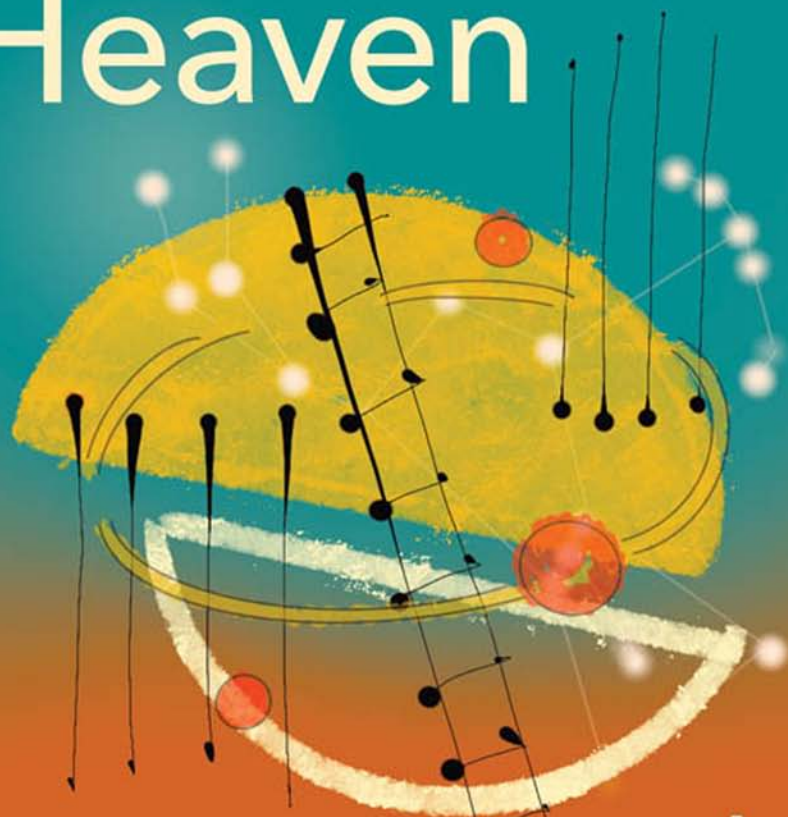


Beyond Heaven



and Earth

A Cognitive Theory of Religion
Gabriel Levy

Beyond Heaven and Earth

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For my parents, David and Margaret Levy

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Preface

Twenty or so years ago, fresh out of my undergraduate studies at Dartmouth, I had the extraordinary opportunity to spend two summers in a row doing fieldwork on the north coast of Papua New Guinea, thanks to the anthropologist Robert Welsch, who organized the trip. We were studying the impact of a deadly tsunami that had hit the coastal communities there, trying to see how they understood this event and how it affected their religious beliefs and practices. The people were very kind after I severely sprained my ankle trying to look cool playing basketball. There was not much knowledge I had from my four years of undergraduate education that impressed them. However, on one very clear evening while resting my ankle, I told them what I knew about the night sky. As I was speaking, I realized they were completely captivated by my story. They were all ears as I explained what I knew (which was actually quite basic) about astronomy. I remember telling them the very counterintuitive notion that those lights in the sky are actually burning hot fire balls incredibly far away. As I told them, I realized this was an extravagant and strange story. It might as well have been fiction. They seemed to be entertained by the fact that it was so fanciful. Since that time, I have been trying to understand what it was about that information in the night sky that was so important for them. I think it comes down to the fact that all human beings share an interest in this kind of natural information.

What I have learned since then is that religion partly concerns this type of heavenly information, just like it concerns earthly tsunamis. But the information religions contain in narrative media is not simply heavenly or earthly; it is beyond heaven and earth.

Fast-forward two decades. I was having a Shabbat dinner one night with a group of people at the synagogue in Trondheim, Norway. One woman I

know asked me why we put salt on the challah (bread) before we eat every Sabbath. As the resident scholar of religion and expert on Judaism, I was presumably supposed to know the answer. On that particular occasion, the reason slipped my mind, so I said, “I don’t know.” She seemed shocked. Wasn’t this something I was supposed to know?

I am sure this happens to agnostic scholars of religion all the time, where we are somehow supposed to be representatives (or “caretakers”) of religion for people outside academia or our fields. But I was confused. She was asking me why *she* was performing the behavior. She wanted me to tell her a story about why she was doing it; she wanted me to tell her what we believe. But wasn’t this something she should know? Shouldn’t one generally know why one does things and what one believes?

As ritual experts have been saying for a while now, with religion and rituals we often behave in certain ways without necessarily knowing the reason. Overarching narratives, especially religious ones, often fill the gaps between reasons and actions. Such gap-filling applies to mundane things like encouraging us to put the salt on bread, but it also includes deeper things, like how narratives on Netflix and HBO, for example, encourage us to interact and be intimate with our friends and loved ones in specific ways.

This book is not about Judaism, but I do maintain that something like the rabbinic method is a good way to try to understand why we believe and behave in certain ways. Briefly put, within that method there is not one answer; we believe and behave in ways that are always contextual, the reasons immanent. As some philosophers have noted, the rabbinic method seems to work well with the standpoint I favor throughout this book inspired by the philosopher Donald Davidson. The idea is that religious language has a life of its own.

My education has come from two diametrically opposed realms of academic culture, each offering its own narrative for the best way to study religion. In graduate school at the University of California, Santa Barbara, the narrative was mostly from continental philosophy and critical theory. Religion is best understood as connected to the discourse of politics and power. In my postgrad work I was stationed in Aarhus, Denmark, in the heyday of “cognitive science of religion” when that field was less splintered. There the leading idea was that we can explain religion using natural science. Religion has to do with evolution. In both places I felt myself always pushing against their narratives, probably because of my undergraduate training at

Dartmouth, where I was exposed to the more “analytic” idea that language is the key to understanding religion. But what is language?

Eventually, I learned that through my interest in religious language I could go beyond those two supposedly opposing narratives, but this would be a difficult task and would require a revision of how we presently conceive of the split between humanities and the natural sciences. This book is largely the product of that effort. As for the woman who asked me about the salt, the main answer is that we have to see her as choosing to put salt on the challah because she wants to. It turns out that she makes this choice and has such an intention partly because of the power that institutions and their narratives hold over us and partly because she is a human animal. We can bring these explanations together and reconcile them, but there will be limits.

