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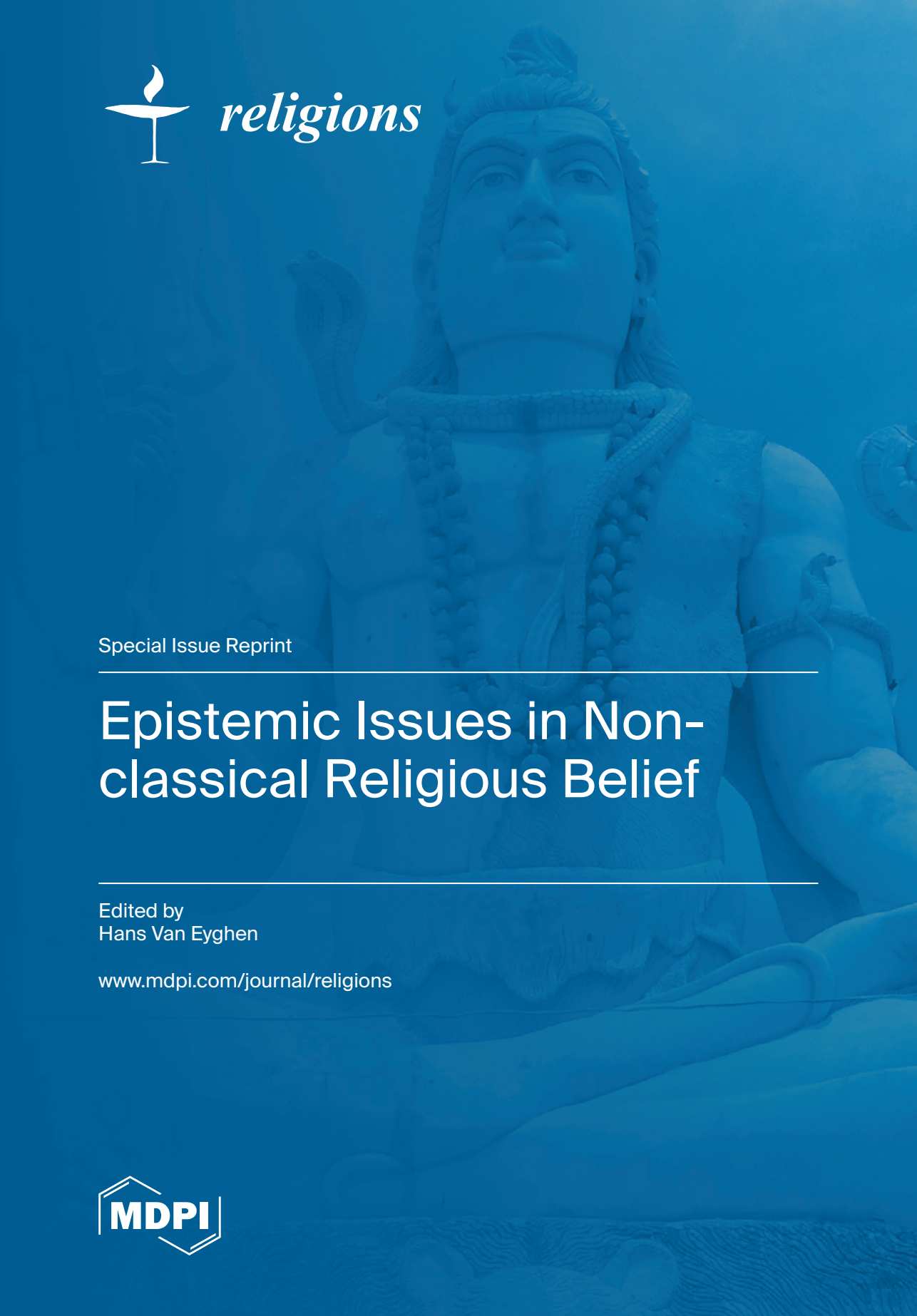

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Epistemic Issues in Non-classical Religious Belief

Edited by
Hans Van Eyghen

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Editor

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Shiva statue at Nageshwar

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About the Editor

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Hans Van Eyghen is assistant professor of philosophy at Tilburg University. He previously worked at VU Amsterdam and studied at KULeuven. His research interests include epistemology and how it relates to religion and the relationship between cognitive (neuro)science and religious phenomena. His main studies include *The Epistemology of Spirit Beliefs* (Routledge) and *Arguing From Cognitive Science of Religion* (Bloomsbury).

Preface to "Epistemic Issues in Non-classical Religious Belief"

This Special Issue contains papers focusing on religious beliefs that differ from the classical belief in God, i.e., belief in a perfect being who created the universe. The authors featured in this Special Issue approach this topic from different angles, including religious studies, epistemology, and comparative philosophy.

The publications included within this Special Issue address belief in spirits, neo-pagan religiosity, Hindu beliefs, Chinese beliefs, Afro-Brazilian beliefs, and animistic beliefs. Special emphasis is placed on non-Western traditions or traditions that are underrepresented in the contemporary philosophy of religion.

The book will appeal to scholars whose research interests include the philosophy of religion, comparative philosophy, and religious studies.

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Article

From Theism to Spirit Beliefs

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Abstract: I argue that arguments for the existence of God provide indirect support for the existence of other supernatural beings such as spirits. I defend three arguments: (i) the existence of spirits is more likely if there is a supernatural realm; (ii) an omnibenevolent God makes use of supernatural messengers; (iii) sacred scriptures attest to the existence of spirits. I defend all arguments and defend them against objections.

Keywords: natural theology; spirits; demonology

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1. Introduction

The main focus of the philosophy of religion was and is God.[1] Most arguments defended pertain to support (or reject) the existence of God or the rationality of belief in God. Very little is written with regard to the existence of other supernatural agents, such as spirits, demons, or angels.[2] Often, the non-existence of other supernatural agents is (tacitly) assumed or ignored. Nonetheless, belief in such beings is widely prevalent.

My aim in this paper is not to provide direct arguments for the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents. Instead, my goal is to show that the likelihood of the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents increases if the likelihood of the existence of God increases. Therefore, evidence or arguments for the existence of God support the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents as well.

This paper is structured as follows: in the next section, I investigate what non-theistic supernatural agents are and how they are different from God. In Section 3, I briefly discuss some arguments for the existence of God and what they conclude. In Section 4, I discuss three arguments that connect the likelihood of the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents to God. I end with some concluding remarks.

2. Defining Non-Theistic Supernatural Agents

Before discussing the arguments, we first need clarity on what is meant by the term 'non-theistic supernatural agent' (NTSA). This section serves to delineate the term and how its referent differs from God and non-supernatural beings.

Adherents of most religious traditions hold beliefs regarding other supernatural agents besides God. Depending on the tradition, these agents go by various names such as 'spirit', 'demon', or 'ghost'. Belief in such beings is widespread. In a survey from 2008, 68% of Americans indicated belief in the existence of angels and demons. The belief showed most dominant among Jehovah's Witnesses (78%), evangelical Christians (61%), historically African-American protestant churches (59%), and Mormons (59%) (Miller 2008). The New Testament affirms the existence of angels (e.g., Luke 1: 26–28) and demons (e.g., Mark 5: 1–20). The Old Testament, which is authoritative for both Christian and Jews, affirms the existence of angels as well (e.g., Genesis 16: 7–11). Many Muslims accept the existence of Jinn, a class of invisible supernatural agents. Hindu and Buddhist traditions often have extensive demonologies. The existence of other supernatural beings besides God is also accepted in smaller religions such as Vodou, Santeria, Yoruba, Chinese indigenous religions, and Shinto.

Though there are considerable differences in how angels, demons, or spirits are regarded, they share a number of common features. All are regarded as having different powers and natures than humans and are regarded as subordinated to God or the gods in most religious traditions.[3] Below, I investigate these common features in greater detail.

Above NTSAs were defined negatively in contrast to God. NTSAs are those supernatural agents that are not gods. This raises the question of what is meant by 'agent', 'supernatural', and 'God'.

2.1. Agent

The first element to be defined is that of 'agent'. As Marc Schlosser notes, the hallmark of agency is the capacity to act. The capacity to act is not merely performing actions but requires intentionality or the capacity to act for reasons.[4] Agency thus defined is usually preserved for humans and animals with high cognitive abilities. According to adherents of most religious traditions, supernatural agents (whether highly elevated or limited) display agency as well. Supernatural agents are believed to be able to respond to prayers or offerings, influence human lives, and, in some cases, take possession of human minds. They do so with a particular goal in mind (e.g., helping humans, punishing humans, or communicating with humans) and can therefore be regarded as acting for reasons.

The capacity to act goes beyond being 'causally efficacious'. While spirits and demons are believed to bring about causal change in the world, they do so in a different way than how inanimate things cause change. A tree that falls can cause damage but does not do so to meet a pre-defined goal and likely had no intention to act. While there are reports of 'wanton spirits' that appear to act randomly, most NTSAs are believed to act because they were moved by human pleas (see also below), because they were offended, or for some other reason.

2.2. Supernatural

Let us continue with defining 'supernatural'.[5] Spelling out necessary and sufficient conditions for delineating the supernatural from the natural is notoriously difficult. Nonetheless, a couple of sufficient conditions can be stipulated. For this purpose, it is helpful to look at when naturalists (adherents of the view that only natural entities exist) rank something among the supernatural. In the past, a lot of naturalists aligned their view with physicalism, the view that only physical entities exist. Nowadays, most naturalists are reluctant to limit the natural to the physical. However, the non-physical entities that naturalists allow for in their ontology are usually limited to entities that supervene on physical things or that are very similar to physical things we know. Examples are social institutions (e.g., money or borders) or relations between people. For example, James Ladyman excludes everything that is 'spooky' from a naturalist stance. Ladyman is not specific about what being 'spooky' amounts to, but it has an air of being unusual or out of the ordinary about it. Hardly ever do naturalists allow for non-physical beings in their ontologies.

Being non-physical, however, cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for being supernatural. There are ample examples of supernatural agents that are regarded as having some physical body or physicality.[6] For example, during possessions, demons would take control over a human body and show themselves through its physicality. Both the Old and New Testament include reports of humans *seeing* angels with some sort of body.[7]

One could revise the condition and argue that supernatural beings need some non-physical component.[8] During episodes of possession, a supernatural force appears to take hold of humans without any change in the human's physical constitution. Some scholars argued that demons have an etheric body combined with an immaterial soul (cf. McCraw 2017). Again, the condition does not hold for all supernatural beings. For example, many Muslims believe that God created Jinn (see below) out of fire (Moad 2017).

A second sufficient condition is the capacity to be invisible. A large number of supernatural agents are considered invisible or capable of becoming invisible. Practitioners of African traditional religions claim that spirits are *felt* rather than seen. Their presences

are announced by certain bodily sensations or emotions. Most adherents of monotheistic religions believe that God remains invisible most of the time.[9] It is hard to think of an invisible being that would be acceptable to a naturalist ontology.

Again, the capacity to remain invisible cannot be regarded as a necessary condition for being supernatural. We noted above that religious scriptures make mention of angels that are visible when they visit the earth. Some Hindu gods, such as the avatara of Vishnu, are also believed to be visible.

A third and final sufficient condition is being able to exist outside space and time. No being that is able to do so is acceptable for naturalists. For them, the whole of reality is usually confined to space and time. In a lot of religious traditions, God is believed to be the source of everything beside him and, therefore, the source of space and time itself. Having created space and time, God, therefore, is able to exist outside of it. Other supernatural agents are believed to exist outside space and time as well. Sometimes, angels are regarded as existing in a different realm of existence. The same would hold for elevated spirits.

Once again, being able to exist outside of space and time is not a necessary condition. In ancient Greek religion and contemporary folk religion, some spirits are seen as attached to rivers, trees, or caves. Since they are bound to natural phenomena, they appear to be bound by space and time as well. Some traditions also hold that some spirits are deceased humans that have not ascended up to an afterlife. These are also bound by the same spatial and temporal conditions as humans.

Summing up, I discussed three properties of supernatural agents that are sufficient but not necessary. A being is thus supernatural if it is:

(i) Non-physical;
(ii) Capable of being invisible;
(iii) Able to exist outside of space and time.

The three properties can get us some way towards distinguishing supernatural agents.

2.3. Non-Theistic

The conditions discussed in the previous section help us distinguish supernatural agents from natural agents. For our purposes, this is not sufficient. The goal of this paper is to assess the likelihood of NTSAs existing given the existence of God. We are thus interested in a subset of all supernatural agents. I noted that NTSAs are defined negatively as all supernatural agents that are not gods. A useful way to distinguish such being is thus looking at how gods can be defined.

