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Cognitive and Semantic Universals in Translations of Psalm 139

Abstract

Umberto Eco clearly states the concept of semantic universals in a short essay. He presents a kind of ethics that starts with cognitive semantic universals rooted in our body. These universal concepts, according to Eco are such because they are independent of any particular culture. Such concepts as for instance “top and bottom”, “left and right”, or “a sense of personal liberty” are rooted in the basic fact that we are bodies. The “sense of personal liberty” is especially important here. This claim is similar to cognitive semantics, especially as presented by Mark Johnson. This article presents an application of those claims to the analysis of Polish translations of Psalm 139. My main claim is that the ancient Hebrew concept of a person is not at odds with such secular semantic approaches as provided by Eco and Johnson. Psalm 139 might be a perfect representation of the cultural polarization of the concept in the process of linguistic and cultural translation and transition. Besides it is this polarization of the concept of this sense of personal liberty which is the focus of this article. My main focus is on Polish translations with circumstantial references to English and Swedish translations. In this article I focus my study of the two minor parts of Psalm 139: one referring to psalmist running from God to heavens, and second, about hating the evil.

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Psalm 139 is a unique text compared to other psalms, because it expresses a whole range of different conceptualisation of knowledge, which is found in many English words such as know, examine, probe, test, understand, be familiar with, search, be acquainted with, perceive, discriminate. I have already tried in another paper to improve the definition of metaphorical conceptualisation (Pluciennik, in press), however, at this point I have to return to these issues in the context of semantic universals in a poetic text.

Umberto Eco clearly states the concept of semantic universals in a short essay in the form of a letter included in “Che cosa crede chi non crede” from 1996 (Polish translation “When another enters the stage” in Eco’s “Five moral letters”, 1999). He presents a kind of ethics that starts with cognitive semantic universals rooted in our body. These universal concepts, according to Eco are such because they are independent of any particular culture. Such concepts as for instance “top and bottom”, “left and right”, or “a sense of personal liberty” are rooted in the basic fact that we are bodies. The last “sense of personal liberty” will be referred to once more in the argumentation which follows. This claim is similar to cognitive semantics, especially as presented by Mark Johnson (and with George Lakoff) in *Moral Imagination. Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (1993) and *The Meaning of the Body. Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (1999).

I would like to present an application of those claims to the analysis of Polish translations of Psalm 139. My main claim is that the ancient Hebrew concept of a person is not at odds with such secular semantic approaches as provided by Eco and Johnson. There are, however, some interesting issues related to intercultural translations of such a concept. In this respect, Psalm 139 might be a perfect representation of the cultural polarisation of the concept in the process of linguistic and cultural translation and transition. Besides it is this polarisation of the concept of this sense of personal liberty which is the focus of this article. I do not make claims as regards the theological questions related to it, neither do I wish to interfere with traditional Hebrew readings of this Psalm. My main focus is on Polish translations with circumstantial references to English and Swedish translations¹.

Psalm 139, as not only a religious but also a poetic text, occupies a special position: it is characterised as a hymn, as a blessing, but also as a lament, and others write about in contexts such as meditation, confession, prayer and reflection. One commentator says that “The various components of this psalm as — anthem, thanksgiving, lament — exposes us to the

¹ I would like to express my gratitude for knowledgeable comments to all three anonymous reviewers of this article.

intensely personal relationship between the psalmist and his God meditation, confession, prayer, and reflection” (Wagner 1978: 357). Consequently, such a complex nature of the lyric itself must attract the attention of all readers interested in genres.

Also quite strikingly is the fact that the so-called “Sitz im Leben” is likely to be a very specific situation of false accusation of the psalmist and his waiting for righteous judgment. And in such circumstances, the psalm turns out to be a hymn, a prayer, confession and meditation. The variety of generic structures accompanies a variety of conceptualisation of knowledge, and a variety of anthropological notions of an interaction of different subjects involved. This is combined with a variety of metaphors used to define better the cognition of the subjects in the text.

It seems that the main motive of this psalm is the psalmist’s absolute dependence on God. This relationship is shown mainly through a metaphorical conceptualisation of divine knowledge. From the very beginning of this text, God recognises the psalmist as the scout who makes the diagnosis by screening, searching, incursion and interview. God behaves like an ancient scout more than the eye of providence. Although the trails of such a metaphor — the eye of providence — relating to the visual domain — can also be found in incipient imaging in this text. But the role of a scout is also accompanied by other presupposed divine roles such as a potter, a weaver, or a writer (see also Pluciennik, in press).

