director of the Palestinian *waqf* administering the Haram al-Sharif, offering the tour, stopped at the center of the building at the reliquary of the Prophet’s hair. Gesturing upward with his hand, he said, “Well, here is the Dome.” The, pointing at the great stone, he said, “And here is the Rock.”

We laughed so loudly that a guard asked us to be quiet, as we were disturbing people at prayer in various corners of the Qubbat As-Sakhrah. Above us, flitting in the Dome like angels, flew the doves who made their homes there. They were dwellers of the air in that celestial dome of the oldest Islamic building in the world. They were reminiscent of the doves released into the oculus of medieval Churches on the Feast of Pentecost to symbolize the descent of the Holy Spirit: the multiplicity of languages and the endlessly changing ways human beings try to use them to communicate with God. And they were almost certainly the direct descendants of the doves who lived in and around the Jerusalem Temple when it stood, sacrificed there by the poor who could not afford a *qurban* of sheep or oxen. They belonged to everyone and to no one.

Even though, as a Christian, I can now no longer enter that majestic shrine in the foreseeable future, I remember well those “semi-specific pigeons” we saw in 1999. Transcending particularities but visible to all who looked up, flitting far above the great Rock entangled in its ancient histories, they are surely flying there still.

**The price of true change**

Fisch and Benbaji have shown that changing one’s mind cannot be done in isolation. Nor can it be done through self-evaluation, for we are indeed fated to make sense of every new situation and to solve every new problem in “the limited terms of what we already know.” True change can only be accomplished by taking the vulnerable step into the marketplace of the other, the trading-zone of experience, where one must speak in unfamiliar ways, as must the other, in order mutually to be understood. All, even God, must there endure the discomfort of ambivalation; all must be disoriented to be reoriented. The trading-zone is a place of sacrifice.

But at the end of the day, Normative Diversity, one might say, has morphed from being the source of the problem to the key to solving it.. . . For although rationality ultimately resides in the intrasubjective, it becomes in a sense intersubjectively “communicative,” although not in Habermas’s sense of the term. And it is a picture that fully applies to the sciences, as long as their story is narrated richly enough to include the normative diversity experienced at the science’s various trading zones and the impact of the community of those who return from them sufficiently ambivalated to rethink the field.

But all this has come at a price many may not be willing to pay. . .

(Benbaji and Fisch 2011, 300).

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1. Of course it is understood that some pidgins or working contact languages, Haitian Creole and Yiddish being excellent historical examples, develop into full-fledged, linguistically evolving languages once they are learned and spoken as primary by the descendants of the initial generation of speakers. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Since that time earthquakes and lightning has dispersed its sun-dried clay; the bricks of the casing had split, and the earth of the interior has been scattered in heaps. Merodach [Sumerian Amar.Utu; Marduk], the great lord, excited my mind to repair this building. I did not change the site, nor did I take away the foundation stone as it had been in former times. So I founded it, I made it; as it had been in ancient days, I so exalted the summit.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We know that the Enki’s vast *Abzu* (ancestor of the Septuagint’s *Abyssos* [alpha privative plus *bythos*, depth?] and the English word “abyss”) was an historical building, quite probably the original Etemenanki. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. . . . Stone I am and metal I am

   on a slave’s cross. The corpse is staring wide-eyed,

   grief rolls from the drum and I dance. I am everything

   and I am nothing: oh. Look at me. I am everyone

   and I am no one. . .

   Cain I am and saint I am: kneel at my feet.

   Leper I am and clean I am: touch me. . .

   Mindless I am and wise I am,

   ask no questions, understand in silence. Dead I am

   and alive I am, a dumb face, I. A wax-face

   sacrifice turns skyward, ringed by staring horror, grief

   rolls from the drum and I dance.

   From Sándor Weöres, “Orpheus Killed,” trans. Edwin Morgan, 1970. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Desiderio Pinto, S.J., “The Mystery of the Nizamuddin Dargah: The Accounts of Pilgrims,” in *Muslim Shrines in India*, ed. Christian W. Troll (New York and Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1989), 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)