The initial problem is that various traditions appear to have different criteria for distinguishing gods from other supernatural agents. If we compare ancient Greek religion to West African Yoruba, we can note that a number of supernatural agents are attributed similar properties. For example, the Yoruba orisha (The Yoruba term for 'spirit') Ogoun is regarded as the orisha of iron and metallurgy. The Greek god Hephaistos was regarded as the god of blacksmiths and metallurgy. Both were worshipped by people active in metallurgy and called upon to aid in their endeavors. Both Ogoun and Hephaistos thus appear to have similar roles and powers and are worshipped in similar ways. Yet, Hephaistos is generally called a god, whereas Ogoun usually is not. Adherents of ancient Greek religion, therefore, appear to have had different criteria for counting supernatural agents among the gods than adherents of Yoruba do.

In western philosophy of religion, God is often defined as a perfect being.[10] A perfect being is the greatest possible being. Perfection implies a number of omni-properties; the best known are omniscience, omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omnipresence.[11] Because God is the only perfect being, perfections can serve to distinguish God from other supernatural agents.[12]

Although straightforward and easy to apply, defining non-theistic supernatural agents as non-perfect supernatural agents raises some problems. The first is that the definition of God as a perfect being is far from universally shared. Karl Barth famously argued that God is only known through his self-revelation and all human (philosophical) reflection is

always at best incomplete and at worst misguided.[13] The view implies skepticism of the accuracy of divine properties drawn from philosophical reflection such as perfection. A less radical criticism of perfect being theology is that the view does not match the concept of God that is dominant in the Bible.[14]

Another problem with defining God as a perfect being is that it is not applicable to polytheistic traditions. Although perfection does not necessarily imply uniqueness,[15] it does imply a similarity between all perfect beings. If there could be multiple perfect beings, they should be highly similar, sharing all perfections without subordination to one another. Polytheistic traditions commonly ascribe different properties to different gods and often have a hierarchy of gods. For adherents of Vaishnavism, Vishnu is the creator of the cosmos. They also accept the existence of other gods such as Shiva and Ganesh, but they have different cosmic roles and different impacts on human life. As Peterson et al. note, a being that is at the source of the cosmos is more perfect than one that is not (Peterson et al. 2008). Therefore, Shiva and Ganesh are not perfect beings for adherents of Vaishnavism. They are nonetheless regarded as gods. A similar line of reasoning applies to other Indian traditions, such as Shaivism and Shaktism, and to ancient Greek religion. For most ancient Greeks, Zeus was the supreme deity who held power over other gods. Although these other gods were subordinate and therefore not perfect, they were clearly considered to be gods.

Although the criteria for distinguishing gods from other supernatural agents differ depending on tradition, a majority of traditions have a (very) limited number of gods.[16] Adherents of Abrahamic religions believe in the existence of one God only and sometimes a number of other supernatural agents such as demons or angels. Adherents of Hinduism accept the existence of more gods.[17] However, it is a common misconception that Hindus worship as many as thousands, if not millions, of gods.[18] Most strands of Hinduism accept a hierarchy of supernatural agents wherein a small number of supernatural agents is considered most elevated. For example, in Vaishnavism, Vishnu (and his avatara) is considered the Supreme Being. Other deities take a subordinate role.

As an alternative to defining God as a perfect being, God (or gods) are defined as that supernatural agent (or those supernatural agents) that enjoys a higher elevated status. The Christian God is far exalted above all other beings (natural and supernatural). The same holds for the concept of God in Islam and Judaism. Indian gods are also of a higher status than other beings such as devas or spirits. The elevated status of gods is due to them having greater powers, such as the power to create or control the course of the universe or being free from constraints that bind other beings, such as space/time or finitude.

Making a distinction between God/gods and non-theistic supernatural agents on the basis of elevated status introduces vagueness. The status of elevation allows for degrees and does not have a clear cut-off point. Some supernatural agents are regarded as highly elevated but not considered to be gods. An example is Avalokiteshvara in Mahayana Buddhism. Avalokiteshvara is one of the most revered and most worshipped bodhisattvas, yet he is not regarded as a God. Something similar can be said of Ogun in West African Yoruba.

Furthermore, not all reserve the term 'God' or 'gods' for the most elevated supernatural beings. Michael Heiser identified demons and angels as portrayed in the Bible as 'gods', even though all are clearly depicted as subordinated to God (Heiser 2015). Shandon Guthrie suggests doing the same (Guthrie 2018). Paul also refers to Satan as the 'god of this world'.[19] Ranking demons and angels among the gods is, however, the exception among Christian theists.

Having a less elevated status implies greater constraints on what these supernatural agents can and cannot do. In many cases, the influence of a supernatural agent does not stretch beyond the bounds of a village or small community. Spirits and demons are also regarded as bound by moral laws or other obligations.

Another important difference between gods and NTSAs is that the latter hardly ever have a role in creating the universe. In Abrahamic religions, God is believed to be the sole creator of the universe. Angels, demons, or Jinn (see below) are part and parcel of creation.

In some strands of Hinduism, the Brahman is regarded as the primordial source of all that exists. Brahman also manifests as a host of gods that are worshipped by humans. A notable exception is the demiurge in late-antique gnostic religions and Neo-Platonist traditions. The demiurge is usually not regarded as a god yet is credited with the creation of the visible universe (see: Fossum 2005). Crediting a non-theistic supernatural agent for creating the universe is, however, very rare in contemporary religious traditions.

We can distill a number of criteria from the discussion so far:

Less elevated status;
Less powerful. and
Not creator.

Because each criterion has one or more counterexamples, none of them can be regarded as necessary or sufficient. The three criteria do provide sufficient ground for ranking a supernatural agent among the NTSAs or not in most cases.

More clarity on the meaning of 'supernatural', 'God', and 'agent' provides a better grasp of NTSAs. Before discussing arguments why an increased likelihood of God's existence implies an increased likelihood of the existence of NTSAs, I first briefly discuss arguments for the existence of God. If the arguments discussed in Section 4 are sound, sound arguments for the existence of God imply a higher likelihood of the existence of NTSAs.

3. The Initial Outlook: Arguing for God Alone

As noted, the (non) existence of NTSAs is rarely discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion. The discussion over the existence of God, by contrast, is vast. As a result, arguments for the existence of God appear to argue for 'mere theism', a metaphysical view where only one supernatural being (i.e., God) exists.

Natural theology is an umbrella term that covers discussion on arguments for or against the existence of God. The arguments are numerous.[20] Although nearly all arguments conclude for or against the (likely) existence of God, they differ in the level of detail they allow for. Defenders of the ontological argument conclude to the existence of a perfect being (Malcolm 1960) or a maximally great being (Plantinga 1968). Being perfect implies having several properties such as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. As noted in Section 2, NTSAs are commonly believed *not* to have these properties. Therefore, it seems as if the ontological argument is of little help or relevance in assessing the likely existence of NTSAs.

The same appears to hold for other arguments from natural theology. The most popular argument for the existence of God in recent years is arguably the design argument. In one of its most recent forms, defenders argue that the highly improbable alignment or fine-tuning of cosmological constants renders the existence of a designer God more probable than its negation (cf.: Collins 2003; McGrath 2009). Unlike the ontological argument, the design argument does not directly conclude with a perfect being but with a designer. As some note, a designer God need not be perfect. David Hume famously argued that the universe could have been designed by a not-so-powerful angel who was prone to make a lot of mistakes (Hume 1970). Such a being is far from perfect. Nonetheless, design arguments appear to be of little help in establishing the existence of NTSAs as well. As noted in Section 2, NTSAs are usually *not* believed to have created the universe.[21]

It thus seems as if arguments merely establish the existence of God and do little to make the existence of NTSAs more probable. The arguments thereby raise the suggestion that there are no close links between the likelihood of God's existence and that of NTSAs. Below I present three arguments for a closer connection. All arguments conclude that a high likelihood of God's existence implies a higher likelihood of NTSAs existing. Therefore, if the arguments raised in the remaining sections are successful, arguments for the existence of God can indirectly lend justification to belief in NTSAs as well.

4. From Theism to Spirit Beliefs

As noted in Section 3, arguments from natural theology seemingly provide support for the existence of God alone. The arguments usually also allow for more qualified conclusions such as the (probable) existence of a perfect being or a designer God. We noted in Section 2 that NTSAs are conceptually very different than God, the main difference being their powers and status. Therefore, it seems that Sections 2 and 3 jointly support the conclusion that arguments from natural theology do not support the existence of NTSAs. By contrast, this section argues that arguments that support the existence of God provide indirect support for the existence of NTSAs if a number of background beliefs concerning God are established. The claim defended in this section can be stated as follows (where 'B' is background knowledge):

$$P(\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{God \& B}) > P(\sim\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{God \& B})$$

The probability of the existence of NTSAs increases if there is a God for a number of reasons, all of which are analyzed in greater detail below. They are the following:

a. An omnibenevolent God wants to make himself known through messengers.
b. The existence of NTSAs is more likely if there is a supernatural realm.
c. The existence of NTSAs is more probable if sacred scriptures are reliable.

Below, I discuss each of these in more detail. In most cases, one needs to establish a number of background beliefs (B). All required background beliefs can be established by additional arguments concerning the nature or actions of God.

4.1. The Existence of NTSAs Is More Likely If There Is a Supernatural Realm

The first argument needs no additional background knowledge concerning God's nature or actions to conclude a higher probability of NTSAs. It notes that the existence of NTSAs requires the denial of naturalism, i.e., the claim that only natural entities exist. If the existence of God is supported by one or more arguments from natural theology, we gain support for the denial of naturalism, and therefore, the existence of NTSAs becomes more probable.[22] The argument can be stated as (where 'N' stands for naturalism and 'SN' for supernaturalism):

$$P\ (\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{N}) < p\ (\text{NTSAs} \mid \text{SN})$$

The first reason why the denial of naturalism aids the case for NTSAs is by defusing prominent epistemic defeaters. An apparently major reason to reject the existence of NTSAs is drawn from naturalism. Adherents of naturalism deny the existence of any supernatural agent whatsoever.[23] By implication, adherents of naturalism deny the existence of NTSAs. Any argument for naturalism is, therefore, an argument against the existence of NTSAs by implication. Learning of an argument for naturalism can therefore constitute an epistemic defeater[24] for belief in NTSAs. Common arguments for naturalism are arguments that naturalism is more parsimonious than non-naturalism (Oppy 2020), arguments that naturalistic explanations proved more successful than non-naturalistic explanations in the history of science (e.g., Boudry et al. 2010), and arguments from the causal closure of the physical universe (Papineau 2009). Assessing these arguments falls beyond the scope of this paper. It suffices to note that if any of the arguments are sound, any subject holding beliefs in the existence of NTSAs has a defeater for those beliefs.

Arguments for the existence of God can indirectly support belief in NTSAs by defeating naturalistic defeaters. If any sound argument concludes with the existence of God, it establishes the existence of at least one supernatural agent. As a result, naturalism is shown to be false. In doing so, arguments from natural theology can defeat naturalistic defeaters and leave room for the acceptance of NTSAs. In doing so, the arguments do not aid a positive case for NTSAs beliefs but merely counter the negative case against such beliefs.

Arguments from natural theology can also do more and aid the positive case for the existence of NTSAs. If sound, arguments for the existence of God show the existence of

a supernatural realm. They show that the whole of existence is not exhausted by what is natural but includes at least something supernatural, i.e., God. The probability of NTSAs existing clearly becomes more probable if there is sound reason to believe that there is a supernatural realm than when there is not. To a subject without any evidence or reason to believe in the existence of a supernatural realm, the existence of NTSAs is what Charles Sanders Peirce calls a 'surprising fact' (Douven 2011). Evidence or reasons for the existence of NTSAs (such as an experience of a spirit or demonic activity) for such a subject is harder to fit with background knowledge. The existence of NTSAs fits much easier if the existence of a supernatural realm has already been accepted and naturalism was rejected.

One could object that showing the existence of a supernatural realm merely shows that NTSAs are logically possible yet not probable. The existence of highly advanced alien life forms on Mars is logically possible, yet not probable given the long history of observations on Mars. Contrary to this claim, the argument does more than merely establish logical possibility. By showing that there is a God, arguments show that there is at least one supernatural being. Accepting an NTSA aside from God then no longer requires a subject to accept a new class of beings that is different in kind. Compared before the invention of the microscope, the existence of micro-animals was not very probable. After the first observations of bacteria by Anthony van Leeuwenhoek (Lane 2015), the existence of other animals of the same class became considerably more probable.

The argument points out how the existence of God renders the existence of similar (supernatural) being more likely. A similar argument could point to the similarities between non-physical (human) minds and non-physical agents.[25] One could rely on evidence for the survival of human minds post-biological death to establish the existence of disembodied, non-physical minds (e.g., Lund 2009; Braude 2003). By pointing out how NTSAs are similar to those non-physical minds, one could raise the likelihood of NTSAs as well. However, establishing the existence of non-physical minds merely raises the likelihood of other non-physical agents. The argument defended in this section raises the probability of supernatural agents that, such as God, are (i) non-physical, (ii) invisible, and (iii) not bound to the spatio-temporal realm. Thereby, the argument defended here is less general and better tailored for the likelihood of NTSAs as defined in Section 2.

