

Article

On Divine Rebaptism

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Abstract: Divine rebaptism occurs when a deity renames an entity with a proper name N^* , which is pronounced differently or is orthographically distinct from the proper name N this entity previously had. *Genesis* 17:5 and 17:15 illustrate this phenomenon or alleged phenomenon while raising two questions not yet addressed. First, the identity question: Are those named “Abram” and “Sarai”, respectively, identical to those named “Abraham” and “Sarah” in *Genesis*? Second, the semantic question: What picture of the semantics of proper names best accounts for the divine rebaptisms portrayed in *Genesis*? This essay begins by motivating these questions; it indicates that they should—in an interdisciplinary fashion—appeal to *Pentateuch* specialists and philosophers interested in the semantics of proper names. Then, a case is made for the claim that though *Genesis* does not provide sufficient evidence to answer the identity question, it indicates a response to the semantic one: that especially in *Genesis* 17:5 and 17:15, this text points to gradation semantics. This is the view that proper names have the properties of being meaningful, indirect, flaccid, flexible, and lexically univocal in distinct degrees, depending on their context of use.

Keywords: *Genesis*; proper names; Abram–Abraham; Sarai–Sarah; interdisciplinarity

1. Introduction

Genesis 17 portrays a deity (hereafter, *Yhwh* (יהוה)) as uttering:

- (1) No longer shall your name be אַבְרָם, but your name shall be אַבְרָהָם (Gen. 17:5).
- (2) As for שָׂרַי your wife, you shall not call her שָׂרַי, but שָׂרָה shall be her name (Gen. 17:15).

Let me begin by adopting the traditional translations of the Hebrew names, “אַבְרָם”, “אַבְרָהָם”, “שָׂרַי”, and “שָׂרָה”, respectively, “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah”¹.

The term “baptism” has been sometimes applied in reference to an action that involves immersion or spraying with water. However, this essay follows Saul Kripke [2] (p. 96) in taking baptism to be an action of giving someone or something a proper name N . Passages (1) and (2) illustrate what may be called divine rebaptisms. That is when a deity renames a person with a proper name N^* , which is pronounced differently or is orthographically distinct from the proper name N this person was previously baptized with². I would like to suppose that *Genesis* purports to account for actual persons, not fictional characters.

One question that (1) and (2) raise is the identity one: Are the persons called “Abram” and “Sarai” who purportedly were rebaptized by *Yhwh* numerally identical (hereafter, identical) to the ones called “Abraham” and “Sarah”, respectively? Another question that (1) and (2) raise is the semantic one: To put it in Kripke’s terms [2] (p. 96), what “picture” of the semantics of proper names provides the best account of divine rebaptism? As far as I know, these questions have never been addressed. Nonetheless, they should appeal to two apparently unrelated kinds of scholars.



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The first scholars at stake are *Pentateuch* specialists, such as Ronald Hendel and Albert de Pury, who have commented on *Genesis* or, more specifically, on *Genesis* 17, (1) or (2) [4,5]. While addressing (1), Hendel urges his readers to “note the *transformation of identity* implied in the name change from Abram to Abraham” [4] (p. 131, my emphasis). In a similar fashion, de Pury underlines that Abram “*becomes* Abraham” [5] (p. 224, my translation and emphasis). As indicated by works that focus on Sarai–Sarah—for instance, Savina J. Teubal’s and Phyllis Tribble’s—it is plausible to read (2) in a similar vein [6–8]. This is to state that there seems to be a “transformation of identity” implied in the name change from “Sarai” to “Sarah” so that the woman designated by the former “becomes” the one designated by the latter³. However, *Pentateuch* specialists have not relied on more properly philosophical resources, such as those indicated by John Locke or Derik Parfit, that allow for a distinction between two readings of (1) and (2) [10,11].

The first reading is the metaphorical one according to which “Abram = Abraham” and “Sarai = Sarah” are true identities. Thus, “Abram” and “Abraham” would designate the same man. Similarly, “Sarai” and “Sarah” would designate the same woman. Thus, the transformations of identity or “becomings” at stake in (1) and (2) would merely be metaphorical ones that account for a moderate “diversity”, to rely on Locke’s words [10] (p. 33). This diversity stands for the fact that the man and the woman at stake are still the same ones, even if after (1) and (2) they became “very different person[s]”, to put it in Parfit’s terms [11] (p. 202). The second reading, the literal one, is that these transformations or “becomings” should be taken at face value and point to a radical “diversity” [10] (p. 33). This is to read “Abram = Abraham” and “Sarai = Sarah” as false identities. *Yhwh* would have made the persons called “Abram” and “Sarai” cease to exist while at the exact same time creating two new persons: those who are called “Abraham” and “Sarah”, respectively. “Abram” and “Abraham” would then name distinct men; the bearer of the latter name would be a “resulting person” who is “someone else” vis-à-vis the bearer of the former name [11] (p. 202). “Sarai” and “Sarah” would also name two different women.

The second kind of scholar that should be interested in the identity and in the semantic question are philosophers who have the resources to distinguish the metaphorical and the literal reading. For instance, John Stuart Mill and Gottlob Frege have been, respectively, associated with non-descriptivism and descriptivism—two views that will be discussed in what follows [12–14]. First, let us highlight that Mill, Frege, and others influenced by them have addressed neither (1) nor (2)⁴. So, no one has brought forth a picture of the semantics of proper names indicated in these passages while accounting for divine rebaptism. It seems motivated to do so for the sake of using *Genesis* as a vehicle for tackling philosophical issues and for the sake of using philosophy as a vehicle for articulating a take on a text whose importance is hard to overestimate.

What I propose to do then is to defend that whereas *Genesis* does not provide sufficient evidence to answer the identity question, it indicates a response to the semantic one: that gradation semantics accounts for (1) and (2) better than non-descriptivism and descriptivism. Gradation semantics is the view that proper names have the properties of being meaningful, indirect, flaccid, flexible, and lexically univocal in distinct degrees, depending on their context of use. Sections 2 and 3 tackle the identity and semantic questions, respectively.

