

## Conclusion: On the Limits of the Unlimited

A universal concept of religion represents a legitimate form of science fiction so long as it takes up fundamental facts of human action or social relations without making their specific shaping part of the definition.

—Martin Riesebrodt, *Promise of Salvation*

In this book, I have presented a theory of religion inspired by Donald Davidson's philosophy of language and mind. One of Davidson's arguments is that the theories we use to interpret data around us and make it meaningful are underdetermined by that data. There are a potentially infinite number of such theories. This book represents one of those infinite number.

The main goal of the book has been to make sense of religion from a nonreductive naturalistic perspective by making explicit the metaphysical background of anomalous monism and applying it to central themes in religion. This background teaches us the paradoxical notion that the mental and physical are not reducible to one another but are nevertheless identical. In this sense, I propose a theory beyond heaven (the mental) and earth (the material). The course I have taken has been to begin broadly with what I see as central for making sense of religion: language. But language can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people.

In the introduction and first chapter, I focused on what I see as most important about anomalous monism—namely, its holistic version of semantics, which points to the all-or-nothing nature of human thought and requires us to take religious language literally. Following Davidson, I argued that human-level semantic content can only emerge in robust triangular interaction between at least two speakers and the world they share. At the same time, holistic semantics is not all there is to language, so I introduced the

term *natural information*, a central concept I have used throughout this book. Natural information has a much deeper genealogy than semantics, but this is a question that theology and religion mostly have pursued, less so science. These two poles of language, semantics and natural information, provide red threads that trace their way through the book.

In the second chapter, I discussed a central chunk of semantic content in religions, superhuman agents, and the perceived difference between fictional and religious agents. I argued that there is actually not much of a difference between them when we take a holistic perspective. In this way superhuman agents, whether superheroes, talking animals, aliens, or gods, all belong to the semantics of religion. There can be a conceptual difference between fictional agents such as Mickey Mouse and the usual gods, but this way of framing the issue puts things backward. From the perspective of triangulation, just as “meaning depends on successful interpretation rather than the other way around” (Cavell 2005, xv), in the same way nothing inherent or essential in a concept determines whether an agent is really fictional or really a god. Whether it is really fictional or really a god depends on successful interpretation, not the other way around.

In order to make this idea even more explicit, I moved on in the third chapter to a discussion of the economies of natural information. I traced such information back much further than we typically go, and in the process I called into question the anthropocentric view that human agency perception is all that special. In this sense, I argued that the attribution of agency and thus religion goes far back in evolutionary time, perhaps to the origin of life and even beyond. I presented a deep history of agency, arguing that there is a continuum, not a sharp line, between agency and superhuman agency.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I discussed triangulation in texts, technology, and intimacy, respectively. In chapter 4, I emphasized the importance of the triangular relation between the teacher and learner in the formation of semantic content. I went on to a discussion that explores where the creative impulses behind religion come from, the human potential to create worlds, with analogy to the ancient text *Sefer Yetzirah*, which has been understood as a tool kit for a creator to make universes and minds, using building blocks it calls ספר (SFR).

New religions are created all the time. In chapter 5 I discussed how modern technology has seized the means of creative production by figuring out how to manipulate natural information, leading to modern popular cults

of celebrity. In the sixth chapter I discussed the challenges of intimacy, or authentic and real intersubjective engagement with others, from the holistic perspective of the previous chapters.

Giving a deep historical and evolutionary account of religion while at the same time holding on to a thoroughgoing holism is a difficult task. Nevertheless, a few central streams in particular have flowed throughout these chapters. First, the core of the theory is that religious language is a form of fiction and religious studies is a form of science fiction (see epigraph). Fiction does not necessarily mean false, for we share a massive bedrock of truths with one another, without which communication could never get off the ground. In order to understand something semantically speaking, we have to provisionally attribute truth (or falsity) to it, and understanding religious language is no different.

Second, agency is central to religious language. In tracing its natural history, I have tried to show that there is no hard-and-fast line between human and nonhuman agency where semantic triangulation starts to break down. Wherever one places that line, one is likely to start attributing falsity to the attribution of agency on one side or other. Disagreement about religion emerges at this minimal level. We humans triangulate in narratives, in texts and other media, and most importantly in our intimate relations with one another. This is where the content of religious language is to be found, immaterial meanings that are identical but not reducible to material events. Such language would not be possible without the natural history of life. Researching both in parallel, discovering the surprising places where they meet, should be part of the science-fictional study of religion.