Introduction: You Can Lead a Horse to Water

For the past few decades I have been working with a group of scholars in the study of religion who are trying to bring Donald Davidson's philosophy, a form of pragmatism known as anomalous monism, to bear on religion. This book represents the culmination of my efforts in that direction. My central argument is that religious language is part of nature and to study it we need an approach that integrates natural-science and humanist approaches in the right way. I argue that an appreciation of Davidson's philosophy provides a fruitful way to understand the relationship between so-called scientific and humanistic approaches, and the limits of that relationship. Davidson's anomalous monism gives us the rules of engagement; it guarantees that neither approach can absorb the other, and it spells out why this is so.

I argue that more interdisciplinary work between the humanities and natural sciences should be carried out, but in order to do so this requires both making the dominant metaphysics that undergird the various disciplines of science and humanities more explicit and rejecting those that maintain naïve monisms and simplistic dualisms. This point is based on Davidson, who argued that reality is metaphysically one but because of the limits of language and human vocabulary must be described in at least two radically distinct ways: in terms of the mental and in terms of the physical or material. For this reason, the relation between the mental and material cannot be bridged in lawlike ways. This grounding assumption opens the door for both humanistic pursuits and naturalist pursuits to be run in parallel, as long as we understand that there is a dynamic or nonlinear relation between the two. I thus offer a blueprint for one way in which the humanities and natural sciences can have a mutually respectful and productive conversation.

I regard this as an urgent problem, because in recent years these academic cultures have only become more estranged. At the broadest level, this book is meant for readers interested in bringing the humanities and natural sciences together in ways that are not demeaning to or naïve about the other side. More narrowly, it is for readers interested in religion, and most narrowly for the core group of scholars interested in pragmatism and religion.

Davidson's philosophy is useful in this regard because he views the concept of truth as belonging to the intersubjective, dialogical level of communication. Truth is negotiated through conversations. In the course of the conversations throughout this book, I argue that in order to understand religions we have to take their semantic content seriously. Within the anomalous monist framework, and also allied versions of pragmatism such as neutral monism, in order to make sense of religious language in this non-reductive way, we have to rethink basic concepts such as narrative fiction, information, agency, creativity, technology, and intimacy. These concepts are the subjects of the chapters that follow.

There is a famous story in Parshat Noaḥ about the Tower (*migdol*) of Babel in the biblical book of Genesis, chapter 11. The story recounts some of the early struggles between gods and humans, and describes how the creator god is stressed by his own creation. Because it is so interesting, many commentaries on this story have been written over the years (see Kramer 1968; DeWitt 1979; Brueggemann 1982; Derrida 1991; Walton 1995; Seely 2001; Hiebert 2007; James and van der Sluijs 2008; Strong 2008; Kugel 2009; LaCocque 2010; Sherman 2013; Giorgetti 2014; Sherwin 2014; Keating 2016). Within the narrative of Genesis, the story comes just after Yahweh saves only Noah and his family among the humans from destruction in the flood. Yahweh has just killed most of the living things on earth, including presumably the Nephilim, the offspring of divine beings (*b^{ne}-hā'elōhim*) who cohabited with the daughters of men (Gen. 6:4). In these stories in Genesis, Yahweh has a persistent worry that sentient life, and in particular humans, will pose some sort of challenge to his and the other divine beings' authority. Yahweh is also regretful and sad:

וַיִּנְחַם יְהוָה כִּי-עָשָׂה אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּאָרֶץ וַיִּחַעֲצַב אֱלֹהִים:

"Yahweh regretted that he made humans on earth; his heart pained." (Gen. 6:6)

Following the flood, Yahweh sets up a covenant with human beings (Gen. 9), encouraging them to be fruitful and multiply, and he promises never again to doom the earth because of human beings. It is just after this

point, after the biblical text enumerates the descendants of Noah, that we run into another challenge to Yahweh in Genesis 11.

At this point in time, everyone has the same language. At a settlement in a valley in the land of Shinar (*šin'ār*), in order to avoid being “scattered all over the earth,” these folks decide to build a city and a tower with its top in the heavens (*w'rō'šō bāššāmayîm*) and thus to “make a name for themselves” (*w'na'asê-lānû šem*). Though they wished to avoid being scattered, this is exactly what happens after Yahweh comes down (11:5) and sees what they are doing. Once he sees what they are doing, he seems to get very worried. He says:

הֵן עַם אֶחָד וְשִׁפְהָ אַחַת לְכֻלָּם וְהֵן הַחֲלֵם לַעֲשׂוֹת וְעַתָּה לֹא יִבְנֶה מִקֵּם כֹּל אִשָּׁר יִזְמֶי לַעֲשׂוֹת:

“If as one people with one language this is what they begin to do, then nothing they propose will be impossible.” (Gen. 11:6)

To avoid the challenge, Yahweh goes down and “mixes” or confounds (*bālal*) their speech so that they cannot understand one another. He also scatters them over all the earth. Thus, the exact fear they had that began the whole enterprise is realized. The Bible records that this is why that place (in the land of Shinar) is called Babel, referring to the play on words that *bālal* and Babel sound similar.

Aside from giving an account of why there are so many human languages, why a place to the east is called Babel and possibly has remains of a giant tower, the story is also a warning not to come too close to Yahweh. It posits a clear differentiation between humans and gods (*'ēlōhim*). We are never explicitly told why Yahweh is so protective of his status, but this structure reaching into the heavens clearly threatens him in some way.

The rabbis also thought a lot about this story. A discussion about it is recorded in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sanhedrin 109A. The general topic in this part of the tractate concerns *Heleq*, discussions about those who will have (no) portion (חלק) in “the world to come” (עולם הבא), in the afterlife. The “generation of the dispersion” (דור הפלגה), the name the rabbis give for those who tried to build the tower and were dispersed, is the second group listed who, according to the Mishna, have no share. This brings the rabbis to the topic of the tower builders. The Gemara asks, “What did they do that was so bad?” (מאי עבד).

The Talmud records that scholars from the academy of R. Shela in Nehardea (located in what is now central Iraq) thought that the tower was built in

order to strike the sky with axes so that water would flow. Rabbis in the west laughed at this interpretation and asked, If that was the case, why would they build the tower in a valley, which would defeat the purpose?

Another “answer” comes from R. Yirmiyah bar Elazar. The builders of the tower split into three groups with different objectives. The first group wanted to live up on the tower, the second group wanted to worship idols on it, and the third wanted to wage war from it. According to this tradition, Hashem (God) dispersed the first group, confounded the language of the second group, and transformed the third group into beasts and unearthly creatures of various kinds.