2. The Identity Question

2.1. Three Traditional Distinctions

Three traditional distinctions go as far back as to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* [20]⁵. The first is between objects and properties. Let us follow Frege in applying the term “object” in its “widest range”: that of a thing or a substance that stands on its own [13] (p. 57). Let us

also assume that the persons at stake in (1) and (2) exemplify objects⁶. By a property, let us take a characteristic or an attribute of an object. Examples of properties are to be an exalted father and to be a father of a “multitude of nations” (hereafter, father of a multitude) (Gen. 17:5). Throughout *Genesis* (especially, in *Genesis* 17), it is suggested that the latter property is more unique than the former property. Accordingly, someone who has the property of being a father of a multitude, as this text indicates, is more valuable or holier than someone who is an exalted father. The former father, but not the latter one, is “exceedingly fruitful” and able to “give rise to nations” and “kings” (Gen. 17:6).

To be a fertile princess and to be a barren princess are further examples of properties. A dispute among *Pentateuch* specialists is on the value *Genesis* attributes to barrenness. The likes of Trible have read *Genesis* as taking barrenness to be a very negative state or even a sign of disability [8] (p. 34). Joel S. Baden casts doubt on this reading [25]. For him, *Genesis* would have been articulated in an Ancient Israeli context where barrenness was a considerably recurrent state. What passages, such as (2), would indicate is not exactly the lack of value of barrenness but the extremely high value of fertility. The latter, Baden emphasizes, “was a highly desired state” in Ancient Israel [25] (p. 16).

Regardless of whether Baden’s reading has advantages over Trible’s, one point is not particularly controversial: *Genesis* (especially, *Genesis* 17) suggests that the property of being a fertile princess is more unique than that of being a barren princess. The woman who has the former property but lacks the latter property can bear a “son”; she can also give “rise to nations” and “kings” (Gen. 17:16). *Genesis* 17 suggests that this makes this woman more valuable or holier than a woman who is barren.

The second traditional distinction is between contingent and necessary properties. A contingent property is one that an object *o* has but may cease to have without ceasing to be *o* for doing so. Typically, to have a particular haircut is understood as a contingent property of someone. In contrast, a necessary property of an object *o* is one that *o* has and may not cease to have without ceasing to be *o* for doing so. The property of being a person has been traditionally taken to be a necessary property of any person.

The third traditional distinction at stake is between necessary properties and essences. As indicated by Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1031a12) and, more recently, Kit Fine, an essence is a necessary property or a necessary series of properties that materially define an object *o* in spelling out what uniquely makes *o* be what *o* is ([20] (p. 94), [26] (p. 3)). It has been often believed that each person or, more broadly, each object has an essence.

Consider again the properties of being an exalted father, a father of a multitude, a barren princess, and a fertile princess. *Genesis* does not show in an upfront fashion whether these properties are contingent properties, necessary ones, essences, or parts of essences of those portrayed in (1) and (2)⁷. This makes it hard to decide whether the metaphorical reading has advantages over the literal one (or vice versa).

2.2. Reasons for the Metaphorical Reading

One reason for preferring the metaphorical reading is that it attributes to *Genesis*, to put it in Harold Bloom’s terms, “a less irrational fiction” (at least from a faithless stance) than the one entailed by the literal reading [27] (p. 11). The metaphorical reading takes the property of being an exalted father and that of being a father of a multitude to be contingent properties of a single man at stake in (1). The properties of being a barren princess and a fertile princess would also be contingent properties of a single woman at stake in (2). In that case, these properties would be somehow like those of having a more ordinary haircut at a given time and a distinct more unusual haircut at a distinct time. Indeed, thinking along these lines has been often believed, for example, under the basis that someone who is barren could be fertile and vice versa, for these are temporary properties.

Usually, the fact that someone changed haircuts is not taken as evidence that the person is no longer oneself, even if this change may be extremely important from the perspective of the person at stake, say, insofar as it represents some sort of crucial change of attitude toward life. Analogously, the metaphorical reading attaches to (1) and (2) what may be called moderate changes. Respectively, those of a man who loses a contingent property while acquiring a new one without ceasing to be himself, and a woman who does not cease to be herself while losing a contingent property and acquiring another one.

That seems to be more credible, a metaphorical reading's champion may argue, than to embrace what is entailed by the literal reading. The latter takes the property of being an exalted father to be a necessary one if not the essence or part of the essence of the man called "Abram". This is so even though this property seems to be a relational property this man has vis-à-vis his "sons", assuming a broad or metaphorical use of the latter term according to which someone, such as "Lot", would be this man's son (Gen. 11:27).

The literal reading then is that if this man does not have the property of being an exalted father, this man is no longer himself. According to this stance, *Yhwh* would have made a deep change by means of (1). That is to make the man designated with the name "Abram" cease to exist while at the same time creating a new man. This is the one called "Abraham", whose property of being a father of a multitude is a necessary one if not his essence or part of his essence. That, the literal reading supports, would be so even though such property also seems to be a relational property that this man has vis-à-vis his so-called "sons", assuming, again, a broad or metaphorical use of the latter term according to which ultimately all Jews, Christians, and Muslims are "sons" of this man.

Also, for the literal reading, to be a barren princess is a necessary property, the essence, or part of the essence of the woman called "Sarai". If this woman does not have this property, she is no longer herself. Thus, (2) would show that while pointing to a deep change, not a moderate one. *Yhwh* would have made the woman named "Sarai" cease to exist while simultaneously bringing to existence a new woman named "Sarah". To be a fertile princess would be a necessary property, the essence, or part of the essence of the latter.

A second reason for preferring the metaphorical reading is that it provides a more plausible account of what may be called *Yhwh*'s divine reward. This reward is an action by means of which *Yhwh* blesses *x* due to *x*'s (and not someone else's) previous actions. That *Yhwh* divinely rewards the persons at stake in (1) and (2) is not a problematic reading. It is hardly deniable that through (1) *Yhwh* aims to bless the man called "Abram".

Similarly, it seems that through (2) *Yhwh* "blesses with fertility" the woman called "Sarai", as Teubal puts it [7] (p. 69). Given that, it seems implausible that *Yhwh* would have made, as indicated by the literal reading, this woman and the man called "Abram" cease to exist while giving rise to new ones, that is, those who are named "Abraham" and "Sarah". That does not seem like a reward but almost a sort of punishment.