One must acknowledge that the probability of the existence of NTSAs gained from establishing a supernatural realm is still rather low. The argument can, however, aid in a cumulative case for the existence of NTSAs. The arguments I discuss next can provide a stronger case.

4.2. An Omnibenevolent God Wants to Make Himself Known through Messengers

The second argument does rely on background knowledge concerning the nature and actions of God. The argument states that the existence of NTSAs is more likely if there is a God who is omnibenevolent and is unable or unwilling to intervene directly in human lives.

Both claims can be established through rational argumentation. The claim can be stated as:

P(NTSAs | God & M) > P(~NTSAs | God & M) (where M = use of/preference for messengers,)

The argument resembles an argument made by the Neo-Platonist philosopher Apuleius. Apuleius argues that intermediary beings are indispensable to transmitting divine communications to the human realm. Apuleius' argument presupposes an ancient worldview wherein there exists a hierarchy of gods and other supernatural agents that exist in different spheres of existence. Before investigating whether his argument can be adapted to a contemporary worldview, I first discuss his original argument.

Apuleius's argument hinges on two claims:

1. The most elevated beings are too far removed from the human sphere to interact with humans.

2. The most elevated beings are moved by human pleas.

Both claims are defended by Apuleius but not stated in this way. As noted, Apuleius's argument assumes a Neo-Platonist, ancient worldview (Mortley 1972). In this view, there are different spheres of existence. All these spheres are inhabited by supernatural agents or 'gods'[26]. His argument can be regarded as defending the need for supernatural agents in the lower realms because they act as a bridge to the gods of higher realms.

Concerning (1), Apuleius writes:

> You have, then, in the meantime, two kinds of animated beings, Gods entirely differing from men, in the sublimity of their abode, in the eternity of their existence, in the perfection of their nature, and having *no proximate communication* with them; since those that are supreme are separated from the lowest habitations by such a *vast interval of distance*; and life is there eternal and never-failing, but here decaying and interrupted, and the natures are there sublimated to beatitude, while those below are depressed to wretchedness. What then? Has nature connected itself by no bond, but allowed itself to be separated into the divine and human parts, and to be thus split and crippled, as it were? For, as the same Plato remarks, "No God mingles with men." But this is the principal mark of their sublime nature, that they are not contaminated by any contact with us. (Apuleius 2001)

Apuleius here argues that communication between the gods of higher spheres of existence and humans is impossible because of their different nature and the vast distance between them. Gods of higher realms are perfect, whereas humans are far from perfect. None of these gods want to 'mingle' with imperfect beings. Apuleius does not explicitly argue why this is the case, but probably gods would refrain from doing so for fear of contamination or because it does not befit their perfect status.

Apuleius also points to the vast difference between gods and humans. He likely did not have geographical distance in mind but rather pointed to the different spheres of existence wherein the gods and humans abide. Since both groups do not share the same realm of existence, communication is impossible.

Concerning (2), Apuleius writes:

> No God, you say, interferes in human affairs. To whom, then, shall I address my prayers? To whom shall I make my vows? To whom shall I immolate victims? Whom shall I invoke throughout my whole life, as the helper of the unfortunate, the favorer of the good, and the adversary of the wicked? And whom, in fine, (a thing for which necessity most frequently occurs) shall I adduce as a witness to my oath? (Apuleius 2001)

Here, Apuleius points to the problems raised by (1) for common religious practices of his time. Common Greek religious practices such as praying, making vows, offerings, invocations, and making oaths all involve some kind of communication to the gods.[27] The practices listed by Apuleius all involve communications from humans towards the gods.

Both claims (1) and (2) jointly raise a problem. Humans feel a need to send communications by means of various religious practices to the gods, but because of their vastly different natures and vast distances between them, such attempts appear to be futile. The same holds for communications in the opposite direction, from the gods to humans. Divine messages to humans are rendered impossible for the same reasons.

The problems raised by (1) and (2) can be solved by intermediary beings that act as a bridge between gods and humans, according to Apuleius.[28] He affirms that there are beings that are placed as messengers between humans and the gods. These beings can carry messages from humans to God and from God to humans (in the forms of prayers, invocations, revelations, etc.) and can act as interpreters (Apuleius 2001).

The intermediary beings are capable of their bridge function because they have a 'middle nature'. They are not quite of the same elevated nature as the gods and not quite of the same earthly nature of man but are "composed of a mixture of both" (Apuleius 2001).

The middle nature of intermediary beings not only pertains to their natures but also to their "place of habitation" (Apuleius 2001).

The polytheism and Neo-Platonist ancient worldview affirmed by Apuleius have since left debates in the philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, Apuleius's argument can be updated to fit a contemporary worldview.[29] Below, I discuss how Apuleius' two central claims can be adapted for this purpose.

Let us begin with claim (2). Some support for (2) in contemporary monotheistic traditions is gained from their sacred Scriptures.[30] An additional argument for (2) is inferred from God's omnibenevolence. Adherents of all three large contemporary monotheistic traditions affirm that God's interventions in human life are good. Christians pray for God's help in their struggles and ask for divine guidance. Jews and Muslims do likewise. Both ancient Greek practices and contemporary practices thus give testament that divine interventions can be of aid for humans. The mere fact that humans want and need divine interventions does not imply that God will be moved by human needs. It does, however, if God is omnibenevolent. A God who is morally perfect will be inclined to act on human pleas because doing so constitutes a moral good. God's omnibenevolence is affirmed by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike.

The discussion so far strongly suggests that Apuleius's second claim can be accepted by most contemporary theists. More problems arise concerning (1). Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament affirm that God can reveal himself to humans without the need for any intermediary being. For example, the Old Testament narrates how God revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush. The New Testament affirms that God took on human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The examples show that contemporary Jews and Christians do not share Apuleius's ideas about an unbridgeable gap between God and humans or about God's nature preventing him from showing himself directly to humans.

Apuleius' first claim must therefore be adapted to fit an omnipotent God. Despite the possibility of God revealing himself to humans and therefore sending divine messages himself, the sacred Scriptures of the three largest contemporary monotheistic traditions (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) all affirm a role for intermediary beings that carry messages from God to humans. The Hebrew Bible frequently mentions appearances of the Angel of the Lord to deliver messages from God or to lead the Israelites.[31] The New Testament also mentions a role for angels in delivering divine messages. The most famous is the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus by the Angel Gabriel.[32] According to Islamic tradition, the divine message contained in the Quran was dictated to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Therefore, despite being able to send messages himself, adherents of all three monotheisms affirm that God sometimes chooses to send intermediary beings.

A contemporary theist could rely on divine skepticism to answer why God sometimes uses angels to deliver messages and delivers messages himself on other occasions. Some excerpts give a hint as to why God would do so on some occasions. After his encounter with the Angel of God, Gideon is smitten with fear because he believes he saw God face-to-face (see: Judges 6). Divine self-revelations are fewer in number in the Old and New Testament than messages sent by angelic messengers. Self-revelations only occur at the most important of times. God reveals himself to Moses to begin the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and reveals himself in Jesus of Nazareth to deliver mankind of sin. Both acts are beyond the power of angelic messengers. When God's goal is merely to provide information to humans, messages are usually sent by angels. Unless the circumstances exceed the power of angels, angelic messengers may be less awe-inspiring or trigger milder emotional responses than divine self-revelations. Therefore, messages delivered by intermediary beings might be easier to process by humans.

One might object that the first argument only shows how an increased likelihood of the existence of the Christian or Abrahamic God increased the likelihood of NTSAs. Apuleius's original argument, however, also shows that a god who lacks the power to deliver or receive human messages has an even stronger need for intermediary beings. Something similar might hold for traditions where the Supreme Being or supreme reality is not easily

accessible to humans. For example, adherents of West African Yoruba accept the existence of a supreme being who possesses many perfections called Olodumare. Olodumare is, however, far removed from the human realm of existence and therefore relies on other supernatural beings (Orisha's) to answer human concerns (Bewaji 1998).

The second argument connecting God's existence to the existence of NTSAs thus states that NTSAs likely exist if God exists because God is moved to intervene in human lives, and God has reasons to use angelic messengers for that intervention. Those reasons might be that encounters with angels are less fear-inducing or emotionally charged than encounters with God or a reason unknown to men.[33] Caution must be made that the argument only holds if God is seen as omnibenevolent and unable or unwilling to intervene in human lives personally. The last point prevents one from making a connection between the likely existence of NTSAs and a deistic God or gods who putatively intervene more often themselves.

The arguments so far focused on establishing that God is unable or unwilling to intervene himself and therefore makes use of NTSAs as messengers. Another element of background knowledge that needs to be established is God's omnibenevolence. A large number of arguments for the existence of God merely conclude to a creator or designer (see above) and do not allow for more conclusions about God's nature. Some arguments, however, do. For example, the ontological argument concludes with a perfect being or a maximally great being. The argument discussed in this section can therefore be joined with the ontological argument to raise the probability that NTSAs exist.

4.3. The Existence of NTSAs Is More Probable If Sacred Scriptures Are Reliable

The next way in which the existence of God can support belief in NTSAs is by providing support for the reliability of sacred texts.[34] The argument adds the reliability of sacred texts as an extra intermediate step in arguing from a higher probability of the existence of God to a higher probability of the existence of NTSAs. This can be stated as follows, with 'RST' signifying the reliability of sacred texts:

1. P(RST | God) > P(RST | ~ God)
2. P(NTSA | RST) > P(NTSA | ~ RST)
3. P(NTSA | God) > P(NTSA | ~ God)

The first premise seems almost trivially true. If there is no God, a lot of the information contained in sacred scriptures should be judged false since the vast majority of sacred scriptures assume the existence of God. Solid evidence for the non-existence of God would therefore constitute an easy defeater for the reliability of sacred scriptures. Apart from trivial support by avoiding this clear defeater, evidence for God's existence can support the reliability of sacred scriptures in different ways as well.

Some have argued that we can expect God to reveal himself if God exists. Richard Swinburne argues that since humans stand in need of guidance concerning proper religious and moral behavior, we can expect God to give propositional information with regards to these in the form of a revelation. He adds that if there is sufficient evidence for the existence of a God who is all-powerful and all-good, there is good evidence that God will answer this need (Swinburne 2007). Elsewhere, Swinburne famously argued that there is more than sufficient evidence for an all-powerful and all-good God (Swinburne 2004).

Swinburne's argument merely concludes with divine revelation and not with reliable sacred scriptures. His argument can, however, be expanded for this goal. Divine revelation is usually very limited in scope. In Christianity, God is believed to have revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth. Direct contact with Jesus was reserved for his immediate followers and people living in the region and age where he lived. The vast majority of Christians never had direct access to this revelation. Revelation is even more restricted in Islam. According to the Islamic tradition, God delivered his message solely to the prophet Muhammad. Others besides Muhammad never heard the message directly. In both traditions, the content or nature of divine revelations is transmitted to others through written reports collected in sacred scriptures. If humans stand in need of information from a divine source as

Swinburne argues, an all-powerful, all-good God will not limit this information to subjects with direct access to his revelation. God would likely want reports of the revelation to be disseminated to as many people as possible. Written reports provide the best means of doing so.

If God is concerned with providing humans guidance by handing information through written reports, God would also want to make sure that the reports are reasonably accurate. He would therefore make sure that the reports are written down carefully and transmitted without many errors. Therefore, sacred scriptures should have certain 'virtues of divinity', such as truthfulness, as Thomas McCall argues (McCall 2009).

Now how does the reliability of sacred scriptures support the existence of NTSAs? The vast majority of sacred scriptures across traditions attest to the existence of NTSAs. The Hebrew Bible affirms the existence of angels (e.g., Exodus 33: 2). The New Testament affirms the existence of angels and demons (e.g., Mark 5: 1–20). The Quran affirms the existence of angels and Jinn, a class of supernatural, invisible beings.[35] The Hindu Mahabharata and Ramayana epics affirm the existence of a large number of demons and spirits such as Ravana.[36] The Sikh Guru Granth Sahib mentions demons that drive humans towards evil inclinations. The Japanese Kojiko largely consists of the exploits of Kami, which take on many characteristics of spirits. The Buddhist Pali Canon mentions the demon Mara who attempted to distract Siddhartha Gautama.[37] If sacred scriptures are reliable, we have reason to believe that the information they provide regarding the existence of NTSAs is reliable as well.