A third teaching comes from R. Nathan, who says that *all* the members of that generation wanted to build the tower for the purpose of idolatry. That is, they wanted to make a name (*šem*) for themselves. According to this teaching, making a name refers back to idolatry in Exodus 23:13, where Hashem (God) jealously tells Moses not even to mention the names of other gods.

The discussion of the tower ends with a tradition from R. Yochanan, which states that a third of the tower was burned, a third swallowed up, and a third remains. The Talmud reports that all around that area in Babylon, associated with the place names Bavel and Bursif, it is still difficult if not impossible to study (Torah) because of what happened there.

More than a thousand years later, the author Ted Chiang has retold the tale, or remixed it, in his short story entitled “Tower of Babylon” (Chiang 2016). Chiang is the author of the novella on which the film *Arrival* (2016) is based, which I will discuss in chapter 4. His magical realist version of the Babel story zooms in on the people building the tower. Building takes hundreds if not thousands of years. There is a constant flow of goods up and down the tower, which takes almost two months to summit—even more if one is carrying bricks or other materials. The story centers on a miner named Hillalum who has been hired because once the tower reaches the vault of heaven, they will no longer need stonemasons but miners to break through.¹ After months of ascending, during which Hillalum meets communities that live within the tower and in fact have never been down to earth, he and the other miners reach the top. With help from Egyptian miners, they must be very careful breaking through the vault of heaven, lest they puncture one of the reservoirs that holds rainwater. Eventually Hillalum has mined so far up that he and the few others with him actually

hit a reservoir. Instead of being pulled downward, he is sucked upward. Somehow he manages to survive and finds himself back down on earth: “He had climbed above the reservoirs of heaven, and arrived back at the earth” (Chiang 2016, 27). How was this possible?

Somehow, the vault of heaven lay beneath the earth. It was as if they lay against each other, though they were separated by many leagues. How could that be? How could such distant places touch? Hillalum’s head hurt trying to think about it. . . .

And then it came to him: *a seal cylinder*. When rolled upon a tablet of soft clay, the carved cylinder left an imprint that formed a picture. Two figures might appear at opposite ends of the tablet, though they stood side by side on the surface of the cylinder. All the world was as such a cylinder. Men imagined heaven and earth as being at the ends of a tablet, with sky and stars stretched between; yet the world was wrapped around in some fantastic way so that heaven and earth touched. (28)

Hillalum realized this was why God let them build the tower; it was, after all, not a challenge to his authority. All that work would not reveal more to them about creation than they already knew. In this way they would learn their place. The world is a seal cylinder, not a tablet (see figure I.1).

The various traditions about and retellings of the story of the tower make clear that it is a narrative about knowledge and information. The heavens carry information. For lack of better words, we can call it natural



Figure I.1

The worship of the sun god Shamash. Limestone cylinder-seal, Mesopotamia.

information. The heavens are alive. For most of the history of life on earth, organisms were not aware of the information. At a certain point in the history of life some organisms on earth became aware of that natural information and began to make use of it. By paying attention to it, they were then able to orient themselves, to navigate more accurately in both time and space, thus gaining more control over their environment (Pimenta 2015). Such knowledge was passed down and thus remembered by telling stories and singing songs about the heavenly characters. Of course, other things worth remembering were also passed down, but this information was some of the most important.

Once human beings started settling down, building technologies like towers made such spatial and temporal orientation even more precise. Sacred sites such as Stonehenge, Göbekli Tepe, or the Egyptian pyramids attest to the fact that in ancient times most large structures were built with the heavens in mind. This is also part of the background for understanding the story of Babel in Genesis. A strong current in Judaic theology saw such focus on the heavens as a form of idolatry. Those agents in the night sky—the stars, planets, and constellations—were not important, but rather owed everything to the one true god.

Metaphysics Matters

These stories apply to modern times. Hard-science investigations into religion in recent years, the field of research known as “cognitive science of religion” (CSR) foremost among them, have climbed to similar heights, but I am afraid that, like Hillalum, they are not much further along than where they started. Perhaps this is because they started with the wrong ideas about the content of religion. The wrong ideas are probably the result of misguided metaphysics, by which I mean the core assumptions about the nature of reality that make theories possible. It is usually hard to know whether their core assumptions are misguided, though, because most scientists do not make their metaphysics explicit.

When we turn our attention to human level phenomena like religion, we need a background metaphysics with a robust attitude to meaning. A science of religion, or any science that looks into meaningful phenomena, cannot work in the exact same way as natural science because of the simple fact that we cannot stand outside our meaning-making practices. When we try to do so, it will distort that which we wish to understand.

A central aim of approaches like CSR has been to reconcile, in the sense of “consilience” (see Slingerland and Collard 2011; Slingerland and Bulbulia 2011; Slingerland 2014), methods and theories from the natural sciences with research on religion. Though religion is defined in various ways, it is usually understood as a universal human phenomenon. By this, researchers do not necessarily mean that religion is innate but that, as with all universal human phenomena, there will be an evolutionary story to tell about how it, or its constituent elements, came about (Taves 2009). The stories are usually about the phenomena of religion writ large, variously defined, rarely reaching the granularity to make claims about specific historical and cultural circumstances where religion is most relevant to people on the ground.

For the most part so far, consilient approaches to religion like CSR are principally psychological in nature. Put simply, the idea is that human minds are the result of evolutionary and other natural processes, so learning something about these processes should tell us something about human psychology. At the same time, if religion has to do with human psychology, then researching these processes may give us insight about the origin and development of religion over time. If the mind is part of nature, it would also call for a naturalistic approach to religion that more and more has imported rigorous experimental methods from other sciences (Sørensen and Nielbo 2013).

The version of consilience adopted by CSR—and by most fields like it that claim some integration of natural sciences and humanities—is mostly one-way. Little effort is made to bring in research from religious studies, or the humanities more broadly, to inform methods and theories in the natural sciences.

Further, an implicit metaphysics of materialist or physicalist monism undergirds such cognitive approaches, as it does for much of the natural sciences. Critics usually frame this metaphysics in terms of reductionism, but this criticism rarely hits the mark, because all scientific theories are reductionistic in one way or another (Cho and Squier 2008; Slingerland 2008b; Xygalatas 2010). Reduction is actually the aim of an approach like CSR.

The metaphysical critique would have to go a bit deeper by saying that there are implicit, unjustified assumptions about the nature of reality built into *all* methods and theories. Unfortunately, scholars in CSR and related disciplines that take a consilience approach rarely ever make their metaphysics explicit, thinking that it is unnecessary or irrelevant. Most think their implicit metaphysical assumptions make no difference to their work

as empirical scientists. So not only are they not aware, but they purposefully avoid the vulnerable process of thinking about metaphysics. This is a mistake.