This view becomes more explicit once criteria for personal identity are considered. As David Shoemaker indicates, Locke and Parfit, among others, assume different criteria for personal identity [10,11,28]. Examples of these criteria are that *x* and *y* are the same person if and only if they meet certain conditions. For instance, *x* and *y* share a body; *x* and *y* share a soul; *y* seems to remember *x*'s thoughts and experiences; *y* is uniquely psychologically continuous with *x*; etc. This essay is neutral on what the best of these conditions are. What matters here is that if the bearers of "Abram" and "Abraham" as well as those of "Sarai" and "Sarah" do not meet any of these conditions, it is hard to give an account of *Yhwh*'s reward. It is challenging to understand how the bearers of "Abraham" and "Sarah" have been rewarded if they do not share a body or a soul, do not seem to remember the thoughts and experiences, or are not uniquely psychologically continuous

with the bearers of “Abram” and “Sarai”, respectively. Additionally, it seems that the ages of those at stake in (1) and (2) did not revert to zero after their divine rebaptisms.

Accordingly, a third reason for preferring the metaphorical reading is that it avoids a problematic implication of the literal one: that the bearers of “Abram” and “Abraham” as well as the bearers of “Sarai” and “Sarah” do not meet any criterion for personal identity. This is a problematic implication because *Genesis* suggests that the bearers of “Abram” and “Abraham” as well as those of “Sarai” and “Sarah” meet one, some, or even all of these criteria. This is to state that the mental events of the man called “Abraham” seem to be significantly psychologically connected to those of the man called “Abram”. For instance, after the phenomenon described in (1), the man called “Abraham” seems to remember that *Yhwh* once promised to make his “name” (and not someone else’s) “great” (Gen. 12:1). Similarly, it seems that the woman called “Sarah” is significantly psychologically connected to the one called “Sarai”. This is to read that after the phenomenon at stake in (2), the woman named “Sarah” remembers, for example, that “Hagar” once looked at her (and not to someone else) “with contempt” (Gen. 16:5).

There are, nevertheless, also reasons for endorsing the literal reading.

2.3. Reasons for the Literal Reading

The first reason for preferring the literal reading over the metaphorical one is that the former runs more in agreement with one of the aims (arguably, the main one) of *Genesis*. That is the aim of spelling out *Yhwh*’s divine essence by showing that, given *Yhwh*’s almightiness, this deity can do what is apparently impossible (at least from the perspective of those who are not deities). Granted the metaphorical reading, the divine rebaptisms portrayed in (1) and (2) would not be particularly remarkable. Instead, they would be concomitant to changes of contingent properties comparable to a change someone goes through after changing haircuts. There is nothing particularly divine about this, even if one grants that a change of contingent property can be extremely important and considers other examples of these changes, for instance, the change from being a juvenile athlete to a high-performance one. In other words, granted the metaphorical reading, (1) and (2) would resemble more ordinary cases; *Yhwh* would only have caused moderate changes. It is not particularly attractive to interpret *Genesis* as suggesting so.

Suppose, in contrast, the literal reading. In this case, the divine rebaptisms caused by *Yhwh* in (1) and (2) would be concomitant to changes of necessary properties, essences, or parts of essences. These changes are very remarkable or, speaking loosely, “miraculous”. This is why that to attribute the cause of such changes to *Yhwh* provides a more plausible account of fact that *Genesis* aims to spell out *Yhwh*’s divine essence, not to indicate what is more credible or rational from a faithless stance. In fact, considerations from this stance seem completely foreign to *Genesis*. This text states that the man called “Abraham” “was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him” (Gen. 21:5). *Genesis* 17:17 and 18:10 indicate that the woman called “Sarah” gave birth when she was around ninety years old. In short, within *Genesis*, nothing is “too wonderful” for *Yhwh* (Gen. 18:14).

A second reason for preferring the literal reading is that it allows for the attribution to *Yhwh* of a better justification for introducing the proper names “Abraham” and “Sarah”. Suppose the metaphorical reading. Granted so, (1) and (2) would indicate that *Yhwh*’s justification for introducing these names is what may be called the superficial justification. According to this view, if a person called *N* loses a contingent property while acquiring a more unique but likewise contingent property, a deity, such as *Yhwh*, is justified to rename this person *N**, even if the person called *N* is identical to the one called *N**. Given so, a deity would be justified to rename the bearers of “Abram” and “Sarai”, “Abraham” and “Sarah”, respectively. That is because the bearers of such names would have changed their former

contingent properties to more unique contingent properties. That would be so even if “Abram = Abraham” and “Sarai = Sarah” were true identities.

Analogously, one would be justified to rebaptize a person with a distinct proper name in case this person changed a more ordinary haircut to a more unique one or if a once juvenile athlete became a high-performance one. That does not seem a particularly strong justification, especially if it is considered that the persons called “Abram” and “Sarai” are portrayed as having changed varied properties throughout *Genesis*. For example, they lose the property of having never gone into the “land of Canann” and acquire the one of having done that in *Genesis* 12:31. Nevertheless, *Yhwh* does not give new names to these persons because of that. Granted the literal reading, a better justification can be attributed to *Yhwh*. Let us call it the deep justification that if a person called *N* loses a necessary property, one’s essence, or part of one’s essence at the exact same time a distinct person is brought to life, a deity, such as *Yhwh*, is justified to call this new person *N**. This is so, the deep justification underlines, for this new person is not only different, but has a more unique necessary property, essence, or part of essence than the person called *N*.

The literal reading takes then (1) and (2) to indicate that *Yhwh* thought along the following lines: the persons named “Abram” and “Sarai” lost a necessary property, their essences, or part of their essences. So, they ceased to exist. Simultaneously, two more unique new persons were “born”, assuming a technical use of the latter term according to which one may be born even if not exiting a womb. So, these two more valuable or holier persons deserve to be called by new proper names: “Abraham” and “Sarah”, respectively.