Accompanying this concept of being active and working of God, the anthropology of the psalmist is focused on human passivity, its absolute dependence on the actions of the creator. The psalmist is shown as an embryo, clay, from which it can be made a creation, an execution plan, or a record. In the context of universals however, there are two images which both suggest the existence of the inner world of the Psalmist, and, on the other hand, existence of wings, which envisions extremely bold anthropology. At that point of the text, it seems, therein lies one of the main problems of the semantics in question. I will attempt to explain this issue by reaching the relevant contexts of certain passages.

Psalm 139, as I have tried to describe, is composed of hymnal enumerations of those mental actions pointing to the question: in how many ways the psalmist is recognised by God. However, there are also two fragments protruding from the sheet, as if coming from another generic form and somewhat other emotional and intellectual paradigms.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I can not attain unto it.
Whither Shall I go from thy spirit? or whither Shall I flee from thy presence?
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there Shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand Shall hold me.

The second heterogeneous piece one can find just before the end of the text:

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me Therefore, ye bloody men.
For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain.
Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with Those That rise up
against thee?
I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.

If the whole work is a hymn on a diagnosis of reception of the Psalmist by God, this piece is impressive in its emotionality, which is, also, extremely violent and negative. In some textual embodiments, the psalmist even revels in his hatred of evil.

The Psalmist with wings?

Firstly, I wish to discuss the piece on wings and ascension to heaven. The text begins with an expression that is clearly one of the first versions of the theory of the sublime.

Divine knowledge is so high that it is virtually beyond reach.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I can not attain unto it.

However, subsequent passages mentally deny this, they are opposed to the first. “Whither Shall I go from thy spirit? or whither Shall I flee from thy presence?” Knowledge is perhaps too lofty, huge, overwhelming, but the same spirit and the mere presence is extremely close, so close that the psalmist wonders where to go from the present spirit, and he finds nowhere to run against this huge presence. If the power of this presence is so great that the psalmist wants to run, it draws here an image of an extremely asymmetrical personal relationship. However, the next four verses paint pictures that contradict this asymmetry, because they reveal — a potential but still — the extraordinary power of the psalmist:

If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
Even there Shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand Shall hold me.

The psalmist can ascend to heaven and descend into the underworld, as well as find out by himself that in a moment he is at the edge of the visible world. However, the last sentence of this passage again returns to the psalmist’s absolute dependence on God, because even at the ends of the earth, the divine power will manifest itself by guiding with a strong and secure grip. The presence does not go away.

This begs the question as to whether the ascent into heaven is a real act as perceived in antiquity? Is it a spiritual journey similar to, one may ask, for instance, the famous trip by Swedenborg, a Swedish visionary and a scientist who had a vision of a trip to heaven? Is it perhaps a journey that can be compared to the spiritual ecstasies of St. Paul in 2 Cor. 12:2–4 when he talks about ascending, “whether in the body... or whether out of the body”, to the “third heaven”? Or is it perhaps the Ascension of Jesus Christ of the Gospels? Or, perhaps, it is an allusion to ascension with winds by Elias in one of the books of the Old Testament?

There are many possibilities that may arise out of here. However, the question might sound rather theological than theoretical, but I would like to ask is “ascending into heaven” a literal or a metaphorical expression? If it is literal, then herein we are confronted with a revolutionary anthropological image: the human body is equipped with an unusual power, so extraordinary that he was simply divine, can freely move in all dimensions of the physical world, can travel on all parties of the known physical world. This makes the psalmist visionary, apocalyptic and... unreal. Is this unreality the real spirituality of the Psalmist?

Perhaps, however, this phrase in question is just a metaphor?

It seems that we can strengthen that non-literal interpretation by using four main arguments from the poetics: 1) the fragment continues thematically with the theme of the sublime; 2) the fragment is a part of a poetics of rhetorical figures such as merism, poetics,

which has already been started in the first verses of Psalm 139; 3) In many translations of this passage the future tense is used or other modal indicators that make unreal activities of the Psalmist, the activities become purely virtual; 4) This passage refers to the earliest known — to ancient readers of this psalm — texts that explain these metaphors and make them conventional expressions.

In explaining those following four arguments, I will try to persuade a reader that John Calvin's supposition of, say, communicative realism in interpreting psalms is really powerful and makes them not just literal translations from Hebrew, but the communicative realism makes interreligious communication much more likely. The communicative realism states that we should always bear in mind the necessity of explanation of our reading to the Jews, the first brothers (cf. Pak 2010).

Ad 1. The argument of the sublime

If from the beginning of the passage we can find that the first theme is too high, or wonderful, or simply sublime knowledge, we can compositionally justify the fragment, which also mentions the journey to heaven (lifting) or the flight on the wings of the dawn. This thematic repetition is a special amplification of the theme, and it seems quite in the right place in a Hebrew culture based on parallelism. We can even argue that amplification lies at the heart of the psalm when talking with so many different synonyms of “to know”. But we should add that this argument of the sublime applied to “knowing” does not make the sublime knowing the centre of the Psalm.