Against the argument, a number of objections can be raised. A first objection echoes a claim made by Rudolph Bultmann (1984). Bultmann argues that sacred scriptures[38] were written down in an era and cultural setting wherein a discarded metaphysical view was dominant. Around the time when sacred scriptures were composed, various superstitious beliefs that are now widely rejected were commonplace. For example, the authors of the books that make up the Old and New Testament accepted a pre-modern cosmological view wherein the earth was separated from the heavens by a firmament. Various texts such as the Genesis creation story attest to this cosmology. Now that the old cosmology has been discarded by scientific advances, sacred scriptures should be 'demythologized' and be cleansed from traces of discarded beliefs.

With Bultmann, one could argue that the existence of various NTSAs is a remnant of a by-gone ontology that is widely discarded as well. Therefore, just like sacred scriptures should be cleansed from references to old cosmologies, they should be cleansed from references to NTSAs as well. Passages that do refer to NTSAs should then be translated to fit with a modern view of the world. For example, the exorcism of the Gerasene demon (cf. Mark 5: 1–20) should be translated as Jesus delivering a man of some psychiatric disorder rather than exorcising him from a demon. The argument does not deny the reliability of sacred scriptures but argues that regardless they do not support the existence of NTSAs. The mention of demons and spirits is merely an outdated means of stating that people suffered from various illnesses and does not affirm the existence of supernatural beings.

As a counter-argument, referring to demythologizing is question-begging. The argument defended above aims to establish the existence of NTSAs by pointing to the reliability of sacred scriptures. The counter-argument replies that sacred scriptures support no such claim because NTSAs do not exist (according to a modern worldview). The counter-argument thereby assumes the non-existence of NTSAs, the very claim the argument aims to deny. On the surface, there is no reason to believe that the authors of sacred scriptures refer to anything else than NTSAs when discussing spirit or demonic activities. Without accepting that such beings, in fact, do not exist, the Bultmann-style argument presents few reasons that they do not.

A second counter-argument refers to diversity regarding sacred scriptures. One could argue that sacred scriptures provide no evidence for the existence of NTSAs because many mutually conflicting sacred scriptures abound. Christians have the Bible, Muslims the

Quran, and Hindus the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Vedas. All are regarded as sacred scriptures within a particular tradition and rejected outside.

The argument is not so much an argument against drawing evidence for NTSAs from sacred scriptures but rather a general argument against the reliability of sacred scriptures. Several authors argued that merely pointing to diversity in revelations (d'Costa 1996) or testimonial chains (Baker-Hytch 2018) does not undermine the reliability of one revelation or testimonial chain. Applied to sacred scriptures, the mere fact of diversity does not show that one set of sacred scriptures is not more reliable than others. Assessing the reasons for preferring one lies far beyond the scope of this paper. Given that most sacred scriptures affirm the existence of NTSAs, it does not matter which sacred scriptures are on a better epistemic footing. One can conclude the existence of NTSAs if either the Bible, Quran, or Mahabharata were shown to be the most reliable. Establishing the reliability of one set of sacred scriptures would, however, require additional arguments. Assessing these lies beyond the scope of this paper.

One could argue from the fact of diversity that some parts of sacred scriptures are more reliable than others. Some authors, such as John Hick, advocated a focus on commonalities across religious traditions and rejecting particularities (Hick 1997). As noted in the previous paragraph, others have argued against the charge of diversity. Even if one would grant the charge and agree that conflicting parts in sacred scriptures should be rejected in favor of similarities, sacred scriptures still favor the existence of NTSAs. As noted, a lot of sacred scriptures affirm the existence of NTSAs. They disagree over the identities of NTSAs and some of their natures. These differences are, however, not the focus of the argument. Therefore, it is likely that the sacred scripture that ends up being the most reliable one is one that affirms NTSAs. That there are many scriptures does nothing to decide which ones are reliable, only that they all cannot be reliable together

Like the previous argument, the third argument relies on God's omnibenevolence, a divine attribute that is already supported by a number of independent arguments such as the ontological argument.

5. Concluding Remarks

I argued that the existence of non-theistic supernatural agents is more probable if God exists. I defended three reasons in favor of that position: the existence of a supernatural realm given the existence of God; the use of intermediary beings to accomplish interaction between God and humans; and the reliability of sacred scriptures which attest to the existence of NTSAs. If any of the three arguments is sound, accepting the existence of God can lend justification to the existence of NTSAs. As a result, arguments for the existence of God indirectly support the existence of NTSAs.

The arguments defended imply that belief in NTSAs deserves more epistemic credit than it is often given. Arguments for the existence of God are commonly regarded as serious endeavors to gain justification for belief in God. If the arguments in Section 4 are sound, justification gained from such arguments allows for justified belief in NTSAs.

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Notes

[1] I thank three anonymous reviewers for exceptionally helpful comments on earlier drafts.

[2] Some notable exceptions are: (Guthrie 2017; Johnson 2017; Wiebe 2004).

[3] As noted by an anonymous reviewer, this does not hold for non-theistic religions such as some forms of animism and Theravada Buddhism.

[4] Although this account of agency is dominant, alternative accounts have been defended (see (Schlosser 2015) for an overview). Discussing these in detail lies beyond the scope of this chapter. The same holds for account of what counts as a 'reason'. For an overview of the discussion on 'reason', see: (Alvarez 2016).

[5] The discussion on defining 'supernatural' is drawn from (Van Eyghen 2018).

[6] This also holds for views on God. Adherents of the Church of Latter Day Saints tend to believe that God is a material being. Most adherents of Christianity believe that God took on human flesh when incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. In both examples, God cannot be regarded as non-physical.

[7] See, for example, Luke 1: 26–28, Exodus 23: 20–23.

[8] I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

[9] E.g., Hebrews 11: 1. I noted above that a large number of Christians believe that God became visible when incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. This, however, attests to the claim that the Christian God has the capacity to remain invisible even though he showed himself at some times.

[10] Perfect being theology has its roots in the works of the 12th-century philosopher Anselm of Canterbury.

[11] For an in-depth discussion, see: (Peterson et al. 2008, chp. 4).

[12] Some authors distinguish the Christian God from 'limited deities' (Baker-Hytch 2018).

[13] For a discussion of Barth's view on divine attributes, see: (Titus 2010).

[14] For a critique of this view, see: (Stump 2018).

[15] It seems logically possible that there be two or more beings that are equally perfect, sharing omniscience, omnibenevolence, and other perfections.

[16] A majority of religious traditions only appear to accept one god and regard all other supernatural agents as inferior. A few notable exceptions are Hinduism and ancient polytheisms. Hinduism, however, also accepts one primordial supernatural agent called Brahman, which is the source of everything (see below).

[17] Some argue that (most) Hindus are monotheistic. Ian Kesarcodi-Watson notes that Hindus commonly accept that Brahman is the supreme being manifested in personalized form as Isvara (Kesarcodi-Watson 1976).

[18] See, for example, (Dasa 2012).

[19] See: 2 Corinthians 4.4.

[20] For overviews, see: (Craig and Moreland 2009; Manning et al. 2013).

[21] There is a subtle difference between being a designer and a creator. Concluding to a designer merely concludes to a being that brought order to the universe. The designer could have operated on pre-existing material or chaos. Concluding to a creator usually means that the creator was the cause or origin of the universe. In most discussions, however, the distinction between designer and creator is not drawn sharply.

[22] As an anonymous reviewer noted, a similar argument can be made relying on pantheism. Establishing the (likely) truth of pantheism would also imply the denial of naturalism and leave more room for NTSAs.

[23] Adherents of naturalism usually also deny the existence of other entities or things besides supernatural agents. They also deny the existence of supernatural forces such as karma or Dao and immaterial souls.

[24] Epistemic defeaters are distinguished by rebutting and undercutting defeaters (cf. Pollock 1986). Learning of an argument for naturalism provides evidence for a proposition opposed to the existence of NTSAs and therefore constitutes a rebutting defeater.

[25] I thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

[26] Apuleius appears to use the term 'god' as interchangeable with 'supernatural agent'.

[27] This is less clear for the practice of making offerings. However, making offerings is a way of showing reverence or respect and addressing the gods in this regard. Therefore, subjects who make offerings are also addressing the gods in some respect and therefore also communicating with the gods.

[28] Apuleius calls these intermediary beings 'daemons'. As Benjamin McCraw and Robert Arp note, the term 'daemon' did not have an intrinsic connection to evil according to the ancient Greeks (McCraw and Arp 2017).

[29] The monotheistic worldview discussed in the remainder of this section is common among adherents of Abrahamic faiths. Most of the examples are drawn from these faiths.

[30] See, for example, Matthew 7: 8, Job 22: 27.

[31] See, for example, Genesis 16: 7–14, Numbers 20: 16.

[32] See: Luke 1: 26–28.

[33] An anonymous reviewer argued that using messengers to avoid inducing fear foregoes the fact that some intermediary beings, such as demons or fallen angels, induce a lot of fear in humans. While some NTSAs can surely induce fear, a defender could respond that this was never the intention of an omnibenevolent God. NTSAs causing fear may be the result of God allowing NTSAs freedom, or they may have some other purpose.

[34] Peter Williams made a similar argument in favor of the existence of angels. He argues that the authority of Jesus and the Bible provide positive reasons to accept the existence of angels (Williams 2006). Unlike the argument defended here, his argument relies on the faith-based authority of the Christian Bible.

[35] See, for example, Sura 72.

[36] E.g., Ramayana. Book 3, chp. 31.

[37] The last two examples may be problematic, as not all strands of Shinto and Buddhism have clear beliefs in God. It is also not clear whether both can be regarded as reports of revelations.

[38] Bultmann defended his claim as applied to the Bible. The idea can, however, be expanded to other sacred scriptures as well.

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Article

On Angels, Demons, and Ghosts: Is Justified Belief in Spiritual Entities Possible?

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Abstract: Belief in the existence of spiritual entities is an integral part of many people's religious worldview. Angels appear, demons possess, ghosts haunt. But is belief that such entities exist justified? If not, are there conditions in which it would be? I will begin by showing why, once one clearly understands how to infer the best explanation, it is obvious that neither stories nor personal encounters can provide sufficient evidence to justify belief in spiritual entities. After responding to objections to similar arguments I have published in the past, I will go on to show that there is at least an imaginable circumstance in which belief in spiritual entities would be justified but then point out that it is not reasonable to think that such conditions will ever be met. In short, if such entities were real, it would be theoretically possible to demonstrate their existence scientifically, and in doing so, one could make belief in their existence justified. But doing so would require and entail a scientific revolution equivalent to proving that the Earth is flat.

Keywords: ghosts; demons; angels; spiritual entities; inference to the best explanation; the scientific method; the criteria of adequacy; methodological naturalism; the supernatural

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1. Introduction

Belief in the existence of spiritual entities (immaterial entities that interact with the world) is an integral part of many people's religious worldview. Angels appear, demons possess, ghosts haunt. Stories about ghosts (the disembodied souls of deceased humans) are abundant, as are "ghost tours" in supposedly haunted places such as Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and the Edinburgh Vaults. Stories about angels are compiled into books (Anderson 1992), and blockbuster movies, thought to be "based on a true story" about demonic possessions, abound. Indeed, belief in such entities is surprisingly common (Newport and Strausberg 2001). According to the Harris Institute (Harris Interactive 2008), 71% of Americans believe in angels, 59% in the devil/demons[1], and 44% in ghosts. Among those who are religious, the percentages are even higher, with 96% and 88% of those who attend weekly services believing in angels and the devil, respectively, and 57% of all Catholics believing in ghosts.[2]

But is belief that such entities exist justified? If not, are there conditions in which it would be? Elsewhere, I have argued that it is impossible for belief in demons to be justified (Johnson 2017). Here, as a way of exploring whether I should amend my conclusion, I would like to explore whether my conclusion also follows for ghosts and angels. To do so, I will begin by laying out an argument similar to the one I laid out in 2017. It will make clear why neither stories nor personal encounters can provide sufficient evidence to justify belief in spiritual entities. I will then turn to considering objections and whether there is even an *imaginable* circumstance in which belief in spiritual entities would be justified. I will show why there is, but I will also show why it is not reasonable to expect such conditions to ever be met. Consequently, my original conclusion about demons was only *slightly* too strong. What I should have said, and will argue here, is that justified belief in demons—and angels and ghosts—currently does not exist and is *practically* impossible.

To understand what this means, and why it is true, we must first explore the nature of explanation—for when it comes to establishing that something (previously unknown) exists, one must establish that the hypothesis that it exists (and acted) provides the best explanation for some phenomena. As we shall now see, that is (nearly) impossible.