A third reason for preferring the literal reading is that it is more in agreement with a birth policy and its context. Arguably, this policy may be attributed to at least some of the original authors of *Genesis* or, more specifically, *Genesis* 17, (1) or (2). This policy propagates the thesis that human procreation is extremely valuable. Actually, to be fertile would be a sort of a blessing. The birth policy, accordingly, urges members of a community to attempt to reproduce, even if it may seem ultimately impossible to do that, say, since bareness in this community, as Baden [25] indicates, is not an exception but rather a state shared by several (if not most) women of this community.

Genesis, *Pentateuch* specialists usually agree, was written by different authors with varied and hardly graspable intentions and throughout a hardly precise determinable period. However, it is plausible to attribute the birth policy to at least some of these authors. As Thomas Römer indicates, some of these authors were likely part of past Ancient Jewish groups characterized by a particular feature of “living in arid regions and finding themselves frequently in military conflict with other groups” [29] (p. 48)⁸.

Given so, the attribution of a birth policy to these authors is historically sound. This policy is in agreement with the urgency of proliferating the number of members of a community so that such a community has more members to help with farming; becomes more fit to confront its military opponents; is ultimately more prone to survive as a tribe; etc. The literal reading is more in agreement with the birth policy and its context than the metaphorical one, because it takes the property of being fertile as more unique, valuable, or holier than the latter. That occurs because, granted this reading, the property of being fertile is a necessary property, an essence, or part of the essence of those who have them, not merely a contingent property, as the metaphorical reading entails.

2.4. An Objection, a Reply, and an Argument

What follows is that *Genesis* does not seem to provide sufficient evidence for preferring the metaphorical reading to the detriment of the literal one (or vice versa); there are reasons for embracing either one of these readings. Also, it is hard to spell out a criterion for establishing a hierarchy among these reasons, say, in arguing that the three reasons given

in support of the literal reading are more crucial than those in favor of the metaphorical one or vice versa. Hence, one may object that given that *Genesis* does not provide sufficient evidence for answering the identity question, this question should be deflated.

I have a three-step reply to this objection. The first step is to argue that the fact that a question cannot be answered does not seem to be a particularly appealing criterion for dismissing it; many if not most philosophical questions (e.g., the one on the condition for personal identity) may meet this criterion. That does not seem to be a good reason for deflating questions that may be motivated due to another criterion, e.g., agreement with what “the human mind”, to put in Immanuel Kant’s terms, is inevitably inclined to address [31] (p. 118). Even if the identity question fails to meet this criterion, this question is motivated due to another factor; namely, its discussion allows for the development of the metaphorical and of the literal reading. Those questions may be of interest to *Pentateuch* specialists and philosophers; they may also open new interdisciplinary research.

The second step of my reply is to highlight that the identity question and this section’s approach to it serve to identify what may be called divine rebaptism datum. This is a phenomenon or alleged phenomenon where a divine rebaptism that may be understood along the lines of the metaphorical or the literal reading occurs. This datum is not exhausted by (1) and (2). The latter are yet focused on here for the sake of providing an in-depth analysis whose aim is to appeal to those, such as *Pentateuch* specialists, interested in these passages’ peculiarities. In a short essay like this, it seems ultimately impossible to do that while also providing a comprehensive account of the divine rebaptism datum. To offer such an account, one would also have to deal with other illustrations of this datum in a detailed way. Examples of these illustrations are those present in *Genesis* 32:28 and *John* 1:42, respectively, “Then the man said [וַיֹּאמֶר] ‘you shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with human and have prevailed’” and “He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter)”. For the given purposes, it suffices to stress that these passages seem to raise issues that are similar to those stated above; that is, they also point to the metaphorical and to the literal reading, arguably, without providing sufficient evidence to decide between the two. Additionally, they might as well be handled through gradation semantics, even if to carefully show that is beyond this essay’s scope. It is crucial to highlight that, despite *Genesis*’ importance, the divine rebaptism datum has not yet been tackled at all. Hence, to begin to do that by focusing on (1) and (2) does not seem to be an impertinent move, especially in light of the fact that philosophers of language have focused on distinct issues, such as cognitive difference. The latter is a phenomenon addressed by Frege [13]. What characterizes it is the fact that identities of the form “a = a” appear to be analytic and *a priori*, whereas identities of the form “a = b” appear to be synthetic and *a posteriori*.

The third step of my reply is to claim that the identity question and this section’s discussion of it motivate a semantic account of the divine rebaptism datum. One way to provide this account is by making a case for the following argument:

P1—If gradation semantics explains the divine rebaptism datum better than non-descriptivism and descriptivism, gradation semantics is justified.

P2—Gradation semantics explains the divine rebaptism datum better than non-descriptivism and descriptivism.

C—Thus, gradation semantics is justified.

Let me now make a case for this argument while tackling the semantic question.

3. The Semantic Question

3.1. On P1

P1's conditional explanatory form resembles that of a thesis suggested by Frege that if Frege's semantics of proper names explains the cognitive difference, this semantics is justified [13] (p. 78). While arguing so, Frege did not consider explanations for the cognitive difference that rivals his. One reason Frege may have done so is that he may have not entertained other explanations for the cognitive difference. However, Katz [17] (p. 12) indicates that, over the last one hundred years or so, these explanations were proposed and problematized Frege's. Thus, works on philosophy of language (e.g., [18]) have often argued for a distinct thesis whose conditional explanatory form also resembles P1: if a view on the semantic of proper names explains a phenomenon better than other alternatives found in the literature, this view is justified. An example of this kind of phenomenon discussed by Schoubye [18] is that of the predicate use of names illustrated by "there are two Alberts in my class".

As indicated in the Introduction, this essay is the first (at least as far as I know) to handle the identity and semantic questions. This is why no explanation for the divine rebaptism datum can be found in the *Pentateuch* literature or in that on the philosophy of language. Given so, what I propose to do is to consider three explanations for this datum: those provided by non-descriptivism, descriptivism, and gradation semantics. This is not to state that other explanations are not possible but only that the three explanations provided here seem to be sufficiently interesting and may motivate others to develop distinct stances. Regardless of that, it seems that P1 is a plausible premise that resembles other theses that are widely shared in the philosophy of language literature. This is so at least if the term "justified" in P1 is read as a short for the expression, "justified at least until better explanations not considered in the present essay are developed by others".

