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Semantics and the Study of Religion

This is yet another essay in “theories and methods,” or, as I would prefer, “approaches to the study of religion.” It deals with the role of “semantics” in the study of religion, but that can be approached from two different angles, at least. On the one hand, we might be interested in what sort of semantic model researchers should deploy in studying the beliefs and practices of individuals and religious communities. On the other, we might be interested in the sort of model yielded by the study of religious language. These need not be the same. A. J. Ayer famously brought a verificationist model to the first, from which he concluded that the second yielded no model at all, because religious language was nonsense. This paper will argue that the same model works well for both, but that the division of language within some religious communities has led to a good deal of confusion.

Having committed myself to discussing semantics, I’m duty-bound to admit that I plan to eliminate the term from the body of my argument. In a discussion of “Kripke models,” in the logic of tenses, John Burgess writes that:

In the literature, one often finds instead the phrase “Kripke semantics.” Since “semantics” is a term already in use by linguists for a theory of meaning, it is important to note that Kripke models were not and are not intended to provide a theory of the meaning of tenses and temporal distinctions (or moods or modal distinctions) in natural languages like English . . . it is best just to avoid “semantics” altogether. (Burgess 2009, 20)

I think Burgess's caveat is well-taken, and that this will prove to be of particular importance in what follows. So unless otherwise required, I will confine myself to talking about theories of meaning, or just meaning.

Here's another point to get on the table. If humans didn't have a certain kind of hardware, based on a certain evolutionary development, they would not be able to learn language. Most human infants progress from naturally emitted noises to mimicry to the production of recognizable sentences sometime within their first three years of life. The move from mimicry to sentences takes place under the tutelage of at least one other language-user, who interacts with the infant using her own idiolect. By idiolect I mean nothing more than the unique way of speaking of a single individual. Donald Davidson has argued that it is misleading to think of language from the top down.(see Davis 2012, 108ff) Rather, the individuals in the immediate environment of the toddler contribute bits of linguistic behavior that eventually come to make up its grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary. These idiolects make up a dialect. So, for example, on a recent trip to the doctor I asked a new nurse if I detected a bit of New Jersey in her voice. "No," she said, "Brooklyn, but I have a sister on Staten Island and another in Jersey." When I told this story to a local barmaid, who happens to have a very broad south Jersey accent, she replied, "oh yeah, they got a very thick accent up there." In a natural language there is similar diversity in grammar and vocabulary. Thus, to be a speaker of a natural language is simply to have an idiolect sufficiently similar to others for them to call your dialect theirs.

This point is worth making because linguists and cognitive scientists often write as if language were a function of brain processes. But while I'm perfectly happy to admit that proper neurological functioning is essential to language learning, language doesn't begin in the brain. It begins when verbal behavior begins to modify instinct and becomes more or less full-blown

habit. Members of a group begin to use verbal behavior to make and modify plans toward a shared end. A sure sign of language, I suppose, is the emergence of the counterfactual, as in “if we had done that, maybe the elephant wouldn’t have been able to crush Manny and Jack.” Neither linguists nor cognitive scientists, nor anyone else, have access to that proto-language-using moment; they have little or nothing to say about how or when verbal behavior became meaningful behavior.(see Davis forthcoming)

Meaning and Truth

In the fourth book of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle notes that “to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true.”(Aristotle 1984, 1011b) Two millennia later Alfred Tarski began with Aristotle’s characterization and produced the following instantiation of it:

‘it is snowing’ is a true sentence if and only if it is snowing.(Tarski 1956, 156)

On Tarski’s development, this captures Aristotle’s point and “its intuitive meaning and general intention seem to be quite clear and intelligible.”(ibid. 155) After all, what else could make the sentence true? Tarski goes on to develop from this a technical account of the concept of truth in formalized languages that “resulted in the creation of a branch of mathematical logic known as *model theory*. This fact alone,” write Alexis and John Burgess, “makes Tarski’s work an enduring achievement.”(Burgess & Burgess 2011, 16) They go on to illustrate the formal structure of arithmetic in as much detail as needed for most philosophical purposes, distinguishing object-language from meta-language, and laying out “a recursive definition sufficient to determine, step by step, the truth values of more and more complex sentences.”(ibid., 26) All of this based on rules for producing ever more complex iterations of “x” is true if and only iff x.

It is worth noting that “Tarski finds a philosophical reason for not taking the notion of truth as a primitive in a view call ‘physicalism’ current in his day among the positivistically inclined. According to this view, the only scientifically admissible primitives are *logical* and *physical*.”(ibid., 21) The implications of this rigorism will complicate the story when, some 30 years after Tarski, Donald Davidson deploys his work to solve a dispute between Quine and Strawson on meaning. Davidson maintains that if we can get a general account of what it is to know a language, we will have answered any reasonable demands on understanding “meaning.” These conditions are three: There must be a grammar, there must be an account of meaning and there must be a finite number of primitives out of which an indefinite number of well-formed sentences may be constructed. But this turns out to have been done already by Tarski. Thus “John loves Mary” is true if and only if John loves Mary. “Mary is kind” is true only if Mary is kind. Add a basic operation for conjunctions and you get “John loves Mary because Mary is kind” is true if and only if John loves Mary because Mary is kind. “Though no doubt relativized to times, places, and circumstances,” writes Davidson, “the kind of structure required seems either identical with or closely related to the kind given by a definition of truth along the lines first expounded by Tarski, for such a definition provides an effective method for determining what every sentence means (i.e. gives the conditions under which it is true).”(Davidson 1965, 8)

Many critics take Davidson to task over the formal mechanisms of his approach (see Burgess & Burgess 2011, chap. 6), but the broader philosophical issues revolve around the “definition” of truth and the relation of truth to meaning. On the latter, Davidson repeatedly attempts to make clear that the only sense of meaning he is interested in is the relation of our sentences to “the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.”(Davidson 1974, 198) There might be reasons of various sorts *why* Mary is kind – her

upbringing, the influence of a professor, witnessing the cruelty of another – but “Mary is kind” is true only if Mary is kind. What else could make the sentence true? “Truth” has no epistemic work to do.