Ad 2. The argument from the presence of other figures such as merism

Merism (gr. *merismos*, lat. *distributio*, meaning separation and de-partment) — it is a figure of speech, which is to use as an indication of the two extreme cases and taking up so that whole merism is a special case of a figure of “pars pro toto”, one in which parts mean any extreme parts. And so in this Psalm 139 at the beginning of it, we know God by knowing the extreme psalmist states in a customary day:

“Thou knowest we downsitting and mine uprising”,
 “Thou compassed my path and my lying down”.

It begins a string of merisms, which is continuing in the following image representing probably all directions of creation when God created the heavens and the earth, east and west and so on. In the last expression too, we are dealing with a figure of merism, and in Psalm 139 we have a heaven and hell, east and west. Merism, therefore, justifies the ubiquitous image of God for which there is no restriction. He is everywhere.

On the other hand this merism as a figure makes the psalm more dramatic because it states a thematic tension between opposite elements.

Ad 3. The argument from occurrences of appearance markers

I would argue that if we see the occurrence of the markers of illusion in this psalm, we would be able to carry out discrimination of the translations of this psalm when it comes to their different degrees of communicative realism. There are more and less rational translations of this passage in various languages, even in the case of two Swedish translations available I can clearly see the difference in the emotional involvement of the two versions.

The traditional Swedish version:

Vart skall gå för jag din Ande, vart skall jag och för ditt ansikte fly? Fore jag upp till himmelen, så är du gift och jag bäddade åt mig and dödsriket, se, så är du ock gift. Toge morgonrodnadens Vingar jag, jag gjorde mig en boning ytterst and havet, SA skulle också där hand the led din din mig och Högre fatta hand propeller.

In this translation, you can clearly see emotional distance in the use of grammatical forms of modality: Fore jag, jag bäddade, toge jag, jag gjorde, så skulle...

The Swedish grammatical encoding modality is strong and reinforced by a very strict word order, in this case reversed order.

The latest translation of the Swedish is not so emotionally distant:

En sådan kunskap
mig är alltför underbar.
så är den hög
att jag kan small den förste.
Vart skall gå för jag din Ande,
vart skall jag Fly for ditt ansikte?
Om jag far upp till Himlen, är du gift
bäddar jag åt mig and dödsriket, är du gift.
Jag tar morgonrodnadens Vingar, gör jag mig en boning
ytterst and havet,
skall också där hand the led din din mig och Högre fatta hand propeller.
„Jag ej kan förstå”, „skall jag”, „skall jag” are still determinants of some distance, but further one can find the present tense: om jag far upp, bäddar jag, är du gift.

The English versions will also find more or less grammatically encoded markers of illusion (or so called appearance markers, see Holmqvist, Pluciennik 2002) in the case of this — disturbing to readers — representation of a floating Psalmist (with the wings or without wings). The most dramatic version of this is in translation of Message:

This is too much, too wonderful —
I can not take it all in!
Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit?
to be out of your sight?
If I climb to the sky, you're there!
If I go underground, you're there!
If I flew on morning's wings

to the far western horizon,
 You'd find me in a minute —
 you're already there waiting!

Colloquialism of this version is even used in the text of the Bible's unofficial and improper script, acceptable just in plain English abbreviations such as "can't" or "you're there" and distinctive exclamation points. But even in this version, we find a grammatical appearance marker in the construction of "if" repeated three times, and in the conditional "if I flew... you'd find". The end of this passage is even more dramatically involved in the present tense, which may cause, even in this context, a feeling of impatience waiting.

Similarly, in terms of the conditional tense we can also find it in GNB, but in this version the conditional construction does mark the defined situation up to the end of this part.

Your knowledge of me is too deep;
 it is beyond my understanding.
 Where could I go to escape from you?
 Where could I get away from your presence?
 If I went up to heaven, you would be there;
 if I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there.
 If I flew away beyond the east
 or lived in the farthest place in the west,
 you would be there to lead me,
 you would be there to help me.
 Similarly, in NLT, we find a very emotional translation:
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
 too great for me to understand!
 I can never escape from your Spirit!
 I can never get away from your presence!
 If I go up to heaven, you are there;
 if I go down to the grave, you are there.
 If I ride the wings of the morning,
 if I dwell by the farthest oceans,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 and your strength will support me.