2. What Good Explanations Must Be

Since the goal of explanation is to expand and unify our knowledge, what good explanations must accomplish is exactly that. While good explanations can raise new questions, those questions cannot in principle be unanswerable; similarly, good explanations cannot appeal to the inexplicable. (By definition, that which is inexplicable does not explain anything.) What is more, good explanations should fit with what we already know exists and to be true. As such, all things being equal, explanations should not invoke new entities and assumptions, and they should cohere with what we already have good reason to believe. And, although conditions do not always allow this, a good explanation should be falsifiable—it should make novel, observable predictions—and get those predictions right.

The process of discovering the best explanation is (quite fittingly) called "inference to the best explanation" (IBE).[3] According to Ernan McMullin (1992), it is "the inference that makes science". In my experience, the clearest articulation of IBE comes from Schick and Vaughn (2020). They call it the SEARCH method, and it involves generating competing hypotheses, considering the evidence for them, and then comparing them to "the criteria of adequacy".

1. Testability: the hypothesis makes novel, observable predictions.
2. Fruitfulness: the hypothesis's predictions are accurate.
3. Scope: the hypothesis unifies our knowledge and has explanatory power. (Conversely, if a hypothesis raises unanswerable questions or invokes the inexplicable, it lacks scope.)
4. Simplicity/Parsimony: the hypothesis does not invoke or require extra entities or assumptions beyond what we already know exists or is true. (This is Ockham's Razor.)
5. Conservative: the hypothesis coheres with what we already have good reason to believe.

It is important to note that a hypothesis being better might simply involve it fulfilling a certain criterion more than its competitors. If they meet all other criteria equally well, a hypothesis that has been confirmed by 50 studies is better than a hypothesis that has only been confirmed by one. (Both are fruitful, but the former is more fruitful.)

The best explanation might also just fulfill more criteria than its competitors (rather than all five).[4] For example, because the germ theory of disease proposed the existence of a new kind of entity (germs), it was not simple; but because of its monumental fruitfulness (it predicted how disease spread) and scope (its ability to explain the cause of disease, how they spread, and why vaccines work), it became accepted. Likewise, Einstein's general theory of relativity was not conservative because it conflicted with (well-established) Newtonian physics; but it became the accepted theory when it proved to be more fruitful and wide-scoping than Newton's theories by correctly predicting and explaining things Newton's theories could not (such as the apparent location of a star near the sun during an eclipse and the perihelion of the planet Mercury). Indeed, if conservatism was always required, scientific knowledge could not progress. Likewise, in a way, quantum theory is not wide-scoping, because it raises seemingly unanswerable questions (or, at least, questions that have yet to be answered); but its monumental success at making accurate predictions in controlled experimental conditions, and the way it coheres with everything we know about how light, electrons, and other subatomic particles behave, has made it (arguably) the most widely accepted theory in all of science.[5]

In fact, not even testability and fruitfulness are required for a hypothesis to be the best among the alternatives. If you have two competing hypotheses but neither is testable (perhaps because they are about events in the past that would have left no presently available evidence), neither can be fruitful. (A hypothesis that makes no predictions cannot make correct predictions.) However, in such a situation, one hypothesis can still

be preferable to another. For example, the hypothesis that "Aliens planted perfectly faked evidence to fool us into thinking that the human species originated 200,000 years ago, when in fact it was seeded by those aliens 6000 years ago" cannot be tested. Since it predicts perfectly faked evidence, it makes the same prediction as the "Humanity is 200,000 years old" hypothesis. Still, the latter hypothesis is preferable because (a) it is simpler (it does not invoke extra entities and assumptions, such as aliens and super-advanced technology), and (b) it is more wide-scoping (it does not raise unanswerable questions about why or how the aliens accomplished such a thing).[6] Hypotheses should be tested if possible, and all other things being equal, the explanation that makes the most successful predictions is best; but neither testability nor fruitfulness are required for an explanation to be the best among the alternatives.

On some occasions, it will be debatable which hypothesis among those in competition is the best. For example, Bohm's pilot wave interpretation of quantum mechanics is monumentally unconservative (because it violates relativity's law regarding faster-than-light signaling), while Hugh Evert's multiverse interpretation is monumentally un-parsimonious (because it suggests the existence of a vast multiverse). (See Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011, pp. 153–66). Which "crime" is worse? Which criterion is more important in this circumstance? It is not clear. What is clear, however, is that when a hypothesis fails on *all fronts*—when it is untestable, unfruitful, un-parsimonious, un-conservative, and not wide-scoping—by definition it cannot be the best explanation. As I shall now show, this is (almost) inevitably true of the hypothesis that spiritual entities exist.

3. Why Stories of Spiritual Entities Cannot Justify Belief

In order for belief in spiritual entities to be justified, and not merely a matter of faith, one must have a good reason to believe they exist—and such a reason could only come from invoking them as an explanation for some event or fact.[7] And usually, when it comes to spiritual beings, what they are invoked to explain are sightings, possessions, hauntings, and healings.[8] Generally, however, people do not experience such events themselves. They hear stories of them. Unfortunately, as I shall now show, stories of such occurrences cannot justify belief in spiritual entities.

First of all, as I showed in 2017, all of the most famous stories about demonic possession and hauntings are verifiably untrue. The story on which *The Amityville Horror* is based is now known to be a total fabrication (see Nickell 2004), as are the most famous ghost stories, such as those told by the Fox sisters who claimed to see and communicate with ghosts (see Ashe 2018). The same is also true of stories about angels, such as the one found in the book *The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven*, which was pulled from shelves when Alex Malarkey admitted that his story was all (ironically?) malarky. "I did not die. I did not go to Heaven . . . I said I went to heaven because I thought it would get me attention" (See Chappell 2015).[9]

Second, when the stories are not known fabrications, they almost always turn out to be complete exaggerations with mundane explanations, such as the stories that are the basis for *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*. As I explained in 2017, the boy who served as the basis for *The Exorcist* did exist, but all the elements of the story that have firsthand accounts are mundane, and all the elements that seem incredible are thirdhand. And Anneliese Michel (aka "Emily Rose") was mentally ill, not demon-possessed. The same is true of ghost stories. The "H. Family haunting" (and their coughing fits) turned out to be carbon monoxide poisoning from a faulty furnace (see Labianca 2001), the shivers and apparitions in Vic Tandy's medical lab were the result of infrasound created by a recently installed exhaust fan (see Schick and Vaughn 2020, pp. 282–83), and the "ghost light" of Anson, TX, does not come from the ghost of a grieving mother looking for her son but from the traffic of a distant road (see Ashe 2018). The explanations for "incredible" angelic stories are usually even more obvious, such as when angels are invoked to explain "low probability" occurrences (e.g., near accidents), [10] are mistaken for ordinary flesh and blood people,[11] or are simply a part of a dream.[12]

This brings us, however, to considering stories of spiritual entities for which mundane explanations cannot easily be found. Can that kind of story justify belief? Again, the answer is no.

Simply put, in order for a story to convey justification, there must be good reason to think that it is true; but the fact that a story contains (seemingly) unexplainable[13] events is reason enough to conclude that it is not. To borrow a bit from Hume (Hume [1748] 2000), since the entirety of science and my previous experience tells me that people on Earth do not float in the air for extended periods, if someone tells me they saw someone on the street do so, the entirety of science and my previous experience justifies the belief that the story is not true (and the "word" of another person cannot outweigh that). I might not be able to deductively prove that a story did not happen, but thinking the inability to prove something false is a reason to think it is true commits the "appeal to ignorance fallacy". In essence, stories with (seemingly) unexplainable events discredit themselves.

To put the point more precisely, when any such story is told, there are at least two explanations: (1) the story is true or (2) the person who originally told the story was either lying or mistaken. Given what good explanations must achieve, the second kind of explanation will always be better because it will always better fit the criteria of adequacy. It will not, for example, require the extra assumption that spiritual entities exist; it only requires what we already know exist: lies and mistakes. So, by definition, "spiritual entity" explanations will always be less simple. The lying or mistaken hypothesis will also have wide scope (i.e., explanatory power), as it can not only explain spiritual entity stories but a host of other such stories as well: alien abductions, UFO sightings, Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, etc. The spiritual entity hypothesis, on the other hand, has no scope because it raises unanswerable questions about what immaterial spiritual objects are made of[14] and how they can interact with the physical world.[15] So, to say that a spiritual entity caused anything is simply to invoke the inexplicable and thus does not expand our knowledge.

This last point deserves elaboration. Consider ghosts. What are ghosts made of? If they are wholly immaterial—literally made of nothing—how can we see them? To be seen, something must give off photons, and something made of nothing cannot give off photons. Furthermore, if they are wholly immaterial, how can they interact with the world (e.g., move objects)? Not only are they made of nothing, but to do so would require them to violate laws about the conservation of energy.[16] In reply, one might suggest that they are only immaterial in the sense that they are not made of physical matter; perhaps they are made of something else. Suggestions have been made—"lifetrons", "ectoplasm"—but the nature of such "stuff" is completely undefined, all attempts at verification have been shown to be fake, there still is no explanation of how it could give off photos or interact with physical matter, and attempts to describe it have been vague and unhelpful. ("Finer than atomic energies" is not a useful description) And then there is the question of where ghosts obtain their clothes. Although funny, this is a serious problem for the ghost hypothesis. If ghosts are the disembodied souls of the deceased, they should be naked; that is how we are born. Yet nearly every ghost story and experience describe the ghost wearing clothes. But clothes do not have souls. So, from where do ghost clothes come? The ghost hypothesis cannot account for this (without introducing even more extra assumptions, such as ghost clothes stores). The hypothesis that ghost stories are fabricated or the result of the environment playing tricks on people's senses, however, accounts for it perfectly. "Ghosts" are figments of our imagination, and we see them as wearing clothes because we are used to seeing persons wearing clothes (See Schick and Vaughn 2020, pp. 279–80).

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the "lying or mistaken" hypothesis is conservative while "spiritual entity" hypotheses are not. Let us first address the former. The idea that people lie and make up stories does not contradict anything we already have good reason to believe; indeed, we know that people have carried out exactly that when it comes to spiritual entities. We also know that our perception, memory, and reason can very easily lead us astray; indeed, how readily and easily they do so is not fully appreciated. As a result, people can be convinced "beyond all doubt" that what they saw was really a

spiritual entity, when in reality they were the victim of their own natural limitations. As I put it in 2017:

> Personal experience is notoriously unreliable; our senses are easily fooled and concoct false sensations when presented with vague stimuli. We also fail to recognize things like the ideomotor and autokinetic effect and that we often simply experience what we expect. Likewise, memories are easily confabulated; we add to and subtract from them readily, without even realizing it, in very grandiose ways. The fallibility of eyewitness testimony has been well established. In fact, the surer the eyewitness feels that his or her memory is accurate, the less likely it is. Moreover, a host of cognitive biases constantly lead our reasoning astray: confirmation bias, availability error, probability miscalculations, appealing to ignorance, subjective validation, anthropomorphic bias, the Forer effect, and so on. (p. 177)

The implications of this are easy to see in many stories about supposed angel encounters, which demonstrate how easily fooled our senses are and how unreliable our memory is. Take the story of the "minister's wife" who tried to pass a coal truck on a two-lane road, only to find another semi barreling down on her. She says, "as the truck approached her, it melted from view", as if it just disappeared; she even insists the other four people in the car saw it too (Anderson 1992, p. 40). Believers will see this as corroborating evidence, but those who study such things will not only see an example of how grandiosely our senses can mislead us but will see a prime example of memory conformity: how repeated storytelling can change not only someone's memory but also the memories of others (see Barber and Mather 2014).

Other stories demonstrate how unreliable our instinctive reasoning can be. Take Father John who, during wartime in Peking, hailed a pedicab. Its driver refused to go straight as instructed, taking instead a much longer route, only to have the Father's preferred route hit by a bomb (Anderson 1992, pp. 49–50). The Father concluded that the driver was (inspired by?) an angel, but he simply mistook the odds of how likely the pedicab would have actually been where the bomb fell, mistook how highly likely such an event was given that bombs were already going off outside the city, and did not appreciate the fact that the driver probably knew that main populated roads were not safe during attacks.

Let us now address why "spiritual entity" hypotheses are *not* conservative. Take ghosts. The hypothesis that ghosts exist is monumentally unconservative because ghosts are supposed to be the disembodied souls of deceased humans, yet the notion that souls exist has been effectively refuted by both science and philosophy. As I explained in detail in my 2013 article:

(1) The arguments for the soul fail (thus we have good reason to conclude they do not exist because the relevant existential burden of proof has not been met).
(2) The philosophical arguments against the soul (rooted in the problem of downwards causation and the violation of physical laws) are persuasive.
(3) Neuroscience clearly indicates that the mind is dependent upon the brain for its existence (and thus it cannot float away from the body in a "soul" upon death).