As for providing a definition of truth, Davidson comes to see the very idea as wrong-headed. By the end of his career he has broken from Tarski and come to treat “truth” as a primitive:

We should not say that truth is correspondence, coherence, warranted assertability, ideally justified assertability, what is accepted in the conversation of the right people, what science will end up maintaining, what explains the success of science or of our ordinary beliefs. To the extent that realism and antirealism depend on one or another of these views of truth we should refuse to endorse either.(Davidson 1988, 190-191)

Truth, thinks Davidson, is more limpid than any of the proposed analyses. We should stick with Aristotle rather than allow ourselves to be tempted down byways we know to be dead ends. All this would seem to place Davidson among the “deflationists,” who maintain that “true”, as a predicate applied to sentences or propositions, isn’t doing any substantive work. Burgess & Burgess distinguish between moderate and radical deflationists. Quine counts as a moderate because he considers “true” to be a genuine predicate; Ramsey is a radical, for treating it as simply redundant.(Burgess & Burgess 2011, chap. 3) But Davidson, although sympathetic, is not willing to go along. Invoking Aristotle once again, he does “not think we can understand meaning or any of the propositional attitudes without the concept of truth.”(Davidson 1996, 33) Suppose I say “I believe that Murphy is younger than I am.” If I am correct in my belief then Murphy is younger than I am. But the only thing that can make a belief correct is for the object of that belief to be true. In in this case, the object of my belief is “Murphy is younger than I am,”

and that is true if and only if Murphy is younger than I am. How I confirm that is another matter. Having and understanding beliefs, desires, hopes, fears and the like requires a concept of truth. In fact, as Davidson puts it, “I confess I do not see how, if truth is an assertability condition, and knowing the assertability conditions *is* understanding, we can understand a sentence without having a concept of truth.”(ibid.) Learning this concept of truth is not difficult. As Davidson puts it in various places, it begins as soon as a child becomes aware that it is possible to make a mistake, for at that point he begins to learn that if he makes an error in applying a term, he will not successfully be able to go on. “Once trial and error (from the teacher’s point of view) is replaced with thought and belief (from the learner’s point of view), the concept of truth has application.”(Davidson 1997, 14)

So, by the end of his career, Davidson has rejected Tarski’s quasi-positivist rigorism about primitive terms and takes “truth” as in need of no explanation or definition beyond the basic characterization given by Aristotle. Furthermore, he has also come to believe that everything that might legitimately be desired from a theory of meaning can be gleaned from what Tarski did with Aristotle’s characterization. Now it remains to see how any of this has an impact on the study of religion.

Religion, Language, and Truth

I’ve always wanted a Dogon statue. The sculpture plays an important role, not only in Dogon daily life, but in the complex religious symbolism first laid out by Marcel Griaule and his team beginning in the 1940s. I first encountered one in a small gallery in Greenwich Village when I was first studying Griaule’s work, back in the 1970s. It was, as I remember, \$500, which was too much for a graduate student. Today I can find a wide variety of Dogon art online, from a couple of dozen dollars to many thousands, but many look unused, which probably means

carved for resale. Why does this matter? I want one that was actually part of the mythic and ritual life of the Dogon and this would normally involve a patina of sacrificial blood and grain. In a scene well-known to my students, a camera pans around a courtyard where a Dogon sculptor is finishing up a piece. Satisfied, he sets it on the ground and picks up a barnyard animal (a small goat, I think), slits its throat, and sprinkles the blood on the statue, along with some grain.(Goberman & Bauman 1988) As Walter van Beek puts it, “without sacrifice a statue would be a simple *baga* (piece of wood); with sacrifice it is a *dege*, the Dogon term for protective statue.”(van Beek 1988, 60)

While I value the design and the sculptural values of the *baga*, what I want is a *dege*. I have a good reason to believe that a particular piece of wood is a *dege* if there is evidence that it has regularly received sacrificial offerings. These sacrificial materials become part of the *dege* and it would be of value to me to know that my particular example was part of a living religious practice and not just a piece of sculpture. This is irrelevant to the value it has to the Dogon. In fact, as van Beek goes on to say, “statues fade out of the religious system . . . These days they are almost always sold to tourists or art merchants. As these *dege* have lost their function and are only relics of a forgotten past, their sale entails no consequences for the Dogon religion.”(ibid., 64) In other words, the Dogon believe that these statues hold a place in their institutions that depends upon a wide variety of other beliefs, about gods and spirits, about the cosmic origins of their individual clans and families, and about the circulation of powers within their cosmos.

And at least some Dogon, based on van Beek’s report, continue to maintain these beliefs. For he notes that, “the prices for statues have risen so high as to incite people to steal ones that are still in use; that is an entirely different matter.”(ibid.) If nobody thought that *dege* were

efficacious, then it would not be clear why it made any difference. But if that is true, then there are likely to be at least some who believe that:

Originally, at the creation, the earth was pure. The lump flung by God was of pure clay. But the offence of the jackal defiled the earth and upset the world-order. That is why the Nummo came down to reorganize it. The earth which came down from Heaven was pure earth, and wherever it was put, it imparted its purity to the spot and to all the ground that was cleared. Wherever cultivation spread, impurity receded.(Griaule 1965, 44)

Of course, some Dogon might maintain a set of beliefs closer to that subsequently described in *The Pale Fox*, while others might ascribe to the truncated version found in Forde's *African Worlds*.(Griaule & Dieterlen 1986 & 1954) Genevieve Calame-Griaule, Griaule's daughter and herself one of the giants of French ethnography, provides a brief version of the creation myth in Pataux 2004. The creator Amma:

Fashioned a placenta, the Primordial Mother, in which he placed the embryos of the first beings, two pairs of different-sex twins in fish form. One of the male twins rebelled and . . . ripped off a piece of placenta which became the Earth. Then, in search of his twin sister, he penetrated the Earth, thereby committing an act of incest. The placenta rotted (the origin of death) and the Earth became impure.(Pataux 2004, 8-9)¹

Death and disorder having been introduced into the system, the remaining twin, Nommo, goes about attempting to maintain order as the ancestors appear, followed by humans, the basics of

¹ It's worth noting that the two recent sets of Dogon photographs, van Beek & Hollyman 2001 and Pataux 2004, present radically different pictures of Dogon life. The former, as will become apparent later, presents a colorful panorama of a syncretic life, with imams and Christians and modern western style clothing. Pataux, in beautiful black and white, shows us Dogon unchanged since the time of Griaule. As will become apparent, I see no reason to privilege one over the other; it's just important to be aware of both.

civilization, and the negative and positive cults necessary to sustaining what fragile order can be established.