So the two horns of the problem I am pointing out about metaphysics are (1) that natural-science approaches to a subject like religion rarely make their metaphysics explicit, and (2) when the metaphysics is made explicit, it often turns out to be philosophically naïve. I provide some examples of metaphysical thinking gone awry, or just gone, in chapter 2. It is not enough to say that the foundational metaphysical assumption of the natural sciences is materialism and leave it at that, because there are indeed different types of materialism.

I suggest in this book that there are alternatives to both implicit and bad metaphysics. For instance, consider the more pragmatically inclined versions of metaphysics, like William James's neutral monism, recently updated by Thomas Nagel, or Donald Davidson's anomalous monism. For different reasons, both accept that reality is indeed made of one thing but that it will ultimately be impossible to bring mind and matter together, either because there is a third neutral term (for James and Nagel), or because of the constraints on the vocabularies of these domains (for Davidson). For the latter, this ontological monism coupled with a conceptual dualism was why Davidson did not think a completely "scientific"—meaning physicalist—psychology will ever be possible (chapters 11 and 12 in Davidson [1980]).

I think these pragmatic monists are right, which does not mean we should abandon efforts at integrating the natural sciences and humanities; it just means that neither offers the whole story and that consilience is limited. For Nagel, it means that our thoughts are as real as atoms or other physical things. For Davidson, it means that the semantic content of our thoughts is real.

Davidson thus gives us the tools to take the semantic content of religion more seriously. I am convinced that one cannot explain or understand religion or any psychologically related human phenomenon without taking this type of content into account. If someone thinks the semantic content can be ignored, they are missing the core of the phenomenon. The semantic content is found when people communicate and attribute meaning. From the Davidsonian perspective, such communications are actions whereby we attribute to other creatures "propositional attitudes." Without such attributions, we would never know we are talking about religion.

As Nancy Frankenberry puts this point, “There is no distinguishable religious context that can be discerned apart from people’s propositional attitudes” (2007, 286). In other words, propositional attitudes such as beliefs, expectations, and desires are where we find religion. The point is that as scholars or scientists of religion, if we try to remove these attitudes by reducing them to something else, or remove them by ignoring the content of their propositions, then we are no longer studying religion.

Removing relevant attitudes and ignoring content is a mistake most purely materialist monist accounts of religion make, including both hard science and the deep-discourse humanist accounts of religion that have recently become popular (Lyden 2003; Fitzgerald 2003, 2014; McCutcheon 2003; Dubuisson 2007; Masuzawa 2007; Taira 2013). In the latter, “religion” has no content; it is merely a name that people give to things to exert personal, political, or institutional power. From that perspective, scholars of religion should not study the content of anything called religion. Rather, they should study the sociology and politics behind those discursive acts of naming. The paradox is that such scholars actually *do* study content—namely, the discursive content of those acts of naming—just not the content of religions. So in both cognitive science and some humanist approaches, the semantic content of religion becomes epiphenomenal.

As in hard-science approaches, in discourse-oriented approaches there is often an underlying implicit metaphysics that is never justified. In CSR, physical things are real, while in deep discourse the content of the acts of naming are real. But in both, the semantic content or meaning of religion is window dressing. Thus, my core criticism of both is that they do not actually study or explain religion. I challenge all scholars and scientists of religion to make their metaphysics explicit. If they cannot, they should try harder to figure out how to do so.

Based on this core criticism, in this book I flesh out the consequences if we adopt a metaphysics different from those that are only *implicit* in the aforementioned theories of religion. The explicit metaphysics I endorse is that of anomalous monism, but other dual-aspect versions—such as neutral monism—also mostly work. Taking this approach will change how we study religion (Rorty 1987; Frankenberry and Penner 1999a, 1999b; Jensen 1999, 2011; Schilbrack 2002; G. S. Davis 2005; Knight 2008; G. Levy 2012; Neville 2016; Godlove 2016; Gardiner 2016; Frankenberry 2018). This book presents a groundwork for this approach and some of its consequences.

The basic metaphysical-methodological cornerstones for this perspective are grounded in the rejection of the “four dogmas of empiricism” (Frankenberry and Penner 1999b; G. Levy 2012, 150). The rejection of the first two dogmas was given originally by W. V. Quine, while Davidson then added a third, and Wilfred Sellars a fourth (Quine 1951; Davidson 1974; Sellars, Rorty, and Brandom 1997).²

The first dogma to be rejected is the distinction between analytic and synthetic descriptions. Quine did not buy into the distinction between so-called truths of reason and truths of fact. Quine added a related second dogma, known as the principle of reductive verification, or verificationism; he argued this dogma was based on the mistaken idea that individual sentences can correspond neatly to the world.

Davidson’s addition of a third dogma was an expansion and partial critique that Quine did not go far enough with the first two: not only is there no clear distinction between truths of reason and truths of fact, but the whole idea of an overarching conceptual scheme that organizes some sort of content (including both empirical and semantic content) is flawed. In other words, we generally cannot distinguish language (schemes) from experience (content); schemes and contents are forever mixed up with one another. The fourth dogma, following from and in a mutual relation to the third, was that the very idea of pre-theoretically given content (such as “experience”) is flawed. This is known as the myth of the given (Frankenberry and Penner 1999b).

In the pages that follow, I focus on the rejection of the third and fourth dogmas and its consequences. Davidson’s rejection of the third dogma led to a nuanced position that left him somewhere between correspondence and coherence theories of truth, theories about the relation between language and the world. In other words, for Davidson a sentence is true partly because it corresponds to the world and partly because of its relation to other sentences (Davidson 1986a). Going too far in one direction or the other leads to problems. Deep-discourse theorists and most humanists go too far in the direction of coherence. For these folks, there is no correspondence between a word, say “religion,” and the world. Since this word does not neatly correspond to anything in the world, they say we should rather study the socioeconomic and political process behind invoking such a word (see Riesebrodt 2010, chapter 1).³

Natural science-based approaches have the opposite problem: they go too far in the direction of correspondence, tending to take language as a

mirror of nature (Rorty 1979a), where the only thing they are interested in is the way a word, say “God,” does or does not correspond to nature. Such approaches to religion envision a world where words simply do or do not refer to something in the world, and there is no messiness with regard to the socioeconomic and political processes behind those words. Like the misguided builders of the Tower of Babel, they wish for one language.