So, the notion that ghosts exist stands contrary to that which is clearly established, both scientifically and philosophically. Indeed, the same is true for angels and demons; given that neuroscience has established such a strict dependence between mind and brain—minds cannot exist without brains—the very concept of a conscious (minded) disembodied "spiritual" entity, which would lack a physical body and brain, stands contrary to well-established scientific discoveries.

And so, when one hears a story about an encounter with a spiritual entity, that story cannot serve as adequate justification for believing in spiritual entities. The hypothesis that the story is not true, either because it was fabricated or because perceptions, memory, or instinctive reasoning led the original storyteller astray, will always be the better explanation.

4. Seeing Is (Not) Believing: Why Personal Experience Cannot Justify Belief

The conclusion of the previous section is reinforced by Hume's conclusion that testimony can never justify belief in the miraculous.[17] As such, some readers may have found it obvious. It cannot be *that* obvious, otherwise published collections of such stories would not exist (See Tindy 2017). Still, in reply, such readers might insist: *Stories may not provide sufficient evidence, but personal experience can. If you see something that you cannot explain during what seems to be a haunting, possession, or angelic visit for yourself, you are then justified in believing a spiritual being is responsible.*

This line of reasoning, however, is fatally flawed, and the reason why may be obvious. Just as someone else's senses, memory, and reasoning can lead them to believe they saw a spiritual entity when they did not, so can yours. Granted, your experience provides *you* with stronger evidence than *someone else*'s story; but the hypothesis that your senses, memory, or reasoning fooled you will still always be the more adequate explanation, especially when you think you saw something (seemingly) unexplainable.

To understand why, consider the experience of seeing a good magic trick. Take Penn & Teller's "Magic Bullet Catch", where they load uniquely marked bullets into pistols, fire them at each other across a stage, and then each spit out the other's uniquely marked bullet from their mouth. Not even the best magicians in the world have been able to figure out how they perform it. But when I saw it, I did not conclude that Penn & Teller actually caught bullets in their teeth or used "magic" powers to make it appear so. I simply concluded that there is a natural explanation—a trick—that I cannot fathom or detect. My senses have led me astray and my reasoning has let me down. This is the best explanation. Unlike "it's magic", this explanation does not invoke extra entities (such as magic powers), does not violate natural laws (as catching bullets in your teeth would), and it (roughly) explains basically every other magic trick I cannot figure out. "I'm ignorant" will always be a better explanation than "they have magic powers". And in drawing this conclusion, I am not being stubborn or irrational; I am simply avoiding the mystery-therefore-magic fallacy, a variety of appealing to ignorance which concludes that one's inability to explain something justifies the conclusion that supernatural forces are involved (see Johnson 2018b). "You can't prove that it has a natural explanation by figuring it out, therefore it has none and is magic".

In reply, one might suggest I am violating Richard Swinburne's principle of credulity: in the absence of direct contrary evidence, if something seems to be the case, we are justified in believing it to be the case (see Swinburne 1991, p. 303). So, if something seems like magic—or like it is caused by a spiritual entity—one can rightly conclude it is. This suggestion neglects, however, a lesson learned in the last section. The fact that something seems unexplainable—whether it be a story or an experience—provides sufficient reason to conclude your senses are fooling you. Sure, all things being equal, for everyday matters, your senses are usually good enough. But as soon as you see something that you cannot explain, you know that all things are not equal—it is likely that either your senses are failing and/or you are not in ideal conditions. Even if the experience is repeated, the whole of the rest of your previous experience, which suggests that such things do not happen, serves as evidence that such a thing did not happen; *that* is the "direct evidence to the contrary". Thus, when you see something seemingly unexplainable, it does not violate Swinburne's principle to conclude that your senses led you astray.[18]

As an example, suppose I think I see pink elephants dancing on my desk. The whole of my previous experience and knowledge tells me that such animals do not exist. Since the justification provided by the whole of my previous experience and knowledge far outweighs the justification provided by my senses in the moment, the conclusion that I must draw is that my senses have led me astray—perhaps someone slipped alcohol into my drink, or I am becoming sick or am otherwise compromised (by lack of sleep or food).[19] Even if the experience happens multiple times, the strangeness of the event itself provides evidence that my senses are not reliable during those times.

And so, one's inability to explain what they (thought) they saw during a haunting, exorcism, or angelic visit cannot justify belief in spiritual entities. One's inability to prove something false (e.g., one's inability to prove the supernatural was not involved by finding a natural explanation) does not justify the belief that it is true. After all, when Penn & Teller see a magic trick they cannot explain on their show *Fool Us*, they never conclude that the magician in question has magic powers; they always realize their ignorance is the better explanation.[20]

5. Replying to an Objection: What about Exorcisms?

In response to my 2017 chapter, Marcus Hunt (2020) argued that, during exorcisms, it is possible for the exorcist (i.e., the attending priest) to be justified in believing that a demon is speaking to them through the (supposedly) possessed person and thus be justified in believing that demons exist. Clearly inspired by Swinburne's principle of credulity, Hunt argues that as long as defeaters (convincing reasons against concluding that a demon is speaking) are absent, "the exorcist may treat as reliable the process by which he comes to believe that testimony is offered by a demon" (Hunt 2020, p. 256). Since, Hunt argues, "[i]n many cases of exorcism, defeaters are absent", he concludes that there are some cases in which belief in demons is justified (Hunt 2020, p. 256).

If he is right, a similar argument could be put forth for belief in ghosts and angels. Both supposedly speak during some spiritual encounters—Paul was supposedly saved from a falling tree by his guardian angel calling his name (see Anderson 1992, pp. 122–24), and The Goldfield Hotel EVP (electronic voice phenomena) supposedly contains the voice of a ghost (see Tindy 2017, pp. 201–9)—so if defeaters are absent in some of these cases too, belief in ghosts and angels could be justified. Unfortunately, Hunt's argument fails on two fronts.

First, Hunt's argument that priests can treat as reliable the process by which they come, during an exorcism, to believe that a demon is speaking to them (through the supposedly possessed person) is faulty. He tries to establish the reliability of what he calls "testifier-identification" ("the process by which one identifies that testimony is being given . . . and identifies by what type of agent testimony is being given") (Hunt 2020, p. 261) by offering common examples in which we successfully use it. We first think text messages are being sent by our spouse, but when they do not make sense, we realize "the autocomplete . . . is encoding nonsense as the phone is 'open' and in their pocket" (Hunt 2020, p. 261). You think your father is asking for a ride from the next room, but then it turns out to be your uncle.

The problem with Hunt's examples is that they all involve being removed from the body of the person (you think is) giving the testimony.[21] If you are not near the person communicating—because you are communicating via text, phone, or even from the next room—it is quite common to come to an erroneous conclusion about who is speaking and then correct it upon receiving further information. There are no such cases, however, where you are in the same room with person X, seeing them speak directly, and at first conclude that person X is speaking but then justifiably conclude that actually some other agent Y is directly speaking through them (by controlling their vocal chords).[22] So, there is no evidence at all that "testifier-identification" is a reliable means by which to detect that one agent is communicating from (for a lack of a better term) "inside" another. But that is what must be the case in order for a priest to be justified in concluding that a demon is speaking to them during an exorcism.

The second problem with Hunt's argument is related. Given that, even when including cases of mistaken identity, the whole of our experience never includes one agent speaking from inside another, even when presented with the evidence seen in an exorcism, the best explanation must be that it is the (supposedly) possessed person that is speaking, not that some second agent is speaking from within them. Whether it be because they are faking, or because of a delusion or mental illness, that is the better explanation for the kind of speech that is seen.[23] That explanation is simpler because it involves fewer assumptions (one rather

than two agents), more conservative because it aligns with well-established knowledge (one agent per body), and more wide-scoping because it does not invoke inexplicable entities (such as demons) or raise unanswerable questions (such as how an immaterial being such as a demon can control a material body).

When it comes to angels and ghosts, the voice heard is usually not coming from another agent, but testifier-identification is still not reliable enough to justify the conclusion that a spiritual entity is talking. In fact, in stories of supposed angel and ghost encounters, the conclusion is always fueled by the previously mentioned mystery-therefore-magic fallacy: "I can't explain where the voice came from, thus it was a ghost/angel". And for the same reasons already articulated, the hypothesis that your senses led you astray, or that you simply are not clever enough to figure out what the voice actually was, will always be the more adequate explanation. What is more, ghost voices almost always come in the form of EVPs, and EVPs are not a reliable source of evidence (more on this in the next section).

Hunt also has a reply to the charge that demonic explanations are "theoretically unvirtuous" (i.e., inadequate):

> [I]t is only on the assumption of a naturalist worldview that the demonic explanation is theoretically unvirtuous. If one begins with a traditional Christian worldview the demonic explanation will not be theoretically unvirtuous. With respect to conservatism and parsimony, the traditional Christian who posits demons as an explanation for possession and exorcism will not be positing types of entities that do not already appear in his or her ontology (and so are not objectionably "queer") but rather will be making use of entities already posited. (p. 265)

But here Hunt fundamentally misunderstands the criteria in question. Take parsimony (i.e., simplicity). An un-parsimonious explanation multiplies entities or processes beyond necessity, introducing ones outside of what is already *known* to exist. We know that agents speak from inside their own bodies but do not know of agents speaking from within the body of another; thus, the demonic explanation is un-parsimonious, by definition. And the same holds, of course, for angels and ghosts, since we do not know that they exist either. Christians/true believers may already *believe* in such entities, but to grant them knowledge of such entities would beg the question, since the existence of such entities is the issue at hand. And since *knowing* that spiritual entities exist would be necessary in order for a theory that requires them to be parsimonious, all spiritual entity hypotheses are un-parsimonious.

Indeed, understanding the role of simplicity as Hunt does makes simplicity useless as a criterion. One of the major marks against all manner of demonstrable pseudosciences—psychic powers, homeopathy, Bigfoot, crop circles, morphic fields, N-rays, pyrotrons, etc.[24]—is that they introduce new entities (or forces) beyond what is already *known* to exist. The claim that aliens cause crop circles lacks simplicity; and it would be obviously intellectually vacuous to try to circumvent that criticism by saying "Well, I already believe in UFOs". Simplicity is a criterion partly because of what Bertrand Russell (1952) demonstrated with his celestial teapot example: the burden of proof (i.e., the requirement to provide evidence) lies on the believer. If you want to introduce a new entity (such as a tiny teapot that orbits the sun), the burden is on you to provide the evidence it exists. Until you do, your belief that it exists is unjustified (and others are justified in believing it does not).

As Brown and Key (2019) rightly point out, when it comes to existential matters—matters regarding whether something exists—an absence of evidence *is* evidence of absence. In "kinds of contexts where we could reasonably expect to find evidence if our hypothesis were true, where our methodology is sound, and where we do not obtain positive results", we are justified in concluding that the thing in question does not exist. Predicting but then not seeing a hypothesized planet (Vulcan) closer to the sun than Mercury is good evidence that no such planet exists; the fact that fish lack the neural circuitry necessary to feel pain is good evidence that they do not feel pain. Scientists rightly draw conclusions that things do not exist, based on an absence of evidence for those things, all the time. Granted, an

absence of evidence is not *100% proof* that something does not exist, but as I have already tried to make clear, science never deals with 100% proof. An absence of evidence is good evidence that something does not exist. To try to reverse this and claim that an absence of evidence is not evidence of absence completely misunderstands where the burden for evidence lies in such matters. If you want to believe that Bigfoot exists, the burden is on you to prove that he does—it is not on me to prove that he does not. And pointing out that you already believe does not help you meet this burden. If something's existence is already well-established, invoking it in an explanation does not violate parsimony; but introducing something that lacks good evidence, especially if the existence of that thing is the issue at hand, does.

Something similar can be said about Hunt's misunderstanding of conservatism. Something is conservative if it does not contradict that which is *already well-established*; it is unconservative if it does. So, yes, the existence of spiritual entities aligns with the *beliefs* of the priests,[25] but their belief does not make their spiritual entity hypothesis conservative; it needs to be well-established by other evidence. Indeed, the fact that it contradicts well-established laws such as the conservation of energy and the causal closure of the physical, actively makes the spiritual entity hypothesis unconservative. What is more, the unconservative nature of the spiritual entity hypothesis is reinforced by the fact that it invokes the centuries-old unsolved philosophical problem of how *immaterial* mental events can causally affect *material* objects such as brains.[26] In fact, it is not even clear how immaterial objects, such as a demon or a ghost, can be "inside" anything (such as a person or a house) given that immaterial objects must necessarily lack all physical properties, including location.

In response, Hunt says that such philosophical problems and arguments do not bother him because, in the same way that he does not find "powerful philosophical arguments for moral anti-realism" to be a reason to doubt that "murder is morally wrong", he does not think a lack of "a good . . . metaphysical account of how the mind arises" undermines "our everyday beliefs about minds" (Hunt 2020, pp. 268–69). Consequently, Hunt also does not think that the philosophical problems with demons should deter belief in demons (or, presumably, ghosts and angels). But there are two things to say in response.