It may well be that in the period between the publication of *Le Reynard Pale* in 1965 and the time of van Beek's fieldwork, between 1978 and 1988, some Dogon – perhaps the ones who are tempted to steal active *dege* – shed their traditional beliefs altogether.(van Beek 1991, 143) But van Beek goes too far when he remarks of Griaule that, “at the rim of the science of man, he embarked upon a veritable journey into the realm of intercultural fiction.”(ibid., 158) And his critique of Griaule's work certainly doesn't license his commentator Jacky Bouju's claim that, “in terms of its assumptions, method, and techniques, Griaule's research can no longer be considered ethnography, for they contradict point for point the methods and techniques of ethnographic research today.”(ibid., 160) In earlier work I have suggested Ogotemmel, as informant, was engaged in something akin to midrash when he presented Dogon cosmology to Griaule.(Davis 2012, 141-146) I want to expand a bit on that point.

Mary Douglas, in answering some questions about how institutions think, discusses wine labels. She notes that, at the time of writing, “the customers of the Cheese Cellar in Evanston now select their wine by the varietal name of the grape . . . What does it mean for the theory of classification that customers now are asking for Zinfandel, Gamay, or Sauvignon, even though the wine may hail from Bordeaux?”(Douglas 1986, 102) In the beginning, to make a long story short, American wine-drinkers were interested in drinking wines that were like the wines they already enjoyed. Carlo Rossi, a jug wine label of the E. & J. Gallo Company, still markets Chablis, Burgundy, Chianti, and Sangria, but nobody expects them to taste much like the classic wines and wine drinks of France, Italy, or Spain. But when the high-end California vintners of the 1960s attempted to challenge their European competitors, it turned out that “the chateau and

regional names could not be attached to wines in California without violating a property right.”(ibid., 106) The grape names, on the other hand, can not be trademarked, and so if you want to market a wine in the style of a great Bordeaux – say Chateau Lafite or Chateau Latour – you use at least 70% cabernet sauvignon. Unless you’re trying for a Chateau Petrus, which is 95% merlot. Chablis is traditionally made from chardonnay, while Chianti is primarily sangiovese, and so on. As American wines began to compete successfully, the grape became the thing. For the new American consumer, French place names become “irrelevant to the Californian scene:”

This is how the names get changed and how the people and things are rejigged to fit the new categories. First the people are tempted out of their niches by new possibilities of exercising or evading control. Then they make new kinds of institutions, and the institutions make new labels, and the label makes new kinds of people.”(ibid., 108)

The French, of course, are committed to their heritage, and so we get helpful websites such as [thekitchn.com](http://www.thekitchn.com) posting tips on reading French wine labels, including principal grapes and styles, and noting that, “Alsace is the one region that consistently (and thankfully!) varietally labels its wines.”(<http://www.thekitchn.com/how-to-read-a-french-wine-label-202068>) Of course, things work more slowly, usually, in an oral culture lacking advertising agencies and mass media, but Douglas’s picture remains the same. Someone comes to a teacher with a question about religious practice. The teacher gives an answer and the client asks for further explanation. The teacher expands on a story or a theme, perhaps in the way his teacher did for him, and the next thing you know you’ve got midrash.

Van Beek may not have set out to discredit Griaule and Dieterlen, though his subsequent talk about, “how to demolish someone’s lifework in a respectful way,” reveals something of his

academic ambitions.(van Beek 2004, 60) What he doesn't do is take seriously the narrative structure of *Conversations with Ogotemmelé*. Written in the style of a mystery novel, the "European" is Griaule in character, not unlike Dante in the *Comedia*. The book opens with the European on his verandah, where:

A European was continuing an enquiry, begun the day before, into a mysterious sacrifice which had taken place in a cleft in the Gorge of I . . . An elderly Dogon was giving scraps of information in reply to his questions, reluctantly surrendering the bare bones of the truth, now going back on what he had said before, now proffering lies, smiling or abashed, but resolutely clinging to his mysteries.(Griaule 1965, 7)

The narrator then scans the house, revealing "a young European woman" doing linguistic research into Dogon dialects, another "European woman who was at once patient and persistent," and "another white woman" collecting prayer texts from "a bright-eyed Bambara." At this point "a novelty" appears in "the person of Gana, son of the Hogon, the oldest man, and consequently the religious chief, of Ogol." This latter announces that "A hunter wishes to see you."(ibid., 7-8) This is Griaule's introduction to Ogotemmelé, the blind and aged hunter, who "wished to pass on to the foreigner, who had first visited the country fifteen years before, and whom he trusted, the instructions which he himself had received first from his grandfather and later from his father."(ibid., 13) The narrator notes that after his blinding he devoted himself to the accumulation of knowledge "of nature, of animals, of men and of gods . . . People came to his door for advice every day and even by night."(ibid., 15)

Griaule the narrator, sets the European as character in the role of ingenu, being introduced to the symbolic system by a single informant, perhaps under the instruction of the religious chief of the village. Given that this would seem to violate the precepts Griaule taught at

the Sorbonne, from 1942 until his death, the reader should be surprised from the beginning.(see Griaule 1957, 54-64) Why would Griaule adopt this strategy? A complete and convincing answer would require more work into Griaule's biography than I am competent to perform, but at least one possibility suggests itself. Griaule's Dakar-Djibouti mission, "was patronized by Paris high society. The Chamber of Deputies voted a special law, and Griaule and Riviere skillfully exploited the postwar vogue for things African."(Clifford 1983, 122) Secretary to the mission was Michel Leiris, a renegade surrealist, hoping to "escape from the dullness of European civilization."(Boskovic 2003, 526) After the return of the mission, Leiris penned *Afrique Fantom*, a combination travel log/self-investigation, with the dedication "a mon ami Marcel Griaule."(Walker 1977, 642) By Leiris's own account, Griaule was "absolutely furious. . . He felt I had compromised future field studies."(Price & Jamin 1988, 171) Evans-Pritchard's review in *Man* reads, in its entirety, "this is a travel diary of the French expedition from the Atlantic (Dakar) to the Red Sea. There are a few interesting photographs. Otherwise the book has little scientific value."(Evans-Pritchard 1934, 62) Almost 50 years later Roy Willis, reviewing a new edition in the same venue, writes that "the reader has to work hard to extract significant food for thought," but goes on note that "this is a pity, because at the heart of this book is a human predicament of compelling interest."(Willis 1982, 797) Willis discerns, underneath Leiris's tedious self-absorption, the desire to "discover his own humanity," in the life of Africa, but finds this impossible because of his status as European scientist, a "quandary . . . that many anthropologists will find only too familiar."(ibid., 798) I am inclined to imagine that despite being offended, Griaule saw this as well, and took it as a challenge. The European ingenu of *Conversations*, unlike Leiris, manages to do science at the same time that, in the manner of Dante's lead character, he discovers himself.