The failure to understand the intersubjective nature of semantics in both approaches leads them to think that the meaningful content of words, and more importantly of sentences composed by the words that agents utter in context, do not really matter. This has been preamble to say that though there are problems, I think there is a path that can retain the good things from both hard science and critical approaches to religion in line with a more responsible alternative monist metaphysics. The path goes through Davidson.

Davidson, Core Aspects

Aside from the noted four dogmas of empiricism that Davidson rejects, the main pillars of his holistic approach that I rely on as background throughout the book are anomalous monism, radical interpretation, and the Principle of Charity. Volumes have already been written about each of these topics, with critiques, responses, and various rejoinders (Hahn 1999; Eynine 2001; LePore and Ludwig 2009, 2013; Malpas 2011). I will not rehash debates from the analytical philosophy of language and mind in these pages. I have previously published extensively about how these subjects relate to religion and the study of religion (G. Levy 2010, 2012, 2014, 2018).

But a brief summary, preferably as free from jargon as possible, is still in order. Before discussing these terms, I want to stress that they come within a background of Davidson’s holism. I agree with Mark Gardiner that the simplest way to understand his holism is that “the unit of interpretation is total behavior” (Gardiner 2016, 289). From this perspective, if you want to understand the meaning of someone’s verbal or nonverbal behavior, ideally you do so in the context of their total behavior. Observing someone’s total behavior is not really possible, so preferably you do so in the context of as much of their behavior as possible. As I understand it, this move is critical for understanding religion, a particular kind of meaning-making behavior. The same, for better or worse, applies to your understanding of the inscribed utterances in this book.

Davidson's holism is forward looking since, ideally, in attributing meaning to someone, one must look at that person's total behavior. In this way, the interpretive process is never finished because new information about the total behavior is potentially always coming in. This point places Davidson firmly in line with his mentor Quine and the other logical pragmatists. The focus on future interpretation and the *pragma*, or action, is central to understanding Davidson as a pragmatist.

Anomalous monism has five core aspects. The first is its behavioral psychology. It is a form of relatively strict behaviorism coupled with what are called "transcendental" (Rorty 1979b) primitives of a minimalist psychology. Observing the behavior of agents around us, including but not exclusive to making sounds and gestures, is the central means whereby we understand what they mean. However, behavior alone is insufficient to the task. Davidson's contribution was describing particular primitive concepts without which he did not think semantic interpretation would be possible.

The concepts of "little *t*" truth and error are the most important primitives for Davidsonian semantics. These concepts are dubbed transcendent because they are simply postulated a priori, as the logical core of the system (the system of meaning). They are just there, part of the system from the start, because for Davidson a semantic system could never get off the ground without them. In this book I take that point to an extreme, but I hope not an unwarranted one, asking the question where and how transcendental primitive concepts arise. Despite critics such as Michael Dummett (1993) pressing him on these points, Davidson rarely speculated on the answer (Davidson 1994b, 1999).

In order for us to understand any information as carrying semantic meaning—for example, in order to understand the speech of another human being—we implicitly assume that their use of the concept of "little *t*" truth will largely match our own. In other words, in order for semantic communication to work, we have to assume a large background of true shared beliefs with other people. Davidson refers to this as the Principle of Charity. Though it is a field left largely untouched and Davidson himself did not discuss it, Davidson recognizes that part of what underwrites the principle is that we share a vast evolutionary history with the other members of our species (Davidson 2001b, 202).

Before going any further, with regard to the term "belief," the second aspect of anomalous monism is that it is strongly anti-representational. In

other words, Davidson does not think the term “belief” refers to a representation in someone’s head. As Scott Davis has put this point, for Davidson there is nothing like “mentalese,” a so-called language of internal thought (G. S. Davis 2018a, 125). As with other pragmatists, for Davidson a belief and indeed all propositional attitudes are better understood as dispositions to act. That is, “anomalous monism makes sense of the claim that attitudes are dispositions to behave in certain ways” (Davidson 2001b, 72). In the case of a belief, this is a disposition to affirm or deny (that is, use the concepts of “little *t*” truth and “little *f*” falsity) something—for example, that abortion is wrong or the world is flat. Such attitudes are not “in the thinkers—not in their minds, or before their minds.” Rather, having a belief is “just exemplifying a property” (75). Propositions, for Davidson, do not refer to entities but rather are abstractions we use to make sense of a person, for “the only *object* required for the existence of a belief is a believer” (74). Such mental events are as real as physical events, but they do not refer to entities. Thus, “having a belief is not like having a favorite cat, it is being in a state; and being in a state does not require that there be an entity called a state that one is in” (74). This is a crucial point to grasp going forward when we consider religion to involve propositional attitudes. Such attitudes should not be understood in representational terms but rather in pragmatic terms.

As a pragmatic concept, beliefs are tied to occasions and real patterns (Davidson 2001b, 82; Dennett 1991). They are ephemeral, coming and going in the context of communicative situations. They do not refer to representations in the head, but to external behaviors. Meaning is thus tied to the media by which it is uncovered. At the same time, as we will see shortly, every mental event (of which a belief is one type) must be identical with a physical event in the embodied brain. So this position does not call into question the fact that something must be going on in the embodied brain when we have such dispositions.

The third aspect of anomalous monism is freedom. Though it is often left out of accounts of anomalous monism, in the classic essay where he first described anomalous monism, Davidson begins and ends with freedom (Davidson 1980, 207, 225). In that essay, Davidson is “in sympathy with Kant when he says . . . ‘[philosophy] cannot give up the idea of nature any more than that of freedom’” (207; quoting Kant [1909, 75–76]). For Davidson, both he and Kant believe “freedom entails anomaly” (207). The challenge of that original essay for Davidson was to uphold an account of

monism such that every mental event has an identical physical event, but at the same time to argue that the mental event is not nomologically reducible to the physical event. In other words, no law, physical or mental, could relate the mental and physical event.

Though potentially a paradox or contradiction, Davidson held that it was not, for we have to maintain this difference between the mental and material if we want to hold on to freedom, agency, and the content of mental states. On this account, freedom may need to be included in the list of transcendent primitives. It is the engine that drives anomalous monism in the sense that Davidson assumes any legitimate philosophical argument about the relation between the domains of the material and the mental must provide and uphold an account of human (and perhaps nonhuman) freedom. Over the course of this book I take up a few subjects I find relevant to religion that center on freedom entailed in anomaly, such as creativity, imagination, humor, surprise, and intimacy.