Third, in order to understand religion, we must bring humanities and natural-science approaches into as much conversation as possible, while also recognizing we will never be able to completely reconcile them. The content of religion is found at the holistic level of semantics, where thoughts have a life of their own, and it will always have some disconnect from the lawlike levels of the natural sciences. The nearly impossible task is to make these conversations interesting and enlightening while at the same time giving due diligence to the state of the art in the respective fields in the humanities and natural sciences. Such a task requires often difficult collaboration and teamwork.

Fourth, religion arises to awareness depending on the perspective through which we look at it. Some scholars (and nonscholars), especially in the humanities, look at it from the subjective perspective; others, especially in

the hard sciences, look at it from an objective, third-person perspective. Based on the work of Davidson, I argue that if we want to understand how religion means anything in the real world, we should be looking at religion from an intersubjective perspective.

In the Introduction to Theories of Religion course I teach every autumn, one of the things I try to get across to students is that the religious upbringing of a theorist tends to influence his or her scientific theorizing. For example, Durkheim's Jewish background influenced his social theory of religion, while James's Protestant background influenced his individualistic psychological theory. Theories always come from a particular perspective and are conditioned by the life history of the person doing the theorizing. We cannot detach the theory from the theorist, but that does not mean we should stop theorizing. In this book, I have tried to own how my own religious tradition, even though I am an agnostic, has influenced my theorizing.

The mythical narratives from Genesis that I begin and end with point to a central theme of this book. These stories, the Tower of Babel and Adam and Eve, show the dangers of coming too close to superhuman agents. For rabbinic interpreters of Genesis, explains Phillip Michael Sherman, "the rebellion at Babel is no different from and ultimately founded upon the same rebellious tendency present in Adam himself" (Sherman 2013, 325, Genesis Rabbah 38.9.2). In other words, the "sons of men" who built the tower were just as bad as Adam in their disobedience and failure to take responsibility for their actions. At the same time, their free choices in disregarding the law, the necessary anomalousness of free agency, is an important part of the stories.

Both stories thus warn against the hubris of human beings thinking they are gods. This brings us to the fifth main point of the book: we should be wary of the spectator view on communication, which I argued leads to a misguided view of semantic content. Instead, semantic content arises in immanent, contextual, enacted dialogue and conversation with other agents. Ironically, in another sense, wanting to become too much like the gods also leads to anthropocentrism, another error we should try to avoid when giving account of religion. Anthropocentrism can set human beings apart from other animals in unhelpful ways. If we are going to understand anything about ourselves as human beings, we must see ourselves as but one variety of animal species on earth, as rational animals.

The sixth main point concerns navigation. The night sky once served as a guide for us in time and space. I think the narratives our ancestors once

told and the songs they once sang about the shapes, patterns, and regular motions up there were part of our early extended cognition that provided the scaffolding for human cognition to develop. With towers and other technologies, human beings have taken greater control over our own navigation, and thus over cognition. This has led to some of the stories about the challenges to superhuman agents with which I begin and end the book.

Cognition has led to hubris, especially when looking at religion. One antidote to such hubris is the seventh main point returned to throughout the book: the continuity between mind and life. Within this continuity, I argued that the concept of surprise is a central player, a kind of liquidity in the economy of information. Following Davidson, I found that surprise is central in accounting for human thought and humor. All this goes to the overall aim of the book, discussing the holistic semantics of religion run in parallel with the mind and life sciences, to see where the dynamic relations emerge. As such, I traced the relation between semantic narratives and natural information backward and forward in time, arguing that religions are more like organisms than they are like genes.

Why is this important? Why do we need such an approach? We are navigating this ship together, but science without the humanities is blind, and the humanities without science are rudderless. My hope is that this book can serve as inspiration, motivation, and example for future conversation between humanists and natural scientists. But this will require that individuals in these cultures want to engage one another. It will also mean changing the structure of our universities that all too often leads to rigid divides between academic cultures. I think such changes are required now more than ever, as humans build even bigger towers than Babel, attaining even more technological power over the natural world than we had in the past. In doing so, we have to recognize our limits.

### **Getting Along, with Methodological Conclusions**

In light of these many theoretical implications, there are also some central methodological conclusions of my argument. Humanist-minded scholars of religion get some important things wrong about the harder sciences, and scholars in the harder sciences get some important things wrong about humanists. In terms of what the humanists get wrong, there is no reason to think that an evolutionary paradigm means that “human nature” is

static and unchanging; in fact, quite the opposite is the case. Humanists have been partly justified in seeing this as a takeaway from natural-science approaches to religion because the latter are often wedded to the Pleistocene fallacy—the idea that our minds were mostly shaped by that one particular period of time in our evolutionary history. But this is wrong. If we want to understand human minds, we also need to go back much further, at least to the beginning of life. The Pleistocene was important, but there is no reason to think that this period in particular was more important than any other to the evolution of our minds.