The Pale Fox, on the other hand, begins by laying out the informants, along with “the names of the tribe or caste to which they belong . . . as well as the area where they live.”(Griaule and Dieterlen 1986, 21) This is closer to Griaule’s norm.(see Clifford 1983, 137ff) Given the plurality of voices, it is not surprising that a more confusing and conflicting mythology emerges. We can’t know what Griaule might have thought about the relation between *Conversations with Ogotemmel* and *The Pale Fox*; he died in 1956, almost a decade before Dieterlen brought the book together. But my guess is that the comparison would have gone something like this. On the one hand, if we conduct proper ethnography we are likely to find that different members of a community are more invested in religious beliefs and practices than others. A few, particularly the old, may find themselves reflecting in great detail on their religious beliefs and practices, and if you allow yourself to be led by them, particularly if you press them to elaborate, you may receive a complex and elaborate system that is held in total by few, if any. But this corresponds rather closely to the way in which rabbinic practice probably developed as an institution. In that sense, Dogon thought displays the same level of intellectual complexity as that of Europeans.

But what about van Beek’s inability to find anything even closely related to the sort of elaborate thought of either book? Van Beek himself provides part of the answer. In the post-war period, “the ecology of the area as a whole came under pressure.”(van Beek & Hollyman 2001, 26-27) This was not a new phenomenon. Recent archeology suggests that the Dogon settled their land between the 13th and the 15th centuries, after an important wet period, but, “the many stories of village relocations and ecological crises . . . are entirely compatible with the increase in aridity and climactic instability, documented for the centuries after their arrival.”(Mayor et al. 2005, 33) Between 1900 and 2000 the population ballooned from approximately 100,000 to 450,000. According to van Beek, “an increase in large-scale migration characterized the second

colonial period, from the late 1940s up to the 1970s.”(van Beek & Hollyman 2001, 26) By the end of this period young men might stay in the cities for several years and the Dogon at home “grew dependent on this labor migration.”(ibid.) One result was that “the old men did lose some of their importance,” while at the same time “the network of relations in the villages grew more diverse.”(ibid., 27) This is a recipe, Douglas might say, for institutional change.

Furthermore, Andrew Apter, applying lessons learned from his work among the Yoruba, has suggested that when it comes to esoteric knowledge, “the deeper modes have no fixed content into which all ritual elders are eventually initiated.”(Apter 2005, 103) He suggests that, despite van Beek’s “masterpiece of ritual exegesis” in his study of the *dama* mask festival, he doesn’t see it on a par with Griaule’s studies because of “his methodological orientation: if people do not tell him it is deep, or recognize deep knowledge in overt declarations, then in effect it does not exist for him.”(ibid.) Taken together, Apter points toward a generally shared public knowledge of the sort van Beek discovers, beneath which flow deeper modes of commentary that may vary by context and individual informant. Whether or not van Beek encountered potential informants, nobody knows, because he was trying to reproduce something that, given the structure and practices of the institution, did not exist. A loose analogy may be drawn to Lord and Parry’s work on the European epic tradition. There are certain fundamental characters and events, but how they are linked may differ with each performance. Nonetheless, the “singer of tales” may insist that he sings the same song each time and that it is absolutely true to the facts.(see Lord 1960, *passim*)

If we add to this the potential for dramatic institutional change brought on by economic expansion and innovation, the difference in available materials during van Beek’s period of fieldwork is almost predictable. The influx of western material culture, not to mention cash

money, introduced new and competing ways of establishing status. Consider van Beek's description of market day. "The men," he writes, don their most colorful long flowing gowns, with the characteristic Dogon baggy breeches. The younger men sport elegant straw hats that define them as adults but show that they are still young and up-to-date."(van Beek and Hollyman 201, 55) Hollyman's photos add much to the story. There are elders who clearly could come from the world of Ogotemeli (ibid., 126), but there is also an imam who teaches Dogon Muslim the Qur'an.(ibid., 86) On Easter Sunday, "Muslims, animists, and Christians from the village of Nombori celebrate Easter together as they dance in front of their village."(ibid., 109) The young boys in that picture seem to favor western-style t-shirts with collars, though the masks don't appear to have changed since the time of Griaule.(ibid., 87-91, 144-146,151-153)

But that would be premature. Those same young men who work in the cities, "return with enthusiasm for important mask ceremonies taking place in their home villages yet reinvent masks in terms of urban novelty." Among the various innovations Richards observed include a headpiece "bedecked with pill packets and recycled monosodium glutamate wrappers, its tresses sparkling with cut-up strips of sardine cans." This "is a continuation of the existing tradition of beautification that provokes no objection among local consumers.:(Richards 2005, 51) At the same time, many Dogon maintain that the masks contain the vital force, *nyama*. This force can be more or less powerful, depending on the situation. Consequently, women unaware of the power were coming too close and, according to her informant, "becoming mad . . . so were tourists."(Richards 2006, 96)

In short, despite "the enormous divergence of belief and practice among a people whose 'culture' is anything but homogenous,"(ibid., 94) those beliefs and practices are interpretable because they are connected to a shared world. Despite the complex flux of Dogon belief and

practice, some among them believe that if the vital force of a mask, *imina*, is not fixed in a way that controls its power, it remains dangerous and bad things are likely to happen. And even if contained, it may be used to powerful ends. To draw on another of Richards's informants, "if a man has committed a bad crime against *imina*, the men of the village will mask up and surround the wall enclosing the yard of that man. They will utter the mask cry '*Hun*' three times and will push against the wall. At that moment the *nyama* of the masks will be transferred onto the criminal. Within three years he will die."(ibid, 97) And "within three years he will die," is true if and only if within three years he dies. What else could the informant mean?