The relation between the mental and material leads into the fourth aspect of anomalous monism, the one most philosophers, including Davidson, focus on—namely, its implications for metaphysics. If you take these first three points about holistic behaviorism, coupled with the core primitives and freedom, some metaphysical implications arise. When we describe the world in purely physical terms, we can potentially describe it with laws. These laws would tell us everything we need to know about the world couched in a physical vocabulary. However, for Davidson this could never be the whole picture. For when we describe the world with a mental vocabulary, which is something we must do in order to understand other agents, we cannot even potentially describe it with laws. Mental vocabulary, which uses terms like “wish,” “desire,” “want,” or “hope”—terms wholly necessary if we want to understand the people around us as free selves (Davidson 2001b, 91)—is simply unfit to this task. If we want to retain the freedom behind mental descriptions of nature, we must understand those descriptions as anomalous, not reducible to anything like a physical law.

The twist in all of this is that Davidson still retains the argument that the mental and physical are identical. In other words, they both refer to the same one world. This is where the monism part of anomalous monism comes in. In more complex terminology, this has come to be called a token-identity theory. The tokens of the mental and the tokens of the physical can be understood as identical, while the types are not. As Kathrin Glüer puts this in her

short introduction to Davidson, his claim is that there is “one neutral, monistic ontology of objects and events underlying these different classifications” (2011, 15). All mental events are thus also physical events at the same time.

For example, when someone wishes, there is a mental event (the wish) that is identical to some neural event (or pattern) in their brain. All mental events can be described using the physicalist vocabulary. In this sense, from an anomalous monist perspective, neuroscientists are doing great science, and the effort to understand the neural correlates of mental events should by all means continue. Such neural firings are indeed the same thing as the mental events that they instantiate.

Neuroscientists are doing great science, but not *all* the science, because the physical vocabulary by necessity leaves something crucial out. Davidson himself has been accused of not being very clear or indeed paradoxical about how mental and physical events can be the same but yet not completely reducible to one another. In analytic terminology, the debate has centered on whether and in what way mental events are supervenient on physical ones. For the purposes of this book, in order to glean something from Davidson and use it as inspiration for a theory of religion, I do not feel it necessary to go far into those debates (see Davidson 2005, 185–188; Kim 1998; Van Brakel 1999; McLaughlin 2006).

The fifth core aspect of Davidson’s philosophy, underpinning the previous four, is the focus on intersubjectivity as the core of meaning. Intersubjectivity is what the word implies, the interrelation between subjects or agents. The domain of the mental vocabulary noted is that of the intersubjective relations we have with other agents. We use mental-state vocabulary in order to interact with other agents. Crucially, for Davidson, we must see such agents around us as acting freely. If we walked around viewing the people around us as robotic automatons, this would not leave much room for meaningful interaction with them. If you do not believe me, try it (briefly, please) and see how far you get.

Davidson’s view on intersubjectivity comes out most fully in his discussions of what he calls radical interpretation. He explains radical interpretation using his famous geometric analogy of triangulation. Since someone’s total behavior is never fully available, meaning making is always contextual and imminent in an active communicative triangle made up of at least two speakers and the “shared” environment around them (the world). Radical interpretation is derived from Quine’s notion of radical translation,

which argues that every act of interpretation is also an act of translation that involves no unitary, absolutely correct translation of a given utterance. The correctness of interpretation will be determined by the pragmatic constraints of the conversation moving forward (Davidson 2001a, essay 9).⁴

Intersubjectivity not only grounds semantics, but it is also the source of objectivity (Davidson 2001b, 83). In other words, intersubjectivity is the basis for objective knowledge about the one world we all share. In this context, for Davidson, the role of the teacher cannot be overestimated. Whether one recognizes it or not, in order to learn to use a language, humans have to be shown how to do so. When we learn language, one vertex of the triangle is the “learner” and one vertex is the “teacher” (212). As Scott Davis has glossed this point, the move from infant communication to full-blown language must take place “under the tutelage of at least one other language-user, who interacts with the infant using her own idiolect” (G. S. Davis 2018b, 379). Such tutelage is how we learn to tie words to the world, but it is only done under the background of the radically intersubjective relation between teachers and students. Education, even in this minimal sense, is what gives content to thought.

Evolutionary Triangles

Any approach that aims to integrate the humanities and natural sciences in some way must come to terms with the evolution of human minds. As far as I can tell, Davidson never discussed the relation between his own philosophy and evolution to any great extent. He apparently did not think the theory of evolution was all that relevant to any of his arguments. Despite this, we can take it as an assumption that Davidson’s philosophical approach accepts standard arguments in the physical sciences. As noted, Davidson’s Principle of Charity is based on the idea that the massive set of true beliefs human beings share is part of the reason why radical interpretation is possible. When we radically interpret another creature, we have to assume they see and feel the world largely, but not completely, as we do. If they didn’t, it is unlikely we would be able to communicate with them. Thus, a biological postulate of this theory should say that the further away a creature is from us on the tree of life, the more difficult it would be to interpret it. Mammals are perhaps most like us, and the most likely candidates for interspecies understanding. In other words, it is fair to say that the more DNA we share with another creature, the more likely we are to understand it.

Communication is possible not just because we are very similar to some other creatures, but also because we are different. That is, radical interpretation relies on the analogy of triangulation, which entails coordination between two creatures with different perspectives interacting with one another and a shared world.

As Jeff Malpas puts it, triangulation “is essentially underpinned by the principles of Euclidean geometry together with some basic trigonometry” (Malpas 2013, 259). If one knows the lengths of two of the sides of a triangle and one of the angles, she can calculate the length of the third side. In simple terms, triangulation allows us to determine relative locations in a triangle. With repeated measurement, we can come up with a relative map. Malpas thus sees triangulation as involving a spatial and temporal dimension and in fact points to “the co-implication of space with time” (259).

Triangulation is the key to understanding the relation between Davidson’s philosophy of mind (anomalous monism) and his philosophy of language or interpretation. It was the way he explained how semantic content was possible even though mental states are anomalous. Triangulation is how the content of rich communication is connected to the world at the same time that it is mixed in a web of coherence.

Malpas holds that triangulation is dynamic, processual, relational, and antifoundational. One reason Malpas thinks it has been so poorly understood by analytic philosophers is that they have failed to see it as an ontological thesis. We should not see triangulation as a “process that *operates upon* content,” but rather it is a process that “*establishes* content” (Malpas 2013, 263, emphasis in original). As Marcia Cavell explains, “Meaning depends on successful interpretation rather than the other way around” (Cavell 2005, xv; see also Malpas 2013, 266).

