

Interpretation

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Discussion

Reply to Lowenthal

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In his comment on my recent article in *Interpretation*, David Lowenthal argues that I contradict myself. The alleged contradiction is between my assertion that God is the absolutely other and the biblical account, wherein God is the provider-judge, the God whose goodness men trust. I contradict myself, according to Lowenthal, because I try to combine the absolutely other and the provider-judge, the biblical God, in one account of God.

I admit to being puzzled by the assumption that I treat God as the provider-judge (a phrase I never used). I would have thought that my remark about sinners in the hands of an angry God indicates only that imagination can obscure one's reason [*Interpretation* 18 (1990): 149]. I believe I am perfectly candid in confessing that I would not want to be misled by my imagination. If my reference to an angry God is the only support for the claim that I treat God as the provider-judge, then I regret misleading my reader, but think myself absolved of the contradiction in question.

Since the provider-judge cannot be simply hidden, perhaps Lowenthal characterized God as the provider-judge in order to explain why I speak of God as revealed. In any case, if God is revealed, then He cannot be the absolutely other. What is absolutely other cannot be revealed, since in the instant that it is revealed it ceases to be simply or completely other. According to Lowenthal, I contradict myself by treating God as both revealed and absolutely other. I readily agree that an account of God that ascribed to Him both these characteristics would in this respect be self-contradictory. But this is a contradiction I point out (*ibid.* p. 148 bottom), not one I fall into.

Perhaps Lowenthal's main point is that the contradiction between provider-judge and absolutely other—whether or not I see it as a contradiction—is one of my own making. More specifically, he claims that this contradiction is not traceable to the Bible. He writes that I leave the biblical view of God “far behind” when I treat God as the absolutely other. He recognizes that by calling God the absolutely other, I refer to God's utter mysteriousness or unintel-

ligibility. The claim that I leave the Bible “far behind” is based on the view that the biblical God is not mysterious and unintelligible. (So far as I can see, Lowenthal does not attempt to show that I am wrong about the Christian God, who is three in one, very God and very man.)

Something is amiss here because in his review of Strauss’s book, Lowenthal writes that the Bible extends God’s mystery “as far as possible.” He recognizes that the biblical God of power and mystery is in tension with the God of love and justice (the provider-judge of his comment), since the moral concerns of the latter must be intelligible to man. Indeed, he calls this tension “a fundamental psychological difficulty within the Bible as a whole” [*Interpretation*, 13 (1985): 317]. The contradiction Lowenthal reads into my position is the contradiction that he himself sees in the Bible as a whole.

Perhaps a “fundamental difficulty” is not a contradiction. In his comment, Lowenthal suggests that in the Bible “God’s ways are indeed mysterious, but this does not mean He Himself is inherently and totally mysterious.” The principle of contradiction is here brought into play in order to say that God is mysterious in one way but not in another. But is it persuasive to claim that God’s ways, His actions in history, are mysterious and miraculous, but that He Himself is knowable (consider *Exodus* 33: 20 and *Hebrews* 11: 1)? Maimonides interprets the Bible in just the reverse sense, suggesting that God’s ways can be known but not His essence (*Guide* I 54). The insistence that God’s essence cannot be known seems to me necessary if God is to be perfect yet one and of infinite power. That these characteristics belong to God seems to me to be a reasonable interpretation of what the Bible says. On the assumption that God’s essence is unknowable, Maimonides goes on to say that “One must likewise of necessity deny, with reference to Him, His being similar to any existing thing” (*Guide* I 55, Pines tr.). By implication God does not even exist in the same way that other existing things do (an equivocality Lowenthal in his comment appears to reject). This radical dissimilarity to any existing thing is what I tried to capture in the phrase “absolutely other.”

Lowenthal and I see the same contradiction between the claim to be revealed, just, and loving and the claim to be hidden, unseen, or mysterious. We disagree in so far as he is certain that an argument is refuted if one finds a contradiction in it. I am not sure that this is the case with respect to a truly fundamental argument or position. When Socrates claims to know that he knows nothing, he contradicts himself to the extent that he must know what knowing is. But does this paradox refute him?

A self-contradictory statement could be defended only if reality itself somehow contained a contradiction. If “reality” is the world we see and touch, then Plato seems to have thought that reality to be so obviously self-contradictory as to justify him in positing another reality, the “ideas,” which, we are told, are not self-contradictory (though to many readers they no doubt seem to be one of the most self-contradictory things in Plato). While Plato’s surface teaching in

itself proves nothing, it does raise the question how we would prove that the reality of the every day world is not self-contradictory. Could we use the principle of contradiction in our argument? Or would the use of this principle to prove that reality conforms to the principle be an instance of circular and, hence, invalid reasoning? (Nowhere does Lowenthal address the detailed argument I make about the contradictory nature of reality on pages 149–50 of my article.)

From Maimonides and Aquinas to Kierkegaard and Bultmann, believers who are aware of philosophy have stressed the mysterious aspect of God in order to clearly differentiate between faith and philosophic knowledge. No doubt, in so doing, they expose just the kind of fundamental difficulty Lowenthal discusses (e.g., *S. Th.* I, q.4, a.3, reply 4). In so far as they continue to believe, they continue to live with or in contradiction. It is another question whether the believing mind is the one that can best understand and accept this situation or whether the believer is not at bottom always seeking release into the clear either/or of Kierkegaard's choice. Lowenthal, at least, seems to think that it is the philosopher who must resolve contradiction; a man who would be rational "must go one way or the other." Perhaps so, yet I puzzle over the seemingly contrary view expressed by Leo Strauss in his reply to Kojève [*On Tyranny* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 210].

Philosophy as such is nothing but genuine awareness of the problems. It is impossible to think about these problems without becoming inclined toward a solution. Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the "subjective certainty" of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born.