In this version, the appearance markers function in a minimal way: instead of the conditional construction, we can find real possibility (I can...), and then the conditional in residual form "if... if... will... will...". That "will" at the end of the passage makes hard certainty despite general uncertainty associated with time to come. This is perhaps the most powerful version of English among those 15 translations that I take in my analysis into account.

Hitherto, on this account we can have a look at NIV:

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,
 too lofty for me to attain.
 Where can I go from your Spirit?
 Where can I flee from your presence?
 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;

if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
 if I settle on the far side of the sea,
 even there your hand will guide me,
 your right hand will hold me fast.

Here, as the NLT, the present tense takes a kind of impetus from a “will” future time.
 The figurative pattern looks interesting also in BBE:

Such knowledge is a wonder greater than my powers; it is so high that I may not come near it. Where may I go from your spirit? How may I go in flight from you? If I go up to heaven, you are there: or if I make my bed in the underworld, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning, and go to the farthest parts of the sea; Even there will I be guided by your hand, and your right hand will keep me.

In this version, instead of one “can”, we find the less certain “may”. The rest of the tags are very similar to the previously discussed versions of this psalm.

It is characteristic that in one of the oldest versions of the psalm in KJV we find, in the end, virtual and neutral “shall”.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I can not attain unto it.
 Whither shall I go from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?
 If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.
 If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;
 Even there Shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand Shall hold me.

That is just this particular “shall” which is overwhelmingly present in the version of Wycliffe:

Thi kunnyng is Maad wondirful of me; it is coumfortid, and Y schal not speech to it. Whidir schal Y go fro thi spirit; and whider Y schal fle fro thi face? If Y schal stie in this heuene, thou art there; if Y schal Doun him to hell, thou art present. If Y schal take my fetheris ful eerli; and schal dwell in the last partis of the see. And Soth thider thin hond schal Leede me forth; and thi hond schal riyt Hold Me.

In the Polish translations, the semantics appear more complex; it becomes a clear trend that, in Catholic versions translations of this passage of Psalm 139, versions without appearance markers or with a small degree of unreality predominate. But already in the oldest Protestant version the grammatical conditional tense is significant: “jeśliżbych”, “bych” [eng. If...]. The certainty of the future time is retained in the final.

139:6 Której rzeczy wiadomość dziwna jest u mnie, a tak wysoka, że jej dosiąć nie mogę.
 139:7 I gdzież ujdę przed duchem twoim? A kędy uciekę przed obliczem twoim?
 139:8 Jeśliżbych wstąpił do nieba, tedyś ty tam jest i jeśliżbych sobie uczynił posłanie w niskościach, oto i tam jesteś.
 139:9 Bych też miał skrzydła świtania, a mieszkałbych na końcu morza.
 139:10 Tedy mię i tam doprowadzi ręka twoja, a ogarnie mię prawica twa.

The most dramatic and the most realistic — in relationship to the exulted flight — version one can find in the poetic translation by Karpiński:

Dziwim się nad tym, coś uczynił, Boże:
 Jak to zrobione, nikt pojąć nie może!
 Dokąd przed Twoim duchem przeraźliwym,
 Albo przed okiem ukryć się straszliwym?
 Jeśli do nieba? W całym jesteś niebie;
 Jeśli do piekła? I piekło zna Ciebie.
 Czy wezmę skrzydła i od rannej zorze
 Udam się lotem za ostatnie morze?
 Moc Twoja, Panie, doprowadzi wszędzie,
 I tam mię trzymać Twa prawica będzie!

It is an interesting elision, which dramatizes — a formally conditional — mode: “jeśli do nieba?” — “if to the sky?”. Then come the real time present and a generalizing hyperbole “w całym” — “throughout”. The whole is crowned by a certain future time that is coming inevitably.

As a very rationalistic version Cytkow’s translation should be considered:

Niedościgłém dla mnie zrozumienie tego, tak wzniosłe, że nie podolał mu.
 Dokąd ujdę przed duchem Twoim, i dokąd przed obliczem Twojém schronię się.
 Gdybym się wzniośl ku niebu, tam Ty, i gdybym sobie usłał w otchłani, tuż jesteś.
 Gdybym wziął skrzydła jutrzni, spoczął na krańcu morza.
 Nawet tam ręka Twoja powiodłaby mnie, a ujęła prawica Twoja.

Virtuality is marked in the introduction by the solid future time instead of unreal possibility as in English “can” or “may”. Then simply conditional “gdybym” (if I) is somewhat made real by elision of a verb in “tam Ty” (“where you”) and reinforcing emotional particle -ż in the line “tuż jesteś” (“here you are, here”). However, the final frame gives a flavour of virtuality to the entire fragment, because of the use of the conditional construction.