As far as the ontology goes, it is a relational one, involving the interaction of creatures with “certain cognitive and behavioral capacities” with one another and the shared world. Since the interacting is external to individual minds, this is a form of externalism. Malpas argues that this *holistic-externalist relationalism* “is the real basis for the idea of anomalous monism—which can now be seen as essentially an expression of the commitment to triangulation, conjoined with certain other claims concerning the nature of law and cause, within the philosophy of mind” (Malpas 2013, 264).

In discussing triangulation in relation to the “emergence of thoughts,” Davidson gets closest to touching on evolution. He is interested that when

describing the evolution of human beings and also development in the life of an individual, there is a stage at which there is no thought followed by one where there is thought. He thinks that we do not have a satisfactory vocabulary for describing the transition between these stages in either case (Davidson 2001b, 127). Indeed, he thinks it might be impossible to come up with a bridging vocabulary between these stages (128). In chapter 3, I suggest that vocabulary from the field of enactive cognition gives us our best shot at coming up with this bridging vocabulary.

Despite this pessimism, he is willing to give some suggestions, and this is where triangulation comes in. Davidson thinks a triangular interaction can take place before anything like semantic content is possible, as in the case of nonhuman animals and small children. In this way, prelinguistic coordination between two creatures and the world, where reactions are correlated, can serve as a case of primitive triangulation. He provides the examples of schools of fish and certain monkeys (128).

This triangular situation is necessary for the emergence of thought, but it is not sufficient. In other words, more is needed for thought to emerge. For Davidson, what is needed is language. What Davidson means by “language” is probably not what you are thinking. Davidson means, first, the ability to use certain concepts, most importantly the concept of truth. Second, he thinks we need the concepts of names and predicates. Third, we need “truth-functional connectives” such as conjunction, negation, alternation, and the material conditional (“and,” “not,” “or,” “if . . . then”). The fourth is the biggest and perhaps most important leap for Davidson: we need quantification, “the concepts expressed by the words ‘some’ and ‘all,’ . . . [for] once we advance to this stage, we have arrived at languages that match, or begin to match, our own in complexity” (133).

Thus, any evolutionary story we tell about how rich semantic content, and indeed thoughts, emerge from a Davidsonian perspective has to account for these four steps. In this sense, to answer the question of how Davidson’s philosophy relates to evolution, the answer is surely to be found in the field of evolutionary linguistics. Here you have roughly two camps and a spectrum in between. Some think language is an adaptation; some think it is a by-product of sorts, providing a mechanistic but not adaptationist argument (Pinker and Jackendoff 2005; Palmarini 2008, 102).

This book is about religion, so it is beyond its scope to wade into such debates. I would simply note that the research most likely to explain the

evolution of primitive triangulation focuses on the evolution of coordination and learning between agents (for an example, see Tomasello 1999) and the development of coordination and learning between agents (see Trevarthen and Aitken 2001). These approaches, like Davidson's, understand that the unit of selection should be a behavioral, intersubjective interaction in time and space, not any particular node of the interaction. Saying this does not deny the importance of studying the behavioral, physiological, or cognitive makeup of the particular organisms that take part in the interaction. In neuroscience, the work of Terrence Deacon with regard to the evolution of language is perhaps the closest to a Davidsonian approach (Deacon 1997). The idea is basically that language evolved to infect us, not the other way around. In this way, the four concepts Davidson argues for could possibly have evolved largely external to human beings.

Once someone discovers them, these concepts must be learned. The closest evolutionary perspective I have found thus far concerning how such learning could take place comes from "cultural evolutionary psychology" (Heyes 2018, chapter 9). We can consider semantic language in Davidson's sense to be a culturally evolved cognitive technology, or what Cecilia Heyes calls a "cognitive gadget" (Heyes 2018). Her approach has a similar perspective on the centrality of teaching and learning for human cognition. Like Davidson's notion of triangulation, where the contingent social relation between teacher and learner (and environment) is the basis for semantic content to get off the ground, Heyes argues that "Small Ordinary" psychological attributes (temperament, attentional biases, and domain general processes of learning, memory, and cognitive control) that we mostly share with other animals (though they are "souped-up"), provide enough of a foundation for "Big Special" attributes (such as imitation, mentalizing, causal understanding, episodic memory, and self-conception) to emerge through cultural learning. As a product more of culture than genetic inheritance, the selective learning that makes "Big Special" cognitive gadgets possible is vulnerable and could be lost without constant intersubjective renewal (218).

Themes and Chapter Overview

Taking an anomalous monist approach allows us to look at religion in a new way, and in doing so, a few major themes emerge that I will discuss throughout this book. The first is that thoughts are real but not all thoughts

are representational. Thoughts move in patterns; for example, sometimes they are dialectical. Certain types of thoughts are impossible to think without logic, but not all thoughts require logic or strict means-end rationality. Some thoughts are images, some are sounds. Some are half-formed, neither fully propositional nor nonpropositional. To have semantic, propositional thoughts—that is, to have semantic content—we need triangulation between at least two speakers and the world. In other words, semantic meaning is social, immanent, and contextual. We should also consider feelings as thoughts, or at least thoughts as components of our emotions. Thoughts always come in a medium. Often the medium is their use. Sometimes the medium is spoken language; sometimes it is written language. Many ancient religious texts fall into this latter category. They give us a certain type of imperfect record of thought.

With regard to ancient texts, they are the closest thing we have to recordings of ancient thoughts, and they are therefore quite important to understanding the history of thought and information. We should not forget that such texts are always interpreted in specific historical and political circumstances and that how we interpret them now also tells us a lot about ourselves.

In the second theme, I claim that thoughts are natural things. They are one class of the many fractal patterns we find in nature (see Czachesz 2012). In this sense, thoughts have a natural history; evolutionary psychology and psychology are continuous, or at least they should be. For this reason alone, scholars who study the history of thought, like scholars of religion, are vitally important. We are the ones who have been paying close attention to this aspect of reality. Minds are real, and we need both hard-science and humanities approaches to study them.

The third theme is that human beings are animals who, like all animals and most living things, have specific types of communication systems and media techniques. I explore how a holistic, systems-oriented approach to such communications might square with evolutionary and biosemiotic understandings of information. Human communication systems are perhaps special in that they appear to be susceptible to viral representations, though this too has parallels in other species. Some representations, such as the regular movement of heavenly bodies, are things we discover, not things we invent; the same may be true of language and mathematics. Buffering or decoupling of fuzzy representations appears to be the powerhouse of our

particularly special form of cognition, and this is what makes both science and religion possible. I will explore the role that the phenomenon of surprise plays in isolating this particularly human capacity. In the process, I delve into the relation between fact and fiction, the lines between humans and other animals, the role that superhuman agency plays in our cognition, the potential to talk to aliens, and the evolution of religion, all within a framework of making explicit an alternative metaphysics—in contrast to implicit ones that are currently dominant in scientific approaches to religion.