One may yet object to P1 by claiming that its antecedent is not sufficient for its consequent, for a semantic perspective is justified if and only if it accounts for a myriad of other semantic phenomena. My reply begins by acknowledging that non-descriptivism and descriptivism are views that are currently adopted for handling multiple semantic issues. However, they were not exactly so when they were first introduced. In particular, when Frege articulated descriptivism in [13], he was mainly or even practically exclusively interested in tackling cognitive difference. Analogously, gradation semantics, which is a new stance, is introduced here for handling divine rebaptism. That does not mean that this view cannot be further developed in future circumstances with the aim of handling other issues. That only means that I need to start from somewhere, in other words, by tackling a specific phenomenon and then dealing with other matters later. Indeed, if this move is not granted, one faces the risk of making the rise of new perspectives (especially, in short essays like the present one) hardly achievable or even impossible on a basis that does not seem to be a particularly appealing one: that such new perspectives are not as comprehensive as other more established stances.

3.2. On P2 and Meaning

The first reason for adopting P2 is that gradation semantics' stance on meaning has advantages over those of non-descriptivism and descriptivism, as far as (1) and (2) are concerned.

The concept of "meaning" has been understood in multiple ways. Mill associates with it the concept of "connotation", which he distinguishes from "denotation" [12] (p. 36). As references [13] (p. 57) and [14] (p. 25) indicate, Frege associates meaning with "sense" (*Sinn*), which is distinct from "reference" (*Bedeutung*). It does not seem pertinent to conflate Mill's "connotation" and "denotation" with Frege's "sense" and "reference", respec-

tively. Also, as Burgess [15] (p. 11) points out, there have been disputes on how these notions should be interpreted. On my part, I remain neutral on exegetical disputes on Mill and Frege.

What I also do is to assume that a proper name N has meaning at a context c if and only if at c , N contributes to propositional content by disguising at least one description that informs something about N 's bearer. This description does not need to be a definitive description. The latter, Kripke [2] (p. 26) indicates, is characterized by the expression, "the x such that x ", followed by a predicate that individualizes x . Frege's view is that distinct speakers of a natural language may attach distinct descriptions to a proper name that do not individualize the name's bearer [13] (p. 58). For instance, "to be a pupil of Plato" does not individualize "Aristotle" because this description is met by more than one object.

A non-descriptivist account of (1) and (2) takes "Abram", "Abraham", "Sarai", and "Sarah" to lack meaning. This is to read these names along the lines of Mill's [12] (p. 33) or Kripke's [2] (p. 26) take on "Dartmouth", a name that despite appearances, would not inform that its bearer is at the mouth of the river Dart. Analogously, non-descriptivism argues that "Abram", "Abraham", "Sarai", and "Sarah" would not inform that their bearers are an exalted father, a father of a multitude, a barren princess, and a fertile princess, respectively. Even if Mill's or Kripke's take on a recurrent use of "Dartmouth" were correct, the non-descriptivist account of (1) and (2) is disputable.

That is so insofar as this account entails that *Yhwh*'s use of proper names would not mirror what there is according to *Genesis* (hereafter, for short, what there is). This is a problematic implication insofar as there are passages, such as the following one, that suggest that what there is and what *Yhwh* states are one and the same: "Then God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). Consider, moreover, passages like *Genesis* 2:19 that point to a prelapsarian language by means of which Adam would have called "every living creature". It is plausible to read *Genesis* as suggesting that this language likewise mirrors what there is and, hence, is superior or more "divine" than other ones which do not do that, at least not as accurately as it can be done by *Yhwh* or was done by Adam before the fall from Eden. Examples of somehow inferior languages seem to be those that the "Lord scattered [...] over the face of all the earth" after the fall of the Tower of Babel portrayed in *Genesis* 11:1–9, which is discussed, for instance, in [32] (p. 8).

More crucially, granted non-descriptivism, whereas the bearer of the names "Abram" and "Sarai" would be going through moderate or deep changes, the introduction of "Abraham" and "Sarah" would not mirror either one of these facts or alleged facts. So, this account does not seem to make sense of *Yhwh*'s superficial or deep justification for rebaptizing the persons at stake in (1) and (2). Rather, non-descriptivism seems to be ultimately unable to explain what would be "divine" about the way *Yhwh* uses language in passages like these that seem to indicate that this deity grasps through language objects' contingent and necessary properties, essences, and parts of essences.

The "divine" nature of *Yhwh*'s use of language becomes more explicit once it is considered that under the influence of Delbert R. Hilliers [33], Hendel takes (1) to be "a performative utterance" [4] (p. 33). This notion was introduced by John L. Austin, who associates with it two features: (i) to not "'describe' or 'report' or constate anything at all"; and (ii) to be an action or to be "a part of, the doing of an action" [34] (p. 5). A performative utterance that would have these features is "I name this ship *Queen Elizabeth*", say, as stated by a shipowner in an inauguration after smashing a bottle against the stem of a ship [34] (p. 5). It seems plausible to follow [4] (p. 33) in taking (1) to be a performative utterance. This move is justified because (i) and (ii) seem characteristics of (1). The same is the case with (2), which, therefore, can also be read as a performative utterance.

In contrast, consider the passages in which “Abram” and “Sarai” are introduced in *Genesis*: respectively, “when Terah had lived for seventy years, he became the father of Abram” (Gen. 11:26) and “the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai” (Gen. 11:29). Features (i) and (ii) do not seem to characterize these excerpts. They are statements made by *Genesis*’ “narrator”; not by *Yhwh*, at least if it is granted that this “narrator” and *Yhwh* are not the same. Also, the introductions of “Abraham” and “Sarah” in (1) and (2) differ from the ones of “Abram” and “Sarai”. It is still plausible to interpret that in *Genesis* 11:26 and 29, “Abram” and “Sarai” inform something about their respective bearers. Even if not identical with *Yhwh*, *Genesis*’ narrator purports to speak on this deity’s behalf. In doing so, this narrator resorts to a language that purports to be “divine” in reflecting what there is.