And so it ends up as a Protestant version of BW:

Zbyt cudowna jest dla mnie ta wiedza, Zbyt wzniosła, bym ją pojął.
 Dokąd ujdę przed duchem twoim? I dokąd przed obliczem twoim ucieknę?
 Jeśli wstąpię do nieba, Ty tam jesteś, A jeśli przygotuję sobie posłanie w krainie umarłych,
 I tam jesteś.
 Gdybym wziął skrzydła rannej zorzy I chciał spocząć na krańcu morza,
 Nawet tam prowadziłaby mnie ręka twoja, Dosięgłaby mnie prawica twoja.

The ecumenical translation has a little more real future both at the starting point, as well as in its final part, although it introduces uncertainty which is repeated three times, “even if” the conditional mode:

Twoja wiedza o mnie jest zadziwiająca,
 zbyt wzniosła, bym jej dosięgnął.
 Gdzie się oddalę przed Twoim duchem,

dokąd ucieknę przed Twoim obliczem?
 Choćbym wstąpił do niebios, tam jesteś,
 choćbym legł w Szeolu — i tam będziesz.
 Choćbym skrzydła zabrał jutrzence
 i zamieszkał na końcu morza,
 tam też poprowadzi mnie Twoja ręka
 i podtrzyma mnie Twoja prawica.

In the Polish Pauline version of the Bible, the real appropriation progresses further, because, at the end of the passage in question, we have the present-tense and not the future tense.

Przedziwna jest Twoja wiedza o mnie;
 przerasta mnie, nie mogę jej pojąć!
 Dokąd odejdę od ducha Twojego
 i gdzie ucieknę przed Twoim obliczem?
 Jeśli wzniosę się do nieba, tam jesteś;
 gdy zejdem do krainy umarłych, i tu jesteś obecny!
 Choćbym wziął skrzydła jutrzenki
 i zamieszkał za najdalszym morzem,
 nawet tam prowadzi mnie Twoja ręka
 i Twoja prawa ręka mnie podtrzymuje!

The uncertainty of the conditional “choćbym” (“even if”), is mitigated by the support activity, which is expressed in a continuous present tense (a sort of in Polish, it is not exact English one), with the addition of an exclamation sign.

So if we can arrange the Polish versions according to their rationality (understood in the frame of a body anchor of the human beings), the group of rationalistic versions consists of BB, BG, Cylkow, BW, BW-P, Brand.

More dramatized (emotional) versions are Lubelczyk, Kochanowski, Wujek, Karpiński, Staff, Pauline. It is perhaps understandable that we can find here also mostly psalms given in poetical verses (Lubelczyk, Kochanowski, Karpiński).

On the borderline of the two main groups, just in between, we could place a version of 1000 and Milosz, and Ecumenical.

As you can see, you are not able to assign a clear denominational affiliation to those choices of translation. However, a tendency in Polish translations exists which is noticeable since Wujek, who might have been staring more into the poetic versions of Lubelczyk, and Kochanowski. Since then, the Polish Catholic versions dominate the drama while Protestant versions and Jewish versions by Cylkow are more rationalistic. However, be wary of some general assessment of the facts, as the Protestant English versions are very dramatic, although it is very true that it is so in the framework of the modality of the grammar, which imposes certain rationality a priori. In the Swedish Protestant versions considered here, the older are more rationalist, the latest one — more dramatic. We should bear in mind that the rationalism is to be understood as communicative realism if interreligious communication is to be preserved.

Anyway, to sum up this argument: in this passage of Psalm 139, an appearance marker and the metaphorical nature of the rapture and flight of the Psalmist are sometimes barely noticeable, but always present. In some translations, the exact metaphorical nature of this communication seems to be mitigated by the effect of poetic drama, or/and theological beliefs: belief

in a real spiritual journey, or faith in prototypical existence of the Psalmist in relation to the ascent into the heavens by Jesus Christ of the Apostolic credo. Thus, the third argument of the presence of the appearance markers is gradable: in some languages it is more powerful, in others — weaker. But clearly you can not forget about it because it seems that versions of the rationalistic translations have greater legitimacy in the original Hebrew, and the versions of classical Greek and Latin.

Ad 4. The argument of the epic frame

It is the most important argument, but the least visible and apparent because it is based on what you can not see in the text. Instead you can find it in the intertextual and cultural references.

If you recognise the intertextual references (Deuteronomy 30:12, Amos 9:2, Job 17:13), then such a simple expression as “ascend to heaven” makes more complex image. Rather, we should talk about more abstract imagery focused on the idea of God’s omnipotence and omnipresence. This is associated with the infiltration of everything by God, and not the physical ascension of the psalmist or his climbing into heaven. The idea is to see it all in context as a whole: the issue here is to run from the presence of God, and not the ascent to heaven and hell, which dictates to us, because we know the Christian creed.