First, if convincing philosophical arguments and problems to which one has no answer are not reason to change one's belief, what then is the point of doing philosophy? If one admits that the philosophical arguments against X are good, and that one has no way to answer them, then one should no longer believe X, even if one's intuition (or sensory experience) tells one that X is true. One of the first lessons of philosophy and critical thinking is that intuition and sense experience are far less reliable than is often thought; so, if the sober, fact-driven arguments suggest that X does not exist, your intuition that it does cannot override them. My sense experience and intuition tell me that my desk is solid and black, but science has revealed that solid objects are mostly empty space, and Locke showed that color is a secondary property (that only exists in the mind). Consequently, I reject the idea my experience and intuition suggest.

The second problem with Hunt's argument is that the comparison is not apt. Take my belief that minds exist; this is not based on intuition. I have direct awareness of my mind's existence; indeed, as Descartes argued, if I know nothing else, I know my mind exists. So sure, if (contrary to fact) I am not able to answer the arguments of eliminative materialists, that does not mean I am forced to conclude that minds do not exist. But the kind of direct knowledge I have of my mind's existence is nothing like the kind of knowledge that an exorcist supposedly has, during an exorcism, that a demon is talking to him. At best, the latter is a general impression in the heat of the moment. So, the fact that I can still believe in my mind despite the philosophical arguments does not mean that I can still believe in spiritual entities despite their philosophical problems.

Hunt also misunderstands the criterion of scope. He thinks the demon hypothesis has wide scope because "the traditional Christian who posits demons as an explanation for exorcism might also posit them as an explanation for the occurrence of much natural and

moral evil . . . as well as . . . some of the paranormal happenings that Johnson mentions" (Hunt 2020, p. 265). But this argument endorses an erroneous understanding of scope similar to one engaged by conspiracy theorists. I will let Schick and Vaughn (2020) explain.

> The scope of a theory is determined by the amount of diverse phenomena it explains, and conspiracy theories seem to have almost unlimited scope. The claims "the Freemasons (the communists, the CIA, The Bavarian Illuminati, the Jews, the Reptilians, and so on) did it" can be invoked to explain almost anything. But unless the conspiracy theorists have sufficient evidence to indicate that their group (rather than some other) did it, and some idea of how their group did it, their conspiracy theory explains very little. Recall the gremlin theory of the bridge collapse discussed in Chapter 6 [in which, to explain why a bridge collapsed, someone invoked a gremlin with ray gun whose powers and workings are incomprehensible]. The claim that the bridge collapse was caused by a gun-toting gremlin is not one that any rational person would take seriously because there is no evidence that a gremlin (rather than something else) did it, and the nature of the gremlin's ray gun is left completely unspecified. So to claim that a particular group of conspirators did something is no better than saying a gremlin did it unless the evidence can best be explained on the assumption that the specified group did it by means at their disposal. (pp. 287–88)

Like a conspiracy theory, the activity of spiritual entities could explain damn well anything; but unless it also comes with an actual (plausible, understandable) explanation of how the spiritual entity caused the thing in question and evidence that it did, the spiritual entity explanation is no better than a conspiracy theory. As I pointed out above, invoking the inexplicable does not actually explain anything; so, spiritual entity explanations, on their face, cannot have wide scope.[27]

So, demonic explanations, on their face, lack simplicity, conservatism, and scope; they thus pale in comparison to other explanations for what one sees in an exorcism, such as mental illness. To this, Hunt also has responses. First, exorcists screen their potential subjects for mental illness before exorcising them, thus supposedly ruling it out as an explanation. He thinks that this counters my argument that the exorcists commit the mystery-therefore-magic fallacy (when they conclude that a demon caused the supposedly possessed person's behavior because they could not find a natural explanation). But if Hunt understood the fallacy, he might have caught his error.

As I explained above, the mystery-therefore-magic fallacy is a fallacy because magic explanations (primarily because they appeal to the inexplicable) will always be inferior to their natural competitors, even when the competing natural explanation is something as plain as "I'm ignorant—there is a natural explanation, I was simply unable to find it". Even if I cannot figure out Penn & Teller's "magic bullet catch" after years of study, I will not be justified in believing they have magic powers because, by definition, the hypothesis that they have magic powers will lack simplicity, scope, and conservatism. Invoking the inexplicable does not explain anything.

To make his point, Hunt invokes an example where, to detect a rarer disease, a doctor first screens for a more common disease (that presents in a similar way). Without the first test, a positive test for the rarer disease would be inconclusive; but if the patient tests negative for the common disease first, a positive test for the second will be more conclusive. That is all well and good, but the analogy does not work because the germs that cause diseases are not inexplicable immaterial entities. Notice that, if the test for both diseases came back negative—indeed, if the doctor ran every test they knew and they all came back negative—the doctor would not conclude "Well, I guess you have a demon". A hitherto unknown medical condition would still be the better explanation. Likewise, even if an exorcist had a professional screen for every mental illness they knew and found nothing, a hitherto unknown mental condition would still be the better explanation for the behavior of the (supposedly) possessed person. Otherwise, they are just appealing to ignorance.[28]

The other response Hunt has to my argument (that naturalistic explanations will always be the best explanation for what an exorcist witnesses) is that it does not matter; even when X is the better explanation, that does not mean that it cannot be rational to accept some other explanation Y. To attempt to prove this, he tells a story about a (usually crime-free) village that is struck by a crime wave. In the previous three incidents, the homeowners reported the criminal as having an Australian accent. But when someone breaks into your house, you hear them as having an American accent. What should you conclude? Hunt says that the "explanation that the burglar in your house also had an Australian accent which you misheard perhaps has a wider scope, is more parsimonious, and more conservative, than the explanation that there are two international burglars on the loose in your village. Nevertheless [i.e., despite the fact that it's not the best explanation], it seems reasonable for you to continue believing that the burglar in your house had an American accent" (Hunt 2020, p. 266).

The astute reader may already have detected the error. Hunt thinks that the plain evidence of your senses can "override" the criteria and make rejecting the better explanation rational. But what this additional evidence actually does is *change which explanation is the better one*. Yes, one burglar is simpler than two, but the one burglar hypothesis now has to either include the fact that the burglar changed his accent and explain why (which would affect its scope and simplicity), or it has to account for how or why you heard an Australian accent as an American one (which would affect its conservatism, in that it contradicts what you have good reason to believe about your ability to hear accents). Now, in reality, which is the better explanation—(a) one robber who changes accents, (b) one robber and a homeowner who misheard the accent, or (c) two robbers with different accents—is debatable. But my point still stands: Hunt's story is not one in which one's personal experience provides a reason to dismiss the best explanation. It is one in which personal experience provides additional evidence that might change which explanation is the best. It is never rational to reject the explanation which, given the available evidence and considerations, is undeniably the best one.

What is more, Hunt's "village crime spree" thought experiment does not establish that exorcists/true believers are justified in believing that a spiritual entity is speaking to them. Why? Because their perception that one is speaking to them is nothing like one's perception of accents. Even if a personal experience could, hypothetically, give one reason to reject what is the better explanation, that personal experience would have to be of the direct, clear, and undeniable kind. An exorcist's impression that a demon is speaking to them is not, and neither is one's impression of an angel's or ghost's voice. (Usually they involve the person concluding, after the fact, that what they heard came from a spiritual entity.)

6. "So You're Saying There's a Chance!"

So, the argument of my original paper, which concluded that justified belief in demons is impossible, applies to ghosts and angels as well. But is it really impossible? Are there not even conceivable conditions in which belief in spiritual entities would be justified? I saw something recently that made me rethink my previous position. No, I did not see a ghost; I saw the latest *Ghostbusters* movie. Strange, I know—but while watching I realized that, even given the above arguments, if I lived in a universe where what happened in *Ghostbusters* actually happened, I could (should!) justifiably conclude that ghosts exist. Why? In short, because in the *Ghostbusters* universe, the ghost hypothesis's fruitfulness helps it overcome its initial inadequacy, thus making it rational to believe. Let me elaborate.

As we have seen, in order for belief in a spiritual entity to be justified, that such an entity caused something would have to be the best explanation for some event or fact. The criteria by which we rank explanations are those that such supernatural explanations necessarily lack, such as scope (because they appeal to the inexplicable), simplicity (because they involve extra entities), and conservatism (because they violate physical laws). They also generally lack fruitfulness because it is difficult to test them in any kind of repeatable way. But that does not mean that testing them is impossible. And if it were possible, and

the spiritual explanation made enough fruitful predictions, it could be enough to overcome the hurdle created by its initial inadequacy.

Recall that the germ theory of disease was initially inadequate; it introduced a new entity, did not articulate how germs cause disease, and conflicted with what we thought caused disease at the time. We could not even directly observe them because they were too small. The theory overcame all this, however, by eventually making other kinds of successful predictions, such as handwashing reducing death rates in maternity wards (see Loudon 2013). Later, it explained the previously unexplained, such as why exposure to cowpox could make one immune to smallpox (see Boylston 2013). Later, it predicted the success of vaccines and proposed mechanisms by which germs cause disease. Eventually, we realized that it did not conflict with anything that was actually well-established, and we even observed germs directly (thus negating any worries about the theory's simplicity). And this all happened in ways that were not private but checkable and observable by others working in the field. Indeed, unlike with the evidence for spiritual entities, the evidence became more convincing and obvious over time. This story is oversimplified of course, but the point remains: even if a theory starts out as inadequate, it can overcome this disadvantage if the theory is true and the right interested parties perform enough of the right kind of work to prove it.

In the same way, if (for example) ghosts actually existed, it would be possible for the hypothesis that they exist to overcome its initial hurdle of inadequacy. Stories and personal experience would not cut it. But if one was able to successfully predict their appearance and activity in a way that is observable and checkable by others—if one was able to construct an understanding of what they were made of and a mechanism by which they interacted with the world—then belief in ghosts could become justified.

Think of the work Egon Spengler conducts in the original *Ghostbusters*. He develops a theory about what ghosts are made of (ectoplasm) and sees physical evidence of it, which he collects and tests. He develops instruments that can detect it, and when they do, he sees apparitions, which themselves have a physical effect on the world, both of which other people can directly see. He even develops a method for successfully catching ghosts. I know that, in the movie, he, Peter, Ray, and Winston are outcasts in the scientific community; but in the real world, Egon would publish his research, it would be checked and confirmed by others, and his theory's monumental fruitfulness and explanatory power would overcome its initial implausibility. It would take time, but just like with the germ theory of disease, Egon's ghost theory would eventually be accepted.

In other words—if ghosts (or any spiritual entities) were real, it could be possible to develop, in a scientific way, a theory of their existence and show that it was adequate, that their activity actually is the best explanation for events in the world. That is not to say that it would necessarily be possible if they existed; spiritual entities might always hide when you try to reveal them.[29] But if they behaved in consistent ways, revealing (and thus justifying belief in) their existence would at least be logically and scientifically possible.

True believers might insist that the ghost hypothesis has already cleared this bar, but it has not. The tools and methods ghost enthusiasts use are not scientific at all. Take EMF (electromagnetic frequency) meters, which supposedly reveal the existence of ghosts. In reality, EMF meters only detect varying electromagnetic fields; and not only do such fields exist everywhere and fluctuate for various reasons, but there is no independent evidence that they are emitted by ghosts. The same goes for devices that detect varying temperatures or non-visible light (e.g., infrared or ultraviolet). Indeed, any detection device must be calibrated with a sample of what you are trying to detect; the instrument must only respond in the presence of that sample. Since there are no verified samples of ghosts, no "ghost detection" device can be calibrated and thus be trustworthy.

Other detection methods, such as dowsing rods and pendulums—which supposedly move at the bidding of spirits—are easily explained by the ideomotor effect: indetectable alterations in one's hands that are exaggerated by the device and make it seem as if they are moving on their own (see Olson et al. 2017). My students are always amazed at how easy it

is to fake such things—although, because ideomotor movements are unconscious, one need not even be aware of the effect in order to "make" dowsing rods and pendulums work.

Other detection methods, such as EVPs, rely on psychological effects such as audio pareidolia. Pareidolia happens when a person takes a vague stimulus and imposes a pattern on it, such as a face in a Martian mountain or the Virgin Mary in a grilled cheese sandwich. Audio pareidolia happens when words or messages are heard in vague noises even though the messages are not actually there. It almost always involves "captioning" the noise with what those presenting it want you to hear so that the captions trick your brain into organizing the stimuli in the suggested way (see Schick and Vaughn 2020, pp. 111–14). (When I play Beatles songs backwards for my students, they only hear garbled nonsense—until I reveal the captions.) In ghost hunting shows, they place tape recorders in rooms, turn the mics all the way up, and then playback the recorded static at high volume. The mics pick up every stray sound, and when coupled with captions, you can basically make any anomaly say whatever you want it to say. So, the message is not really there; it is being imposed by suggestion.