The ethnographer learns to communicate with her subject through the same process of triangulation by which her subjects come to communicate with each other, which is the same process by which infants are trained into the linguistic community. "It is the result," as Davidson puts it, "of a threefold interaction, an interaction which is twofold from the point of view of each of the two agents: each is interacting simultaneously with the world and with the other agent."(Davidson 1997a, 128) This triangulation makes possible "the objectivity of thought and the empirical content of thoughts about the external world.(ibid., 129) Of course, something like triangulation occurs when I feed my cat Grue; I dump some kibble into the bowl, the cat hears what I hear, sees what I see, and begins to eat. But it is fanciful to think that Grue says to himself, "I hear Davis filling the bowl!." Cats don't talk. "Unless the base line of the triangle," writes Davidson, "the line between the two agents, is strengthened to the point where it can implement the communication of propositional contents, there is no way the agents can make use of the triangular situation to form judgments about the world."(ibid., 130) Talking, and thus thinking, emerge in the process of learning to share beliefs about the way the world is. If I am

tempted, as I often am, to imagine that Grue is thinking, I only have to remind myself that whatever he does, he can't do what we humans do.

What we humans do is learn a language, then learn more languages, and then communicate with each other, conveying what we believe, what we desire, and the like. These beliefs and desires are about the relations of ourselves to each other and the world we share. I imagine that Richards does not believe *all* of what her informants believe, though she knows what it would be like to believe those things because she can watch them and elicit reasons for their actions. When her initiation as a sister of the masks “was proposed by my host, the mask chief of Amani, to enable me to approach the masks in safety during the Amani *dama* of 2000,” she willingly acquiesced. (Richards 2006, 104, n. 68) As an initiate, she received the implement indicative of her new status. And when she made her “way through the crowd, women parted fearfully in all directions, eyeing with visible fright the *dugugi-yena* ladle.” (ibid., 105) She knew what the women believed about her dangerous new power. She could connect what they said with what they did in a world they shared. That, after all, is how we come to understand other people, including their religions.

And so, *pace* van Beek, Bouyu, and others, Griaule's fieldwork remains the place to start in the study of the Dogon. This includes *Conversations with Ogotemmel* and *The Pale Fox*. But the latter should be considered elaborations of midrashic reflections by individual elders who, as Apter put it, were not drawing on a fixed text, but on a fluid tradition in which some formulaic topics were available for elaboration in different ways at different times. Think of the 2nd creation story of Genesis 2;4. It is pretty clear that Griaule took the extra step of arguing for the equal intellectual depth of the African traditions and those of Europe – a reasonable position in any case – but after the English-language publication of *Ogotemmel* certain New Age types

turned it into a cult. That can't really be held against Griaule and Dieterlen. And in the intervening 50 years, the desertification of Dogon country, the incursion of European tourists, and the changing institutional context have made it impossible to recover anything like Ogotemeli's elaborations. But that's just how history works. All history and all fieldwork should be treated as open for restudy and the big picture will always be subject to reinterpretation.

Religion, "God," and Meaning

In an essay from 2002, Terry Godlove seems to reach much the same position about understanding religion, concluding that, "while students of religion need not believe in God, we do need to believe in belief." (Godlove 2002, 24) In a very neat argument against those who would dismiss "belief" as a useful concept in the study of religions, Godlove maintains that:

Shoulder to shoulder with the new materialists, the radical interpreter also embraces the causal, material circumstances of speech and action; indeed, the argument from natural history requires her to weave them into the very fabric of meaning. Those in religious studies looking for an interpretive stance from which to integrate the material and the mental will find one in Davidson's account of radical interpretation. (ibid., 20)

This seems to make one with the combination of history, sociology, and ethnography I have been deploying to make sense of the Dogon.² But in recent work, Godlove seems to be moving away from Davidson and toward a position that I think has puzzling consequences.

In *Kant and the Meaning of Religion*, Godlove adopts Robert Brandom's distinction between "weak," "strong," and "hyperinferentialism." For Brandom, "conceptual content" is a function of the inferential role a piece of language plays in a particular discourse, as opposed to

² For more on this volume see Davis 2004.

its role in “the representation of states of affairs.”(Brandom 1994, 130) Strong inferentialism maintains that “broadly inferential articulation is *sufficient* for specifically conceptual contentfulness – that is, that there is nothing more to conceptual content than its broadly inferential articulation.”(ibid, 131) Hyperinferentialism, on the other hand, “would allow only inferential circumstances and consequences of application. Under such a restriction it is impossible to reconstruct the contents of actual concepts, except perhaps in some regions of mathematics.”(ibid., 131-132) The difference between “broad” and “narrow” Brandom develops from Michael Dummett, who writes that, “learning to use a statement of a given form involves, then, learning two things: the conditions under which one is justified in making the statements and what constitutes acceptance of it, i.e., the consequences of accepting it.”(ibid., 118) Among the Dogon, “That is a dugugi-yena,” is introduced to young girls in the context of explaining the “sisters of the masks,” which in turn is introduced as part of learning about masks and their powers and why women are typically not allowed to watch the masks. This is crucial because “the link between *pragmatic significance* and *inferential content* is supplied by the fact that asserting a sentence is (among other things) implicitly undertaking a commitment to the correctness of the material inference from its circumstances to its consequences of application.”(ibid.) Thus, once the woman has assimilated this part of the language it is natural that on seeing the woman with the dugugi-yena she step away fearfully so as to avoid potentially negative consequences.