The most important in this context is the passage from Deuteronomy 30:10–14.

If thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.

For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off.

It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear — it, and do it?

Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear — it, and do it?

But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.

In the NIV version, it sounds even more forcefully: If you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and your heart so you may obey it.

In this particular passage, one can find strengthening of the rationalist interpretation: joining up is synonymous with distance and irrelevance and proximity is valid. Joining up in Deuteronomy is unrealistic, is remote and the only powerful reality is a desire for liberation. Before the presence of God, there is no escape. Alexandra Wright writes about Deuter-

onomy 30: 11–14, that Psalm 139 clearly do benefit from this passage that they suggest the omnipresence of God, but also the lack of interest of the psalmist in such presence, because he feels much closer presence through the commandment, which is very close in his lips and his heart. It is extremely important to note that this is not the only such portion of the earlier texts, but this one is special because it comes from the Torah of Moses.

Another passage from the prophetic book, namely the one with the vision of the prophet Amos (Amos 9:1–5, in particular, 9:2):

I saw — the Lord standing upon the altar: and he said, Smite the lintel of the door, that the posts may shake: and cut them in the head, all of them; and I will slay the last of them with the sword: he that fleeth of them shall not flee away, and he that escapeth of them shall not be delivered.

Though they dig into hell, thence shall mine hand take them; though they climb to heaven, thence will I bring them down:

And though they hide themselves in the top of Carmel, I will search and take them out thence; and though they be hid from my sight in the bottom of the sea, thence will I command — the serpent, and he shall bite them:

And though they go into captivity before their enemies, thence will I command — the sword, and it shall slay them: and I will set mine eyes upon them for evil, and not for good.

And the Lord God of hosts is he that toucheth the land, and it shall melt, and all that dwell therein shall mourn: and it shall rise up wholly like a flood; and shall be drowned, as by the flood of Egypt.

In this passage, also the main point is that there is no escape from the judgment of God who does not caresses us with his hand but holds us in it. Also important in this context is that the real power broker is the word, which can take over our whole interior.

God tests his faithful:

Jer 20:12, an appeal to Yahweh as “you who test the righteous, who see kidneys and heart”.

In Jer 23:24, in a divine threat of judgment: “Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him?... Do I not fill heaven and earth?”

“We preach not to please human beings but to please God who tests our hearts”

(1 Thess 2:4 [author’s translation]; cf. 2 Cor 11:11; Gal 1:20).

So if you go back to the issue of the alleged winged psalmist and his extraordinary mobility potentially encompassing the entire world, it should be clear that in the context of the intertextual framework, which may be described so far, texts in both the Torah and prophetic passages, wings of the Psalmist are only a metaphorical image. The point is not to present man as an angel, bird, or a miracle-worker, but to create the image of being in the relationship of absolute dependence on God, before whom there is no escape. In this passage, the representation of human activity is not in focus, instead we can find here an emphasis on human dependence: a weak man remains dependent on the power of God who is present with a man and all encompassing. It is important in this context how it is present. The question arises of how God meets the man, how he knows him.

There is a modern interpretation of the omniscience relating to the modern notions of space. Florence Nightingale, commenting on Psalm 139, wrote:

FN: His substance is within the substance of every being; whether material or immaterial, and as intimately present to it as that being is to itself. It would be an imperfection in Him, were He able to remove out of one place into another, or to withdraw Himself from anything He has created, or from any part of that space which is diffused and spread abroad to infinity, a Being, whose centre is everywhere and His circumference nowhere. Infinite space is the sensorium of the Godhead. Brutes and men have their [illeg]. But as God Almighty cannot but perceive and know everything in which he resides, infinite space gives room to infinite knowledge and is as it were an organ to omniscience.

The editor of this text comments on the idea of the sensorium of God that it is directly addressing Newton's optics.

ED: The "Being whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere" is from Pascal's *Pensées*.¹⁸⁴ Space as the "sensorium of God" is from Newton, *Optics*, Query 28, so that this "intelligent, omnipresent" Being "sees the things themselves intimately, and thoroughly perceives them", while images only are carried through the sense organs "into our little sensoriums". (McDonald 2010: 185)

The problem, however, is that Psalm 139 only exposes, in a few translations, the sense of sight, however, most versions of the psalm exposes knowledge of God and the psalmist as intimate and tangible relationships, encompassing the entire existence of man, his whole body (see Pluciennik, in press). Hence, the psalm focuses on the imagery representing the presence of God with man: there are powerful metaphors such as a hand leading the psalmist through the world, hands creating man, hands making man with clay.