Neither does evolution simply mean survival of the fittest. Fitness in complex organisms minimally entails two basic principles: survival and reproduction. The latter sometimes involves sexual selection, which brings about some very weird features in biology. The fittest organism is rarely the *Übermensch*, such that only the strongest and most selfish survive (Wilson 2010). Furthermore, evolution has no predictable telos because it takes place in open systems and moves only to local, not absolute, maxima. In other words, in a given local, ephemeral environment, some organisms are the fittest, but this is constantly changing; one day some of an organism's attributes make it fit, but the next day these same attributes may make it unfit. I bring this up because I think there is a propensity among humanists to understand evolutionary theory wrongly, as holding the mindset of social Darwinism from the nineteenth century.

In contrast to this outdated view, modern biology is well beyond the crass functionalism of social Darwinism and is making new discoveries all the time. Most biologists accept there is a great deal we do not yet know, for example, about the role of extrachromosomal DNA, regulatory RNA, and their relation to the seemingly worthless DNA (“junk DNA”) in our genome (K. V. Morris and Mattick 2014; Wu et al. 2019; Cheetham, Faulkner, and Dinger 2020). Another example is recent work based in molecular biology arguing that memory emerged in the biological record when certain proteins began acting like viruses (Pastuzyn et al. 2018).

This point about misunderstandings between the “two cultures” relates to another difficulty in any interdisciplinary work between the humanities and hard sciences. The research is necessarily conservative: it must utilize methods and theories that are relatively firmly established in the various disciplines it brings together. The problem is that by the time research is brought into discussion with religion in a relevant way, it is usually outdated. This point could be applied to the whole subfield of cognitive approaches to religion, which

have tended to incorporate the “machine” view of the mind, the mind as a computer, from very old versions of cognitive science and cybernetics. In my opinion, state-of-the-art cognitive science does not have a machine view of the mind anymore but has moved on to “4E cognition,” which emphasizes the embodied, embedded, extended, and enacted aspects of cognition (Menary 2010; Madary 2011; Newen, De Bruin, and Gallagher 2018).

If we jump from the level of theory to the level of scientific practice on the ground, one of the beautiful things about hard-science approaches to religion is that at this point in time they are usually thoroughly interdisciplinary and collaborative. Most research published under its banner has a team of people from various fields working on it. If anything, this methodological approach exemplifies consilience on the ground, where scholars from various fields accustomed to different theories and methods manage to conduct experiments and write papers together. I would challenge more humanistically inclined scholars of religion to engage in more collaboration in this way. Such collaboration is certainly not easy, but it probably generates better, more nuanced scholarship. It is true that humanists do versions of this with conferences, grant project collaboration, and edited volumes, but more team-based core research and writing should be done in the humanities, despite its difficulties.

What practitioners of the hard sciences often get wrong (and humanists get right) is that they are rarely willing to take into account the constructedness and historical conditionality of science. In order to make future collaboration more likely, natural-science scholarship interested in religion should be more open to the idea from scholars of religion that not just religion, but also science, is a historically situated human phenomenon. Scholars in cognitive science are on the right track when they are open to the idea that science can be studied in a way similar to their approach to religion, as a natural phenomenon in the context of human evolution, a cognitive science of science (Thagard 2012). They are usually less inclined to enter into science-studies discussions about the discursive, strategic agent-oriented conditions of possibility of such discourse.

To take one example, it seems obvious that since males have been the ones predominantly steering the Neurathian scientific ship, this may have an effect on the choices made about what to study, and indeed how to study. Perhaps males and females would come up with the same exact sciences, but I doubt it (see Vandermassen 2005). In saying this I do not mean to endorse global skepticism or relativism, but merely to make the

pragmatic point that the scope of science is limited and that if women controlled more of its institutional apparatus there would likely be a different focus and different discoveries (see Clough 2011).