I hope this brief summary provides enough background about Davidson's philosophy to keep you going.⁵ I am not going to mount a full-scale defense of his holistic-externalist relationism, as Malpas called it, in these pages. That Davidson is considered one of the most important analytic philosophers is good enough for me. It is not my goal to convince a reductive materialist, for example, to adopt his stance; rather, if you are a reductive materialist, I want to tell you about some of the consequences if you do. In this regard, I hope you will keep an open mind.

Since Davidson's philosophy is holistic, each of these themes is inter-related with the others. Each of the chapters that follow illustrate the consequences of adopting one or more of the core aspects just mentioned, and all of them can be understood as exploring the idea of triangulation around the subject of religion.

In chapter 1, my goal is provide an orientation to the basic method that I take throughout the book and the broad terrain I cover. I argue that a Davidsonian approach to the semantics of religion is the best way to study religion, because it can do justice to both its material, biological, or technological side, and its mental or informational side, without reducing one to the other. When discussing religion, content is king, and there is no other way around it, so a semantic approach to religion should have central place in any theory of religion. The Davidsonian approach I recommend allows me to follow what I call a natural genealogy in order to outline the core features of religious language and to trace back both mental and material histories of religion in a nontheological way, while leaving room for alternative ontologies.

In order to make sense of the semantics of religion, we have to understand how it may or may not differ from other types of semantics. In chapter 2, I tackle the relation between two closely related semantics: fiction and religion. Previous approaches to fiction and religion exemplify the inexplicit metaphysics I am reacting against and most often fall victim to

naïve representationalism and dualism. I thus explore the consequences of adopting an anti-representational, nondualistic, and intersubjective view of religious meaning, which I regard as a type of fiction. That is, religions involve triangulating with fictional agents. If we apply the motto about triangulation from Cavell, that “meaning depends on successful interpretation rather than the other way around,” we see that attributing meaning always involves some fictionalizing, since it is a process of syncing an immanent theory about the projected patterns in another person’s behavior with our own in the context of a shared environment.

I argue that much of the scholarly understanding concerning the relation between religion and fiction comes as a result of taking a potentially distorting, spectator view of language. Instead, looking at language from an anomalous monist perspective, we see that the perceived discrepancy between the two is contextual and must be taken case by case. I describe a few of the more influential theories about the relation between fictional and religious language and argue that from a semantic perspective there is not much reason to distinguish the two. Further, even from a social-psychological perspective there is not much more of a reason; human beings can believe practically anything, given the right developmental and cultural circumstances, and this is probably a good thing, accounting for our creativity and humor. Religion grows out of this, and it is foolish to think we can contain it without cutting off our creativity and humor at the same time. The narrative mental flexibility of the human animal necessarily rolls along with our unique biological and cognitive plasticity. We could not have one without the other.

Scientific approaches to religion up until now have tried to understand this plasticity from a top-down perspective, thinking they stand outside it. But the truth is that we do not and cannot, and thus a more immanent view on information is in order. The goal of the third chapter is to lay out a view of information that is conducive to this anomalous or “flat” approach. I am concerned with the jump between nonsemantic and semantic types of information, between the prelinguistic primitive triangle and the rich semantic triangle noted in the previous section. Another way to put this is that I am trying to account, historically and cosmologically, for the relation between the physical and the mental. It turns out that information and agency, though probably quite special in human animals, are continuous with the rest of nature, so we must make an effort to trace the notion of information back to the origins of life, and perhaps further.

The first three chapters present some of the approaches I am reacting against and argue for what I see as the theoretical way forward when we take seriously the propositional content of religion at the same time that we move away from representationalism. The last three chapters apply the theory to discrete cases: ancient texts, modern media, and intimacy. The fourth chapter is about the permutations of information in the process of creation. I focus on the important place of education in triangular meaning making and the role that texts play in that process, using an ancient “scientific” text known as *Sefer Yetzirah* (*Book of Creation*) as a jumping-off point to make further arguments about natural information. This text (and others like it) considers language and instruction (what ancient Hebrew writers called “torah”) to be embedded in the fabric of the universe. I argue that this is not as strange an idea as it sounds from the perspective of modern cosmology. I provide some examples from diverse fields such as education, mathematics, comedy, and psychedelia to elucidate the anomalous monist perspective on creativity as something beyond human beings. This perspective requires us to reorient ourselves away from the anthropocentric bias that also distorts our picture of religion.

Stars are perhaps the most ancient form of natural information, of human consciousness discovering information embedded in the universe. In the fifth chapter, I argue that the more recent technologies that have allowed us to control light—from writing (black fire on white fire⁶) to LEDs—thereby controlling what people see and ultimately know, lie at the heart of that most modern form of “religion”: the cult of celebrity. I argue that children are especially susceptible to this type of information because their particular distinctions between fantasy and reality are not inborn but take time to develop. Both television, in the form of advertising, and religion, in the form of myth-making, plug into this aspect of childhood development; they both teach children about what Maurice Bloch calls the “transcendental social.” But it is wrong to see adult and child imaginaries as starkly different, for adults also blur the lines between fiction and reality. Our obsession with the luminous ones goes very far back in human history, and I argue further that we can understand the cult of celebrity by tracing the trajectory of that obsession through liminal figures who blur lines between humans, gods, and animals. I thus explore the connection between meaning and media, examining, in effect, what happens when we triangulate with agents on our screens. In the process, I argue that the semantics of religion is coupled to its media technologies.

Celebrities, like gods, are intimate strangers, paradoxical figures we are intersubjectively close to and far away from at the same time. We can feel close to superhuman agents, even love them. In the sixth and final chapter, I explore this paradox further by taking up the topic of intimacy. Intimacy is central to religion because it concerns the quality of intersubjective interactions and requires some owning of individual subjectivity. Intimacy involves subjective feelings and emotions; from an anomalous monist perspective, however, a more fundamental ground for experience is intersubjectivity. The sixth chapter thus takes up the problem of accounting for subjectivity in the context of prioritized intersubjectivity. Intimate relationships are filled with fictions, for not all triangles are equal, especially when we triangulate with those we love.

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