In the context of just such representations, we should explicitly say that the most important way of God's presence in man is presence through and by the word. The most important is the already quoted in this article fragment of Torah from Deut. 30, relating to the law and the presence of it in man through word:

If you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

While reading the psalms, it is particularly important for interpretation that their lyricism does not prevent us to be aware of the existence of a fixed frame of the epic on freedom and liberation: the Psalmist, in almost every small part, refers the reader to the concept of salvation, deliverance, freedom, and this is the concept authenticated by the basic survival narrative of the nation of Israel, which was the narrative of Exodus from Egypt, the land of slavery.

This interpretation will strengthen the presence of this frame in the second epic passage of Psalm 139, which I indicated at the outset, and which requires an explanation of why it stands out on the rest of this psalm. In this peculiar passage, we can find hatred of evil expressed in a strong way.

So far, I analysed four arguments for metaphorical character of the image of the Psalmist with wings, one of the arguments is this epic frame of liberation that permeates the entire Bible and which is its main reference. If we agree to such an explanation, it still requires us to pay attention to an archaic set of hatred in the second part of Psalm 139: we are struck by this passage, many commentators could not ignore the violent emotions that are contained in it.

Why the psalmist does hate the evil?

If, however, the psalmist and his hatred of evil are possible to read in the epic frame of the entire Bible, the hatred of evil becomes better understood and more rational. We can not forget that freedom for a man is not a pipe dream that is an archaic and basic need, almost identical with the opportunity to breathe without restrictions and to move without bondage. It is a universal anthropological frame: a man wants to be free, not wanting to be tied, which we should read: he/she hates the risks and discomfort of the body, hates bondage that immobilises his body. Such a vision can be read from many passages in the Bible, but it is especially imposed in the history of David and his psalms. And this is also a semantic universal according to Umberto Eco that I cited at the beginning of this article.

From the point of view of the modern sensibility, the passage in question strikes the reader by violence of negative emotions:

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me, therefore, ye bloody men.
For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain.
Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? And am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?
I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.

Some of the English versions of this psalm are very literal in showing “perfect hatred of evil” in this passage:

If only you would put the sinners to death, O God; go far from me, you men of blood.
For they go against you with evil designs, and your haters make sport of your name.
Are not your haters hated by me, O Lord? Are not those who are lifted up against you a cause of grief to me?
My hate for them is complete; my thoughts of them are as if they were making war on me.

Sometimes the hatred is shown not only as excellent, but the text elevates it representing it as infinite, as in CJB:

ADONAI, how I hate those who hate you!
I feel such disgust with those who defy you!
I hate them with unlimited hatred!
They have become my enemies too.

JPS Tanakh seems to be close to the original, which speaks rather of finite hatred, that is excellent, perfect hatred:

O LORD, You know I hate those who hate You,
and loathe Your adversaries.
I feel a perfect hatred toward them;
I count them my enemies.

The original Hebrew תִּקְלָהּ *taḳliyt* “indicates a boundary and the limit. It refers to a physical marker that delineates or sets a boundary (Neh 3:21). It is used figuratively of the boundaries of the Almighty, which, of course, are unsearchable (Job 11:7)”. This word is clearly related to core תִּקְלָהּ *tiḳlāh* “A feminine noun indicating perfection. It indicates what is without fault, complete, whole, not lacking in any way. God’s laws are the epitome of perfection (Ps 119:96)”.

This archaic assignment of perfection and fullness to hatred, which is associated in the culture and Christian civilisation with evil, does not look right, and it is archaic enough to cause recent attempts to circumvent the “perfection of hatred”, for instance in the NIV translation:

I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.

Other, more emotional versions underline the totality of hatred, as the NLT:

Yes, I hate them with total hatred,
for your enemies are my enemies.
Is the Message:
I hate it with pure, unadulterated hatred.
Your enemies are my enemies!

In the Polish translations the saturation of hate varies. For instance, BB gives a very archaic form, but it is a previously given interpretation of the term “right hatred”, similarly to all the Renaissance talk about “just war”, so too in BB, we can have “a just hatred”.

Miałem je w prawej nienawiści, a byli nieprzyjaciółmi moimi.
[I had them in the right hate, and they were my enemies.]

Lubelczyk writes about perfect hatred:

Doskonłą nienawiścią nienawidziałem ich
I stąd żem nieprzyjacioly tak srogie miewał z nich.

However, already as a sensitive poet of the Renaissance, Erasmian and stoic, Jan Kochanowski’s piece had to be weakened in its negativity and infinite and perfect hatred which has been replaced by “wiekuistą nieprzyjaźnią ze złem” [“eternal enmity with evil”].