Godlove seems to take this further. He claims that Kant is, “an early, and probably the first, proponent of a strongly inferentialist view of conceptual content,” and that the first *Critique* is “directed against what Brandom is calling hyperinflationism: Absent legitimate application to the world, our concepts are meaningless.”(Godlove 2014, 28)

When he gets to the illustrating this, however, he borrows Michael Williams's notion of an EMU: "explanation of meaning in terms of use."(ibid., 153) The EMU comprises an I-clause, which stipulates the inferential moves connected to a term, an E-clause, introducing the epistemic conditions that license using the term, and an F-clause, providing the point of using the term. Thus, to use an example Williams takes from Brandom, who takes it from Sellars, "(I-R) The inference from 'x is red' to 'x is not green', 'x is not yellow', etc. is always good, i.e., necessarily, if x is monochromatically red, x is not monochromatically green (yellow, etc.)" The E-clause becomes, "(1) The inferential moves specified by (I-R) are free. (2) If the speaker has a reliable discriminative reporting disposition (RDRD) – a disposition, given appropriate motivation and conditions, to report 'x is red' only in the presence of a red thing in his field of vision – 'red' has a reporting use." Finally, the F-clause tells us that, "In a reporting use, tokens of 'x is red' express reliable discriminative reactions to an environmental circumstance. In this way, they function as language-entry transitions, and thereby play a distinguished role in securing/undermining 'theoretical' entitlements." (Williams 2010, 326) Thus E- and F-clauses capture Brandom's "broadly inferential articulation," as opposed to the narrow articulation of "hyperinferentialism." And Williams's approach help illustrates the limits of hyperinferentialism. If you limit yourself exclusively to the I-clause, then the concepts you introduce may be consistent with each other and complete, but they will have no role to play in language-entry reports about the world around us.

It's important to remind ourselves, however, that EMUs are not definitions. They introduce us to the conditions and consequences of introducing a term into our discourse.

For when Godlove subjects Kant's notion of "the abstract God" to the EMU model, he seems to be going beyond what Williams intends:

I-G(A): The concept of God (the Transcendental Ideal, the highest being, *ens summum*) is that of the complete determination of all positive predicates – "the idea of a being which includes in itself all reality"(A578/B606) That is, from any positive predicate inferential links to all other possible positive predicates are always free – are always legitimate all at once. This is not a possible cognition for finite intellects.

E-G(A): It "cannot be objectively given and be itself such a thing. Such a thing is a mere fiction"(*eine blosse Erdichtung*, A580/B608). It is not a formal condition of experience and so neither an empirical warrant nor a transcendental deduction is available.

F-G(A): The failure of the I and E-clauses means that this concept cannot figure in empirical judgment, and so the point of having it cannot be to pick out a feature of the world.(Godlove 2014, 158-159)

And here's the puzzle. Williams doesn't present us with an account of how an EMU-clause fails, thus when Godlove write that "this is not a possible cognition for finite intellects," it's unclear whether this is part of the I-clause or a judgment upon it. If we focus just on the second sentence, we would seem to have something like "tree, therefore God," "bug, therefore God," "Charles Manson, therefore God," etc. We could, I suppose, join these claims with the conjunction, terminating in the "etc." If there are an infinite number of well-formed sentences that can be constructed using conjunction, then the "etc." just indicates that we could go on forever, but never complete them all at once. But that's no big deal.

As for the E-clause, I confess that I've never been sure exactly what a transcendental *deduction* is supposed to be, but I don't see why the believer cannot take some event as a warrant for saying "I see God's handiwork in that." Suppose, for example, my girlfriend is a Reformed Jew of the typical California sort – not observant, culturally Jewish, with a willingness to use a broadly religious vocabulary – and we've hiked up the cliff above San Gregorio about a quarter to eight. Over the course of the next 18 minutes the sun will descend into the Pacific and the green-gray waters will turn a shimmering blood-orange and gold. If she says, "I see God's handiwork in that," I might ask if she's just being metaphorical, but she doesn't have to be. I don't believe in God, but why cause a stink? And had I been with a real religious person – let's say Nicholas Wolterstorff - as opposed to my fictive girlfriend, then I would have no doubt that he literally meant that he saw the handiwork of God in the beauty of nature. Of course, "Nick sees the handiwork of God in the beauty of nature" is not true simply because he believes; it's true if and only if Nick sees the handiwork of God in the beauty of nature. We disagree about the existence of God, but that's not a big deal either.

Of course, Godlove has at least two responses. On the one hand, he can say that he is simply reconstructing Kant's views on religion, and if that's all he's doing, then I am happy to say that the exegesis of Kant is masterful and revealing. I would never have thought that Kant's stance toward religion involved a "humanizing program" that would point us in the direction of Durkheim and Weber.(Godlove 2014, 174) But his mastery of the texts is impressive and his argument about Kant seems both radical and persuasive. Given my own proclivities, any program that points us in the direction of Durkheim and Weber is likely to be a good one.

On the other hand, there seems to be a project of Godlove's own, one that goes beyond the exegesis of Kant. It may well be the case that, on Kant's own terms, his account of the abstract God is incoherent, and that Kant's point was to demonstrate that incoherence. Godlove takes it a step further and claims that, "talk that had seemed to be about God turns out, on inspection, to be, literally, about us. Kant is inviting us to look beyond the bogus content of the concept at stake, and instead to ask after what it might yet be good for. A portentous invitation at the dawn of the social sciences."(ibid., 160) This seems to argue that Kant's critique of his own abstract account of God should apply to any and every account of God, but it is unclear why this should be. Wolterstorff might admit that he does not have a complete account of God, but that the God of which he speaks is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as encountered first and foremost in the Christian Bible. With regard to that God, Wolterstorff has worked out some pretty complicated inferential relations:

On the assumption that Jesus was speaking on behalf of God, it is toward God that his disciples have a duty to forgive those who wrong them, not toward those who wrong them. And it is God who has a right against them, not the malefactors, to their forgiving the malefactors. I suggest that duties of charity in general are third-party duties. Our principle of correlatives remains unscathed. Moral obligations do not outrun rights.(Wolterstorff 2008, 384)

It is open to anyone to disagree with Wolterstorff, not only about the existence of God, but about the primacy of rights talk in understanding justice, but if you accept either of those positions, he seems to have done a masterful job of "tracking the inferential connections between the circumstances of appropriate application and between the appropriate consequences of application."(Godlove 2014, 163)

From Midrash to Metaphysics

Assuming that Godlove does want to make the larger philosophical argument about religious language in general, why might he have doubts about the legitimacy of Wolterstorff's project? It may be, in part, because he, like Kant, "is aiming his critique at a scholastic tradition in philosophical theology,"(ibid., 160) rather than religion as a lived human institution. "The sheer abstractness," he writes, "of the *ens summum* makes it hard to think of this God as requiring some definite mode of human conduct."(ibid., 160-161) At this point he invokes an argument of Richard Rorty's that turns on its head a well-known argument of Alasdair MacIntyre, who "disdainfully remarks of Tillich that his 'definition of God in terms of ultimate human concern in effect makes of God no more than an interest of human nature.'"(Rorty 1997, 156) Rorty welcomes, rather than disdains this move precisely because a religion based on ultimate concern would have no exclusive inferential relations to any belief, action, or policy. "A pragmatist philosophy of religion," Rorty continues, "must follow Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief."(ibid., 158) Beliefs, as both Davidson and Brandom make clear, are what motivate the move from propositions to actions, and Rorty hopes to drive a wedge between the two. "The best way to make Tillich and fuzziness look good, and to make creeds look bad," he writes, "is to emphasize the similarity between having faith in God and being in love with another human being."(ibid.) This, Rorty hopes, will go some way to knocking the wind out of gay-bashing and crusades.