Science cannot tell us ontological truths; these are ideas that are built into our methods and theories beforehand that only philosophy (or theology) has the tools to explore. Nevertheless, even from the science studies perspective I endorse, science is still the best way we have yet devised for deciding which of a number of competing evidence-based theories is provisionally true or false. Since the discovery of relativity and quantum mechanics, science has become increasingly strange, such that science fiction and religious fiction are mashing up (see figure 7.1). We can see this in the recent mixing of these genres in popular culture, such as the book/film *I Am Legend* (1954/2007) or the film *Spectral* (2016). For this reason, while the approaches of actor network theory (Bruno Latour), historical ontology (Ian Hacking), and genealogy (Michel Foucault) have basic affinities with my approach, the best way to describe anomalous monism from a science-studies perspective is as a form



**Figure 7.1**

Photo entitled *Guns and Moses*, by former Berlin-based artist Daniel Josefsohn.



of “flat-ontology.” This stance basically says that despite cultural constructedness, everything is real: humans are real and consciousness is real. Knowledge steadily rolls back on itself like Hillalum’s cylinder seal noted in the introduction, but when we press it out, it looks like heaven and earth are disconnected.

As part of this science-studies background, we can return to the metaphysical challenge from anomalous monism. Most hard-science approaches to religion are dominated by an undisclosed implicit metaphysic inherited from Protestantism. The field is mostly made up of white men from this cultural background. Perhaps this is true of European science in general, and for obvious reasons. The metaphysics says there is an essential ontological difference between the mental and the material. Since there can be no ghosts in the machine, we must ignore ghosts entirely and focus only on the machine (Modern 2021). In this book I argue that the ghosts, though fictional, are much more interesting. This book tries to imagine what a scientific approach to religion would look like with a different metaphysics.

Natural-science approaches to cognition have the potential to aid scholars in the humanities, whether they study ancient or modern texts, since texts are products of human psychology. In the same way that scholars of literature and art have been receptive to various theories about human psychology, from Plato to Freud, I think any scholar working with products of human imagination and creativity should also be receptive to this new brand of cognitive and evolutionary psychology. This new brand states that minds are not temporally static, but rather they have an evolutionary history that stretches back to the origins of life. Two goals, among a number that shaped minds over these millions of years, are survival and reproduction. Minds try to keep themselves going, they want to feel safe, and they want intimacy. Minds devise strategies with respect to these goals.

Up until this point there has largely been a one-way street of usage where scholars in the hard sciences employ humanists to conjure a bit of data from their fields that scientists can use for their own empirical purposes. Their purposes will be quite different from those of humanist scholars working with ancient and modern texts. I think the next phase should involve humanist scholars opening the street to two-way traffic. This requires that humanists read as much from the harder sciences as they possibly can. On the other side, my argument involves taking the “scientific” content of ancient texts, and ethnoscience in general, more seriously (Ellen 2020; Bender and Beller 2020). Humanists have been studying cognition for thousands of years, and

we should not just abandon that tradition because something new comes along.

The basis of objective facts is intersubjective triangulation, but there are limits on the capacity of intersubjective triangulation because of the necessary incommensurability of the vocabulary we use when we describe things in psychological versus physical terms. When scientists treat animals, including humans, as machines, they are forgetting this incommensurability. However, there is no pre-given place where the incommensurabilities will lie; we have to discover them ourselves. In this sense, conceptual dualism should not prevent us from having interdisciplinary conversations. So while some scientific practice and theorizing must accept the conceptual distinction between the mental and physical, the same need not apply to our reading practices and conversations. Our reading practices and conversations should not distinguish between the natural sciences and humanities, thus privileging one over the other.

In order to bring these forms of scholarship together, a time-out in the culture war is urgently needed. The enemies are misplaced for both scientific reductionists who complain about the difficulty of understanding “postmodernism,” and humanists who complain about the politics of science (see Slingerland 2008a, 143; F. Curtis 2010). With education and science both under attack in the current geopolitical atmosphere, we should look to our shared commitment to knowledge, rather than allow outside forces to divide and conquer academia. If you look hard enough you can find places where humanists, engineers, biologists, analytic and continental philosophers, and psychologists of all stripes are working together. Maybe you will find some people whose politics you distrust, but you can definitely find some common political ground with a few.

However, there are reservations. The old way of doing cognitive science will not cut it anymore. Any form of it that regards the content of the mind as epiphenomenal to the real stuff should be disregarded. Similarly, any form that divides the world into untheorized dualist categories should be questioned. At the same time, there will be a limit on how far consilience can take us. I have argued that a Davidsonian approach takes us very far in the right direction, especially when it comes to the implications for the study of religion. Religion grows out of the universe, but in order to make sense of it we have to recognize the paradox that it is both mental and material, or perhaps neither, but certainly beyond heaven and earth.