“Abram” and “Abraham” do not seem then to be distinct spellings of the same name, as it is the case, according to Kaplan [3] (p. 529), with “Londres” and “London”. Additionally, “Sarai” and “Sarah” do not seem to be different spellings of a common name. *Yhwh* appears to convey important semantic differences between “Abram” and “Abraham” and between “Sarai” and “Sarah”, while causing the moderate or radical changes. One may then argue that descriptivism provides the best account of the divine rebaptism datum. This explanation is characterized by the thesis that “Abram” and “Abraham” as well as “Sarai” and “Sarah” have meanings. “Abram” and “Abraham” would disguise the descriptions “to be an exalted father” and “to be a father of a multitude”, respectively. The *Harper Collins Bible Dictionary* points to this direction [35].

Accordingly, a plausible move is to go as far as translating the Hebrew words, “אַבְרָם” and “אַבְרָהָם”, as “exalted father” and “father of a multitude”, respectively. “Sarai” and “Sarah” would disguise two descriptions: “to be a barren princess” and “to be a fertile princess”, respectively. The Hebrew words “שָׂרַי” and “שָׂרָה” may also be plausibly translated as “barren princess” and “fertile princess”, respectively. A descriptivist may insist that this is so, despite the fact that both of these words appear to stand for “princess”.

Descriptivism argues then that (1) semantics conveys that “Abram” and “Abraham” have distinct meanings that reflect the fact that their bearer (if the metaphorical reading is granted) or bearers (if the literal reading is embraced) have distinct properties. Similarly, descriptivism argues that (2) semantics conveys that “Sarai” and “Sarah” have distinct meanings, which also reflect the fact that their bearer (if the metaphorical reading is granted) or bearers (if the literal reading is embraced) have distinct properties.

The descriptivist account of (1) and (2), however, is also disputable. This stance does not account for the fact that the moderate or the deep changes at stake in (1) and (2) stand for a considerably fine-grained shift of properties that characterizes the properly “divine” use of language that *Genesis* purports to have. The shift at stake is from properties that are less unique to properties that are more unique. The superficial and the deep justification depend on this shift. Nevertheless, granted descriptivism, *Yhwh*’s divine rebaptisms of “Abram” into “Abraham” and of “Sarai” into “Sarah” would not reflect that. Rather, these rebaptisms would only semantically convey that these names’ bearers changed properties, without more specifically indicating why these changes require the introduction of new proper names, as per the superficial or of the deep justification.

Gradation semantics renders more explicit the stated fine-grained shift of properties by embracing two theses:

T-1—A proper name *N* is more or less meaningful at context c_i than at context c_{ii} if and only if one or a cluster of descriptions disguised by *N* and that inform something about *N*’s bearer at c_i are more or less individualizing than one or a cluster of descriptions this name disguises and that inform something about *N*’s bearer at context c_{ii} .

T-2—In context *c*, a proper name *N* is more or less meaningful than a distinct proper name *N** if and only if at *c*, one or a cluster of descriptions disguised by *N* and that in-

form something about N 's bearer are more or less individualizing than one or a cluster of descriptions disguised by N^* and that inform something about the bearer of N^* ⁹.

Suppose T-1. Then, one can read that "Abram" becomes gradually more meaningful from the first context where it appears in *Genesis* 11:26 up to the last context where this name is used in *Genesis* 17:5. In *Genesis* 11:26, this name's meaning is that of being an exalted father. Gradually, throughout *Genesis*, a complex cluster of descriptions is attached to this name. The gradual description of this cluster semantically mirrors the process of "becoming" that *Genesis* indicates this name's bearer goes through. This cluster is then characterized by all deeds that are gradually attributed to the bearer of "Abram", say, to have been called by *Yhwh* to leave "one's country", "kindred", and "father's house" (Gen. 12:1). While spelling out this cluster, *Genesis* gradually spells out this man's essence up to (1), that is, when this man either gains a new proper name, "Abraham", as the metaphorical reading claims, or ceases to exist, as the literal reading defends.

Granted T-1, one may read that "Sarai" becomes gradually more meaningful from its first appearance in *Genesis* 11:29 up to its last occurrence in *Genesis* 17:5. Concomitantly, *Genesis* unfolds the process of "becoming" of the bearer of "Sarai". In *Genesis* 11:29, "Sarai" only means "barren princess", as indicated by *Genesis* 11:30, a passage that, immediately after this name's introduction, emphasizes that "Sarai was barren; she had no child". Gradually, throughout *Genesis*, a complex cluster of descriptions characterized by all deeds *Genesis* attributes to this name's bearer is attached to "Sarai", say, "to be a woman beautiful in appearance" (Gen. 12:11). While spelling out this cluster, *Genesis* gradually unfolds this woman's essence up to the moment she ceases to exist, as the literal reading argues, or is rebaptized "Sarah", as the metaphorical reading defends.

Suppose T-2. Then, it is plausible to read that when "Abraham" is introduced in (1), its meaning is not merely that of "being a father of a multitude" but a more complex one. This meaning is that of being this kind of father as well as meeting all other descriptions attached to "Abram" up to (1) with one exception: "Abraham" does not meet the description of being an exalted father. Given the divine rebaptism *Yhwh* performs through (1), the bearer of "Abraham" does not meet this description.

This is to read (1) as semantically conveying not only that "Abraham" and "Abram" have distinct meanings but also that the former name is more meaningful than the latter one. That is so insofar as "to be a father of a multitude" is part of the meaning of "Abraham", whereas "to be an exalted father" is part of the meaning of "Abram". That mirrors a fact that is independent of whether the metaphorical reading has advantages over the literal one or vice versa: that the bearer of "Abraham" is more unique than the bearer of "Abram". So, *Genesis* 17 suggests, the former is more valuable or holier than the latter.

Granted T-2, one can likewise read (2) as semantically mirroring a fact that is independent of whether the metaphorical reading has advantages over the literal one or vice versa. This is the fact that the bearer of "Sarah" is more unique than the bearer of "Sarai" and, hence, the former is also more valuable or holier than the latter. This reading is plausible, if the meaning of "Sarah" in (2) is understood not only in terms of "fertile princess" but of a more complex cluster of descriptions. This cluster includes all the descriptions attached to "Sarai" up to (2), with one exception: the description of being a barren princess. That happens because by means of (2), *Yhwh* blesses the bearer of "Sarah" with fertility. It follows that (2) semantically conveys not only that "Sarah" and "Sarai" have distinct meanings but also that "Sarah" is more meaningful than "Sarai".