Godlove, however, seems drawn to a view something like MacIntyre's, in which the progress of western science, the fragmentation of religious solidarities, and the pressure of modern capitalism almost inevitably put pressure on those who would be both religious and

modern to evacuate meaning from religious belief in the quest for eirenic liberal pluralism. I imagine that Godlove and I would both be happy to embrace such a pluralism, but I suspect that we are, at the same time, wedded to contrasting academic commitments. When he writes that Kant's critique of "the bogus content of the concept" amounts to "a portentous invitation at the dawn of the social sciences,"(Godlove 2014, 160) he enters the lists in an ongoing debate on approaches to the study of religion. In the earlier article, Godlove was at pains to sustain the importance of belief in the study of religion.(Godlove 2002, 20-24) But at the same time, he hopes to discredit those protectionist strategies that attempt to shield religion and religious believers from naturalist critiques. So when he hits upon a way of reading Kant, the supposed defender of faith, in a way in which "talk that had seemed to be about God turns out, on inspection, to be, literally, about us,"(Godlove 2014, 160) it looks as if he has found a Kantian argument for the primacy of Durkheim and Weber. Social scientific theory occupies the reasonable intellectual ground between a relativizing postmodernism and theistic protectionism.

By way of contrast, I worry that embracing Godlove's Kantian argument would require accepting the view that believers don't really know what they're talking about. This seems both philosophically implausible and empirically false. Let's not worry about peoples in distant times and places (though I think they knew what they were talking about as well) and focus just on the present. Any of us could, in the course of a week, spend an afternoon with a theologically conservative Christian, take a brief tour of the Dogon country, chat in Jordan with a politically liberal professor of *shari'a*, and join the Jawoyn people of northern Australia in walking with the spirits of the Dreamtime. If they are so inclined, these people can tell us why they do what they do, what will happen if they fail to do it, and how this

relates to their other beliefs about the world. The natural way – I’m tempted to say the only way – to interpret their beliefs is in terms of the propositions they are prompted to utter and the actions they actually undertake. And the natural way to interpret those propositions is the good old Aristotelian way, in terms of their truth-conditions and the inferential relations among their propositions. This, I take it, is what Wolterstorff is attempting to do for the relation of our moral vocabulary to our religious vocabulary, though I’m not sure he’d be happy to put it that way.

Perhaps we should borrow a good Durkheimian notion, in the manner of Hilary Putnam, and talk about the division of religious labor. If we decide to identify religion as a part of a particular culture, it will usually be because there is some recognition within the target community of the distinctiveness of the negative and positive cult, and the beliefs invoked to sustain them. Some communities may sustain the cult simply by the threat of physical or spiritual consequences, while others may be amenable to questions.(see Davis 2012, 144-145) Richards offers an interesting example:

In 2000, as I sat beneath a shelter awaiting the afternoon *dama* celebrations at Amani, a group of young boys, aged around eight or so, were chattering next to me about the fact that they knew that the masks were men. An elder dozing on a rock nearby overheard and asked the question “*imina tiritiri?*” (Do the masks speak?). The elder then fiercely objected to the children’s discussion: “Masks don’t speak, therefore they cannot be men.”(Richards 2006, 101)

This combines both a basic argument against the position held by the boys and displays the threat of authority. But when the boys undertake initiation, they will receive the basic account of the origins and functions of the masks, the sort of thing van Beek suggests is

widespread and well-known. Confronted by the persistent Griaule, Ogotemmelé was deputized to elaborate on Dogon thought, thus entering into the world of midrash. (see Weiss Halivni 1991) I don't mean to suggest that the Dogon had a well-developed distinctions between plain meaning (*peshat*), applied meaning (*derash*), and mystical meaning (*sod*), only that something like this emerges in the process of bringing the materials of daily life into connection with basic Dogon stories.

I doubt we will ever know whether or not Ogotemmelé was a unique teacher or part of an emerging interpretive institution. The work of van Beek and others suggests that no such institution currently exists, though Apter reminds us that it may be fluid and called into play only on special occasions. Van Beek's informants "were critical of Griaule's work, as far as they knew it (which was limited). Their main comment was 'Il a exagere.' They were perfectly aware that many of his 'findings' reflected his own thoughts, more than theirs." (van Beek 2004, 54) But this doesn't mean much, given that they were being interviewed more than 40 years after Griaule's conversations with Ogotemmelé. Not only that, but Richards's work makes it clear that different locales display differing interest in and development of ideas. Van Beek writes that "the crucial concept of *nyama*, allegedly 'vital force,' is irrelevant to Dogon religion." (van Beek 1991, 148) Richards, however, while noting that the concept does not figure in the life of van Beek's village of Tireli, writes that, "among those Dogon villages today where the concept undoubtedly exists, the *nyama*, necessary for the health of an individual, can transform itself into a vengeful and aggressive force." (Richards 2006, 95) The long and the short of it is that Dogon religion continues to evolve.