Brzydę, przebóg! — I póki będę na ziemi,
Wiekuistą nieprzyjaźń powiodę z niemi.

Wujek has a perfect hatred, BG — “The main hate”: “Główną nienawiścią nienawidzę ich, a mam ich za nieprzyjaciół”. Karpinski also was too sensitive for the “perfection of hatred” and gave this passage as “the greatest abomination”: “Największą u mnie stali się ohydą, Ci wszyscy, którzy przeciw Tobie idą”.

Cylkow is close to the original, but also wishes to avoid the interpretation of “finiteness” as “excellence” and writes about the whole, as — a century later — Czesław Miłosz:

Cylkow: Cała nienawiścią nienawidzę ich, wrogami są mi.

Miłosz: Całą nienawiścią znienawidziłem ich, wrogami stali się moimi.

BW has perhaps a little modernising effort, when it gives the emotional intensity of hatred by the phrase “Nienawidzę ich całą duszą, Stali się wrogami moimi” [“I hate them with all my soul, they became my enemies”]. Similarly emotional one is a version of BW-P “Nienawidzę ich z całego serca, bo stali się także moimi wrogami!” [“I hate them with all my heart, because they have also become my enemies!”]. A sensitive poet, Leopold Staff is hiding in the “depths” of his hatred of the psalmist: Zaprawdę, nienawidzę ich głęboko, stali się moimi wrogami” [“Verily, I hate them deeply, They became my enemies”].

Ecumenical translation gets back to the sources: “Nienawidzę ich pełnią nienawiści, stali się moimi wrogami” [“I hate them with full hatred, they became my enemies”]. In contrast, the last of the great Polish version of the Bible, Paulińska version also is drifting toward the emotionality of hate: “Nienawidzę ich z całego serca, stali się także wrogami moimi!” [“I hate them with all my heart, also they became my enemies!”].

So how do we answer the question posed in the title of this section? It seems to me that if you remember the epic frame of the Bible, which the great story of liberation is always present when we are reading the Bible, we must recognise that the desire for freedom lies at the root of many motifs encountered in the culture of the Old and New Testaments. In the Psalms, a concept of freedom is understood to be extremely original and archaic, a very physical, freedom means the ability to breathe and the basic ability to move.

However, this epic frame is not sufficient to better define this “perfect hatred” of the Psalmist. We do still need to recall the frame of linguistic kinds, the living situation of this psalm, understood and perceived not only as meditation and contemplation, but also as a response to a false accusation: such “Sitz im Leben” is summoned at Psalm 139, then it probably happened at the source of this meditation. The psalmist in such a situation explains that nothing can hide from God: he does not want to be included among the bad ones; he must be well separated, because otherwise he could be threatened with stoning or slavery. The sin of Israel was a legal category, which entailed the outright loss of freedom. And this is the main explanation of the presence of so violent the need to separate themselves from the murderers. In the Protestant versions of the Psalm 139, it could certainly be that, on the legal formula of Israel’s interpretation, a providential double predestination doctrine overlaps, but that’s a whole different topic.

In summary of my arguments I wish to say that the main theme of Psalm 139 is, on the one hand, an attempt to show the psalmist’s and man’s in general, absolute dependence on God, on the other hand, a representation of his freedom from evil and therefore certainty of that freedom. Human freedom is inscribed not only in the epic frame of the psalm, but it is also a motive for violent separation from murderers being an image of evil in this psalm. In that sense, the psalm assures the universal anthropology, in which man’s desire for freedom or self-development has a basic role to play, because people have bodies and that, in the nature of these bodies, there is a need to breathe and move.

Dependence on God, however, is shown in Psalm 139 thanks to conceptualisation of the knowledge of God by means of metaphorical expressions relating to the semantic domains associated with senses other — more archaic — than sight. Divine knowledge stems from an intimate, tangible connection with the subject of creation, moulding, modelling with clay, modelling of the body. But the power of these images would not be well described, if we do not bear in mind a specific Hebrew philosophy of word, identical with the philosophy of law, which is associated inextricably with the frame epic as the story of creation, but also with the story of liberation from Egypt, liberation from slavery and given by God to Moses the law in the desert. The word in the Psalms is close to the body. It is in the body. This is a semantic universal: I would like to end this article with a hypothesis of body anchor of ancient texts (cf Maier 2001). We need to remember that the ancients did have the bodies, as we do, and that they conceptualised the world with the body. This is a semantic universal. Eco and Johnson in this respect are preserving communicative realism in which our view of linguistic facts are to be negotiable with others. A strong vision of Eco is established in this particular reading of Psalm 139: the body anchor and the sense of personal liberty are really crucial to this text.

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