Granted T-1, "Abraham" and "Sarah" may also be read as proper names that gradually become more meaningful after they are introduced in (1) and (2), respectively. That is so up to the last moment such names are used in *Genesis* 50:24 and 49:31, respectively, or, in the broader work one may take *Genesis* to be part of, e.g., the Jewish or the Christian

Bible. That is to interpret that every time “Abraham” and “Sarah” are used in *Genesis*, their clusters of descriptions are expanded while their respective bearers’ processes of “becoming” and essences are characterized. Ultimately, what *Genesis* accomplishes in doing that is an extremely detailed account of these bearers. This account indicates that such bearers are extremely unique, valuable, or even holy persons that should be taken as standards of behavior for all others who, accordingly, should adhere to the birth policy.

3.3. On P2 and Indirectness, Flaccidity, Flexibility and Lexical Univocity

The second reason for adopting P2 is that gradation semantics’ stance on indirectness, flaccidity, flexibility, and lexical univocity also has advantages over those of non-descriptivism and descriptivism as far as (1) and (2) are concerned.

If a proper name *N* is meaningless, *N* is direct and rigid; it also seems that *N* is fixed, even if that may not be very directly implied by last sentence’s antecedent. That is what Kripke [2] (p. 26) and, more explicitly, Schoubye [18] (p. 716) suggest. The former indicates that *N* is indirect if and only if *N* refers to its bearer through the mediation of at least one description that informs something about *N*’s bearer [2] (p. 26). Otherwise, *N* is direct. That would be the case with “Dartmouth”, according to Kripke [2] (p. 26) and Mill [12] (p. 33).

As Kripke [2] (p. 3) indicates, *N* is flaccid if and only if *N* does not designate its bearer in all possible worlds in which it exists. Otherwise, *N* is rigid. “Dartmouth”, Kripke [2] (p. 26) suggests, is rigid. This name would designate only one object, even in possible worlds in which this object meets descriptions that are not met by the actual bearer of “Dartmouth”, say, “to lie at the mouth of the river Dart”. According to Schoubye [18] (p. 716), *N* is flexible if and only if *N*’s semantic information is affected by logical operators, say, temporal or modal ones. Otherwise, *N* is fixed. The view that “Dartmouth” is fixed is supported in [2] (p. 26). This name’s semantic information would always be the same regardless of whether “Dartmouth” is placed under the scope of an operator such as “at time t_i ” or “at time t_{ii} ”.

As indicated in the last subsection, it seems that “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” have meanings. Therefore, another reason for opposing the non-descriptivist account of (1) and (2) is that these proper names also appear to have the features of being indirect and flaccid. Additionally, it is not easy to understand how they would be fixed. Thus, one might again be inclined to embrace the descriptivist account of these passages.

Descriptivism reads “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” as being indirect; they would refer to their respective bearers through the mediation of the descriptions “to be an exalted father”, “to be a father of a multitude”, “to be a barren princess”, and “to be a fertile princess”, respectively. These names would also be flaccid in referring to their respective bearers in other possible worlds if and only if such bearers meet these descriptions but not in possible worlds in which these bearers do not do that.

Additionally, for descriptivism, “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are flexible. Consider two logical operators: “at a possible world or time in which the bearers of these proper names satisfy their respective descriptions stated in the last paragraph”; and “at a possible world or time in which these bearers do not satisfy these descriptions”. When placed under the scope of such operators, according to descriptivism, the semantic information of “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” is different.

As indicated in the last subsection, there are reasons for opposing descriptivism. This is so insofar as “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” appear to have not only meanings, as descriptivism indicates, but also distinct degrees of meaning that vary with the context. Given so, gradation semantics also seems to have a better account of (1) and (2)

than descriptivism insofar as indirectness, flaccidity, and flexibility are at stake. That may be rendered explicit by considering that this semantics embraces two other theses:

T-3—If a proper name N is more or less meaningful at context c_i than at context c_{ii} , N is more or less indirect, flaccid, and flexible at context c_i than at context c_{ii} .

T-4—If in context c , a proper name N is more or less meaningful than a distinct proper name N^* , at c , N is more or less indirect, flaccid, and flexible than N^* .

Suppose that as indicated in the last subsection, “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are more meaningful at the last respective contexts where they appear in *Genesis* (hereafter, late context) than at the respective contexts where they are introduced (hereafter, early context). What follows from that, given T-3, is that “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are more indirect, flaccid, and fixed in the late context than in the early context.

“Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are more indirect in the late context than in the early context, for in the late context, they refer to their respective bearers through the mediation of descriptions that are more individualizing than those at stake in the early context. The descriptions of the late context (hereafter, late descriptions) point to a more demanding criterion of identification than those of the early context (hereafter, early descriptions).

“Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are more flaccid in the late context than in the early context because in the late context, these proper names refer to their respective bearers in less possible worlds in which they exist than in the early context. This occurs because it is harder to meet the late descriptions than it is to satisfy the early descriptions.

“Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are also more flexible in the late context than in the early context. In the late context, these proper names carry more semantic information than in the early context. So, in the late context, these proper names are more easily affected by logical operators than in the early context. Consider any logical operator of the form “at a possible world or time in which the bearers of “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” do not meet at least one of the descriptions attached to these names in the late context”. All sorts of operators of this kind affect the semantic information of “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” in the late context. In contrast, in the early context, the semantic information of these names is only affected by more restricting logical operators, say, “at a possible world or time in which the bearers of “Abram”, “Abraham”, “Sarai”, and “Sarah” are not an exalted father, a father of a multitude, a barren princess, and a fertile princess, respectively”.

Suppose, moreover, that as indicated in the last subsection, “Abraham” is more meaningful than “Abram” in (1) and that “Sarah” is more meaningful than “Sarai” in (2). It follows that, given T-4, “Abraham” is more indirect, flaccid, and flexible than “Abram” in (1) and that “Sarah” is more indirect, flaccid, and flexible than “Sarai” in (2).