In Judaism, midrash became an institution early on. "A popular midrashic homily," writes David Weiss Halivni, "raises the question: 'Why does the Torah begin with the

account of creation and not with Exod. 12:1, the first commandment given to Israel?”(Weiss Halivni 1986, 9) The answer, Weiss Halivni concludes, is that “the torah could not have begun with Exodus 12, because biblical law would then have been without preamble, without a rationale, and thus counter to the Bible’s inner spirit.”(ibid., 13) This inner spirit results in “the relentless drive of Jewish law toward becoming ever more justificatory . . . Justification entails argumentation, and argumentation leads toward a higher esteem of study.”(ibid., 115) The same can be said of Christianity, Islam, and almost certainly of other traditions with which I’m not familiar. Law begets midrash, which begets theology, which begets philosophy of religion. But with every level – barring authoritarian intervention – the intellectual obligations of the listener diminish; an alternative reading is always in the offing. In early 20th century American Protestantism, the proliferation of voices speaking all at once led to Fundamentalism. One of its forerunners, according to William Hutchison, was Dwight Moody, whose response to obscure biblical passages ran:

People say, “What do you do with what you cannot understand?” “I don’t do anything with it.” “How do you understand it?” “I don’t understand it.” “Well, how do you interpret it?” “I don’t interpret it” . . . “Do you believe it?” “Yes, I believe it.” Of course I do. I am glad that there is a height I know nothing about in the old book, a length and a breadth we know nothing about. It makes the book all the fascinating. I thank God it is beyond me. It is a pretty good proof that it came from God, and not from the hand of man.(Hutchison 2003, 143)

Twenty years later *The Fundamentals* would begin appearing, reflecting Moody’s “simple, noncombative assertiveness,”(ibid., 144) but ultimately lending a name to a very combative movement that not only survived the setback of the 1920s, but persists as part of an

“evangelical subculture” that “is broad and deep in the United States.”(Balmer 2014, 357)

The nice thing about biblical inerrancy is that it leaves very little to doubt in its inferential relations. The apologetic philosopher of religion can content himself with the classic arguments and with debunking the classic criticism.(see Craig & Sinnott-Armstrong 2004)

Godlove and I probably agree that faith as ultimate concern, the catch-phrase commonly associated with Tillich, is vapid, at best, though it’s worth being reminded that Tillich was preaching the sovereignty of God in the face of human sovereigns preparing for massive, unchecked, war.(Hutchison 2003, 162-165) In any case, the believer in biblical inerrancy is free to agree that Tillich’s theology strays too far from biblical truth without changing an iota of his beliefs. He can happily admit that even the most orthodox theologian is merely an interpreter of biblical truth and reaffirm that in some cases it is both wise and humble to follow Moody in thanking God that some biblical passage are “beyond” him.

As in the case of the Dogon, rationality is local. By this I mean that there is no universal standard of rationality. What’s reasonable for one group to do in their particular natural and intellectual environment is a function of the standards on the ground. Thus, when Henry of Livonia reports that the Baltic pagans “thought that since they had been baptized with water, they could remove their baptism by washing themselves in the Dvina and thus send it back to Germany,” he is ridiculing their superstition, even though he reports with pious certainty on the very next page that when Brother Theodoric “died a certain convert saw his soul being carried into heaven by the angels and recognized him from a distance of seven miles.”(Henry of Livonia 1961, 27-28) Belief in the superstition of others goes hand in hand with belief in a god of miracles.

It may seem that I am making it hard for anyone to be irrational, but in fact it is hard to be irrational, for reasons captured by Davidson. In the language of Davidson, we would be inclined to label someone irrational if we regularly failed to assign reasons to many of his actions, but this would mean either that he didn't act on reasons or that the reasons he did give were not simply mistaken, but made it dramatically difficult to negotiate day to day activities. If I mis-identify a Mercedes as a Maserati it's no big deal. If I regularly mis-identify my Mazda 3 for a Dodge Ram Laramie Longhorn, try to start it, call a cat for a tow when my key doesn't work, and the like, it will become more and more difficult to understand my behavior. That's irrationality. We have words for some sorts of "maladaptive patterns" of behavior, and their exact natures are regularly debated before the appearance of each new edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association. To think the world is other than it is, and to shape your behavior to conform to those false beliefs, is a receipt for frustration. But isolating individual propositions which we do not find compelling and then labeling those who would accept them irrational is intellectually unfair.

Conclusion

I hoped to do several things in this essay. First, I think it is important, in discussing Donald Davidson, to be mindful of the ways, particularly later in his career, of the interrelations language, intention, and rationality. By the end of the 1980s, Davidson had ceased to view Tarski as providing a "theory" of meaning. Instead, the Aristotelian characterization of truth from which Tarski takes his cue tells us all we need to know about the relation between truth and language. To the extent that we can formulate the truth conditions for a natural language along the lines Tarski elaborates for formal languages, we

can learn more than any theory of meaning can provide about inferential relations. It is the ability to triangulate the behavior of others in a shared world that leads us to believe they are rational, that they are using language, and that we can translate their language.

Equipped with this approach to meaning, I turned to the Dogon of Mali to illustrate it in action. Drawing particularly on the work of Polly Richards, I put on display the ways that what Dogon say and do allows us to attribute to them certain beliefs about the way the world is, its dangers and enticements. In the process, we accumulated evidence that different aspects of Dogon religious belief are emphasized in different parts of the Dogon land, that the social order and the language are both under pressure as a result of changes in the physical and social environment, and that we should expect interpretive fluidity, depending upon our informants. This allowed me to suggest a resolution to a recent debate in the interpretation of Dogon thought, namely the critique of *Conversations with Ogotemelli* and *The Pale Fox*, by Marcel Griaule and with his co-worker Germaine Dieterlen respectively. If, following Andrew Apter, we think of Dogon cosmology as fluid and lacking a fixed or final form, then it seems natural to think of Ogotemelli as offering the European student midrash on basic Dogon themes and beliefs. This midrash becomes ever more layered and elaborate as the teacher seeks to develop a coherent account.

From there I reiterated my long-standing view that the comparative study of religion and ethics needs little more than sensitive interpretation, guided by the best available history and ethnography. I claimed Terry Godlove as a fellow traveler in this tradition, and I wondered whether he had strayed from it in his important new work, *Kant and the Meaning of Religion*. Following Godlove, I introduced recent work by Robert Brandom, suggested that it dovetails well with that of Davidson, and expressed some worries that his application

of Brandom to Kant went perhaps a bit further than Brandom's work countenanced. What philosophers and theologians say in interpreting their communities' beliefs doesn't need to color, much less be shared by, the other members of those communities. Just as a contemporary Dogon can say that Griaule "exaggerated," it is open to the contemporary Christian to dismiss Tillich's theology without feeling the need to revise her own beliefs, for it remains the case that "Jesus died for my sins" is true if and only if Jesus died for my sins.

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