“Abraham” is more indirect, flaccid, and flexible than “Abram” in (1), for in (1), “Abraham” disguises a more unique cluster of descriptions that carries more semantic information and whose criterion of identification is more demanding than the one indicated by the descriptions “Abram” disguises. Similarly, “Sarah” is more indirect, flaccid, and flexible than “Sarai” in (2). This is because in (2), “Sarah” disguises a more unique complex cluster of descriptions that carries more semantic information and whose criterion of identification is more demanding than that indicated by the descriptions “Sarai” disguises.

Another feature usually addressed by those interested in the semantics of proper names is lexical ambiguity. As Schoubye [18] (p. 716) indicates, N has this feature if and only if N shares a phonological string with another proper name N^* whose bearer is distinct from N 's. Otherwise, N is lexically univocal. For example, popular proper names, such as “Paul”, are lexically ambiguous. That is so insofar as these names have been used to designate different bearers, say, the man known as “Paul Celan”, the one known as “Paul

McCartney", and countless others. Suppose, on the other hand, that the proper name, "Paulaham", shares phonological strings with no other name while designating a single entity. In this case, "Paulaham" would be a lexically univocal name.

Non-descriptivism and descriptivism can concur that "Abram", "Abraham", "Sarai", and "Sarah" are, within the context of *Genesis*, lexically univocal names. The reason is that in this text, they are only applied in reference to their respective bearers. I agree with this view. However, it is worth considering, not the context of *Genesis* text itself, but of its first apprehension. As *Pentateuch* specialists are aware, in this context, "Sarai" and "Sarah" were both probably popular proper names but "Abram" was a more recurrent name than "Abraham". Indeed, "Abraham" might have been inserted for the first time within *Genesis*. Hence, it is plausible to interpret that this move served to underline to those inserted in the context of *Genesis*' first apprehension that the bearer of "Abraham" is more unique and, therefore, valuable or holier than the bearer of "Abram". Given so, it is worth characterizing gradation semantics as also endorsing two other theses:

T-5—A proper name N is more or less lexically ambiguous in context c_i than in context c_{ij} if and only if N 's phonological strings are more or less widely shared at c_i than at c_{ij} .

T-6—In context c , a proper name N is more or less lexically ambiguous than a distinct proper name N^* if and only if at c , N 's phonological strings are more or less widely shared than those that of N^* .

Suppose T-5. Then, one may argue that in the contemporary context of the USA, "Abraham" is more lexically ambiguous than in the context of *Genesis*' first apprehension. In contrast, "Abram" is more lexically ambiguous in the latter context than in the contemporary context of the USA, where practically no one is named so. Moreover, granted T-6, in the contemporary context of the USA, "Sarah" and "Abraham" are more lexically ambiguous than "Sarai" and "Abram", for the latter two names are practically never used.

4. Conclusions

What follows is that though *Genesis* does not provide sufficient evidence to answer the identity question, it indicates a response to the semantic question: the best account for divine rebaptism is provided, not by non-descriptivism or descriptivism, but by gradation semantics. The latter, I have argued, is justified. This is what is indicated by C, a conclusion that follows from the premises supported above: namely, P1 and P2.

If that is so, two other disputes seem motivated. The first dispute may appeal to those who have political concerns, say, regarding what has been called "race" and "gender". This dispute is on whether gradation semantics can account for secular rebaptism. That is when, not a deity, but a person or a social institution renames a person with a proper name N^* , which is pronounced differently or is orthographically distinct from the proper name N this person was previously baptized with. For instance, that happened when the person first baptized "Malcolm Little" was rebaptized "Malcolm X" and the person first baptized "William Bruce Jenner" was rebaptized "Caitlyn Marie Jenner".

The second dispute at stake may be of interest to *Pentateuch* specialists and philosophers. That is the dispute on whether gradation semantics can account for the fact that throughout *Genesis*, as Römer [29] (p. 24) discusses, a deity is called in varied ways, say, "Yhwh", "the LORD", "The Eternal One", etc. Suppose, along gradation semantics' lines, that these are proper names that have the features of being meaningful, indirect, flaccid, flexible, and lexically univocal in degrees that vary with context. If that is so, one may argue, it is not easy to explain the traditional faithful thesis apparently conveyed by *Genesis* that *Yhwh*'s existence is of a necessary kind. *Pace* that, let me conclude by highlighting that the present essay may have a crucial religious significance for those who believe in this deity's existence. After all, it spells out a property that *Genesis* seemingly attributes to *Yhwh* and

that has not received much attention. Let us call it semantic mirroring; the property of being able to rebaptize persons while simultaneously making them change their contingent properties, necessary ones, essences, or parts of essences.

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Notes

- ¹ While doing that, I adopt the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE) of the Bible and remain neutral on complex issues related to the translation of the original Hebrew text of *Genesis*. For a view on such issues, consider [1].
- ² Whether a difference in pronunciation or in orthography between two proper names is a sufficient condition for taking these names to be distinct is a dispute that cannot be handled here. Consider [3] in this regard.
- ³ This essay applies “woman”, as well as the terms, “man”, “men”, and “women”, loosely. For a detailed take on these terms, consider [9].
- ⁴ For authors who are influenced by Mill or Frege and who point to all sorts of more sophisticated versions of non-descriptivism, descriptivism, or hybrid combinations of these views, see, among others, [2,3,15–19].
- ⁵ In [2], Kripke seems to presuppose these distinctions, which point to an ordinary ontology that has been defended by Hirsch [21] but criticized by works such as [22,23].
- ⁶ The paper is neutral on the dispute on whether mereological sums are also objects and the one over conditions for personhood; references [23,24] tackle these matters, respectively.
- ⁷ Indeed, as Quine [22] indicates, it is challenging to do that as well as to decide on a dispute that is beyond this essay’s scope, that on whether, to begin with, these traditional distinctions should be adopted.
- ⁸ Jan Assmann points to a similar direction in [30].
- ⁹ It is beyond this essay’s scope to handle whether or how this take on meaning may account for names in fiction (e.g., “Ulysses”). For approaches to this issue, see [36,37].

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