People often cite pictures and videos as evidence of ghosts as well. But if the supposed ghosts in them are not simply the result of visual pareidolia, the photos are literal fakes. Indeed, fake ghost photographs are almost as old as photography itself (see Radford 2011). Given today's video and picture editing technology, no matter how convincing any photographic evidence of ghosts seems, without corroborating checkable evidence, the more adequate explanation will always be that the photo was photoshopped.

Some have argued that, despite the fact that so many have been debunked, the mere large number of ghost stories out there serves as evidence that ghosts exist. As Catholic scholar Peter Kreft put it, when arguing for the existence of ghosts, "The existence of [a great deal of] counterfeit money strongly argues for the existence of real money somewhere" (Townsend 2013). But as I explained in 2018, this line of reasoning invokes something called The Countless-Counterfeits Fallacy, where a large number of bad pieces of evidence is supposed to increase the chance that there is a good one. It does not.

> Simply put, the true believer mistakenly thinks that whether or not a piece of evidence is good is a matter of chance, so that the more pieces of evidence there are, the more likely it is that one is reliable. . . . But this is not how evidence works. I can't pile up a thousand pieces of bad evidence that you committed a murder and claim it's likely that one proves you did. Whether a piece of evidence is good is not a matter of chance; it either is or it isn't. In fact, the more evidence of a particular kind of phenomenon I debunk with a certain kind of explanation, the more likely it is that all such evidence is explained by that kind of explanation. (Johnson 2018a, p. 142.)

After you debunk a few magic tricks, you know they all have natural explanations. In the same way, given that even the most famous and convincing evidence for ghosts falls under the slightest bit of scrutiny, we can justifiably conclude that all such stories are explainable in natural terms.

So, although it is possible for it to do so, the ghost hypothesis has not cleared the incredibly high evidential bar set by its initial inadequacy, and so it is with demons and angels too. Indeed, the evidence for them does not even have the pseudoscientific sheen that EMFs and EVPs give it; it is all just stories and personal experience. That is not to say it is impossible; I have admitted that there is at least an imaginable situation in which belief in spiritual entities would be justified. But to do so would be akin to proving the world is flat.

In fact, that is a good analogy.

Like with spiritual entities, the best evidence we have that the Earth is flat is our personal experience. Go outside, look around—it seems flat. The evidence we have that it is round is all scientific (although some such evidence can be gathered by ordinary persons, see Schottlender (2016)). But that scientific evidence is so overwhelming, and the adequacy of the flat Earth theory so pathetic, that the evidence of our senses is completely outweighed

and the belief that the world is flat is utterly irrational. That is not to say that I cannot imagine a way that one could (despite all current evidence) prove it true, if it actually were. But that scenario would involve proving false highly confirmed and peer-reviewed data, proving that countless pictures from space were faked, explaining away countless lines of evidence, proving giant conspiracy theories true, and countless other nearly impossible tasks. It would make for a pretty silly movie, and if it did happen it would dwarf all previous scientific revolutions.

Likewise, the evidence that science has provided for materialism (and thus against things such as spiritual entities) and the laws that govern the physical world (which suggest that only physical things have physical causes) are so overwhelming, and the adequacy of the spiritual entity hypothesis so pathetic, that belief in spiritual entities is utterly irrational. That is not to say that I cannot imagine how they could be proven to exist, if they did. But this revelation would overturn so much established science, that it would dwarf all previous scientific revolutions.

Indeed, realizing how high the evidential standard is makes crystal clear why things such as the experience of an exorcist, or Tidy's and Anderson's collection of ghost and angel stories, cannot clear the bar. Consider that, even when the multimillion-dollar OPERA particle detector measured neutrinos as traveling faster than the speed of light (in violation of Einstein's relativity), its operating team did not conclude they had (even though they could find no error in the experiment). They went to the scientific community and asked them to find the error (see Brumfiel 2012). It was eventually found, but the point still stands: if the checked and confirmed measurement of something such as an OPERA particle detector cannot overturn one simple fact in relativity, what hope does the personal, uncheckable experience of those who think they have seen spiritual entities have in overturning the entire scientific community's understanding of the world? "I/they saw it with my/their own eyes" just is not going to cut it.

7. Is Scientific Proof of Spiritual Entities a Contradiction in Terms?

I have argued that justified belief in spiritual entities is at least *theoretically* possible. Now, given their initial lack of adequacy, the evidential burden is so high that it is *practically* impossible to be justified in believing them, but since there are at least imaginable circumstances in which such hypotheses could be testable and fruitful, that burden could (hypothetically) be overcome. It has not; and the fact that it has not is sufficient reason to conclude that such entities do not exist. But it is at least logically possible.

This is tantamount to suggesting that it is logically possible for there to be scientific evidence of spiritual entities. To some, this might seem to be a contradiction in terms. Methodological naturalism—the idea that science demands, by definition, that only natural explanations be considered (and thus only natural explanations can be confirmed by science)—is quite common. Boudry et al. (2010) elaborate on how common it is by pointing out that:

> In the Kitzmiller vs. Dover case on the teaching of IDC [Intelligent Design Creationism] in biology lessons, Judge John E. Jones denied the status of science to IDC because it "fails to meet the essential ground rules that limit science to testable, natural explanations". . . . Based on the testimonies of Kenneth Miller, Robert Pennock and John Haught, Jones stated that "This rigorous attachment to 'natural' explanations is an essential attribute to science by definition and by convention". . . . Philosopher of science Michael Ruse, among others [Maienschein, Miller, Scott, Strahler] agrees that science "by definition deals only with the natural" . . . The position . . . is also endorsed by the National Academy of Sciences in their official booklet Teaching about Evolution and the Nature of Science: ["]Because science is limited to explaining the natural world by means of natural processes, it cannot use supernatural causation in its explanations. Similarly, science is precluded from making statements about supernatural forces because these are outside its provenance. (p. 229)

If this is an accurate description of the method of science, "scientific evidence of ghosts" is an oxymoron. Ghosts are outside its provenance. They are not, however, because methodological naturalism is not an accurate description of the scientific method.

First, the common reasons given for thinking that scientists must embrace methodological naturalism are inaccurate. For example, the fact the supernatural *could* behave in inconsistent unpredictable ways does not mean that its existence cannot be revealed. It means that true believers can always make ad hoc excuses for why it is not. "The tests didn't reveal the ghost because the ghost didn't want to be discovered".[30] But it is possible to make ad hoc excuses for anything.[31] The fact remains, if the supernatural existed and acted on the world in a consistent way, its existence could be revealed by scientific methodology.

Second, the motivations for thinking that scientists embrace methodological naturalism are ill-founded. For example, accommodationists—those who think that science poses no threat to religion because they are in separate domains—use it to soothe the worries of the religious. They say things such as:

> *Religion and science are not incompatible; you really can be both religiously minded and scientific. It's just that, when you are doing science, you don't consider religious/spiritual hypotheses. You operate as if the supernatural doesn't exist. But that doesn't mean the supernatural doesn't exist. So in your everyday life, like at church, you can operate as if they do.*

But this does not, at all, represent what science can or cannot do. If it did, scientific arguments that God did not create the universe 6000 years ago would not be possible. As I pointed out in 2020, science can and does consistently cast doubt on the existence of the supernatural (e.g., souls, miracles, etc.) (see Johnson 2020a). Indeed, the progress of science has been a steady and consistent march towards disproving supernatural phenomena. We used to think that everything from diseases to earthquakes were caused by the supernatural; thanks to science, we have now rejected those explanations and identified their natural causes. If methodological naturalism was true, that would have been impossible. As physicist Taner Edis put it, "Separating the spheres of science and religion is useful for keeping the peace, but it is intellectually dubious" (Edis 2021, p. 110).

Methodological naturalism is also used by the dogmatically religious to criticize science. They think that science *is* applicable to religion and can even prove religious claims (hence their efforts for "scientific creationism" and "intelligent design" to be taught in science classrooms). The only reason, they think, science has not proven them (or that scientists have not admitted as much) is because of the biased methodology of scientists, methodological naturalism, which dismisses the possibility of the supernatural on its face, without argument or evidence. On this view, the only reason there is not yet scientific proof of spiritual entities is because science is methodologically biased against the supernatural.

But, again, this is not true. Science has no prior ontological commitments and thus is not required to only consider certain kinds of (e.g., natural) explanations; it is simply inference to the best explanation, a method for discovering the truth about what exists. Granted, scientists today usually do not bother with considering supernatural hypotheses, but that is not because of a pre-evidentiary methodological (or ontological or philosophical) bias; it is because supernatural hypotheses *have already been considered* scientifically, again and again, and have so consistently failed that today's scientist have realized considering them is a waste of time. (This is the same reason that I would not put "magic powers" on my list of possible explanations for Penn & Teller's magic bullet catch; I have seen too many other equally inexplicable feats naturally explained.) As Boudry et al. (2010) put it, all the arguments for the methodological naturalism (what they call "Intrinsic Methodological Naturalism") fail. What they call provisory methodological naturalism on the other hand, the "empirically grounded attitude of scientists" that the supernatural does not exist, is justified because of "the consistent success of naturalistic explanations and the lack of success of supernatural explanations in the history of science" (p. 227).[32]

For example, the scientific investigations into psychic powers could have been fruitful. They were not, because (it turns out) psychic powers are not real; but if they were,

they would behave in consistent ways, reveal independently observable and verifiable information, and thus be confirmable by scientific methods. As Taner Edis put it

> [P]arapsychology, [the] effort to show that psychic phenomena are genuine . . . has all the institutional trappings of any scientific discipline, from peer-review journals to academic conferences. Parapsychologists conduct experiments with considerable methodological sophistication, comparable to straight psychology in their rigor . . . and regularly publish results that, if confirmed, would be minor miracles [i.e., would revolutionize science]. (p. 67)

The problem was those results were not confirmed, not that parapsychology is unscientific.[33] To be sure, there are some parapsychologists who behave unscientifically, but psychic phenomena are something that can be investigated scientifically. "[I]f the paranormal were real, science could have affirmed it" (Edis 2021, p. 107). So, the fact that those investigations turned out negative is good reason to conclude that psychic phenomena do not exist.

Now, one might argue that if science were to do such a thing, it would not be proof of the "supernatural" because what would have been proved is that the phenomenon or entity in question was actually part of the natural world. The term "supernatural" just means "beyond the natural world" and proving that something exists would prove that it exists in the natural world. If we were to prove scientifically that psychic powers (or ghosts/demons/angels) were real, we would just expand our definition of what nature included, so that it encompassed such powers (or entities), and then turn around and insist that anything beyond that new conception of the natural world does not exist.

Perhaps. And if so, science might not be able to prove the existence of the supernatural; it could only prove that which we thought was supernatural was actually natural after all. But, to my eyes, this is beside the point—a semantic triviality. The question at hand is: "Could belief in demons, angels, or ghosts be justified?" If they were revealed to exist in the natural world, the answer to that question would be yes, even if the relevant understanding of what the natural world was expanded as a result.

8. Conclusions

I have admitted that my previous conclusion in 2017—that justified belief in demons is impossible—was too strong. By doing so, skeptics of the paranormal may think that I am handing "true believers" a win. This, I believe, is short-sighted. First, my original argument made the belief "demons don't exist" unfalsifiable. Since that criticism cannot be applied to my revised view, it is an improvement.

Second, given what I have demonstrated about the deficiencies of supernatural/paranormal explanations, to find conditions in which belief in the supernatural would be justified, one has to turn to outlandish fictional stories. This demonstrates how ridiculous belief in the supernatural is and how irrational accepting it as real would be. To be justified in believing in spiritual entities would require a scientific revolution akin to proving that the world is flat. What is more, given that science could reveal their existence if they existed, the fact that it has not provides sufficient justification for believing they do not exist. None of these consequences will make "true believers" happy.

Now, in response, the true believer might insist that my argument simply assumes materialism, or more precisely, that to be real *just is* to be material. This is not the case. Given that spiritual entities are (by definition) immaterial (i.e., not made of matter), by admitting that science could reveal the existence of spiritual entities, not only is it false that I am presuming materialism, but I am also admitting that immaterial entities could be real. Granted, I have not entertained the possibility that the immaterial nature of spiritual entities entails, by definition, that they are incapable of interacting with the physical world at all. (I suppose one might think they were made of nothing at all.) If that were the case, scientific investigation into such entities would, in fact, be impossible. But I did not entertain this possibility for two reasons.

First, if spiritual entities are (by definition) incapable of interacting with the physical world, they are then (by definition) incapable of generating any evidence of their existence; thus, (by definition) justified (i.e., evidence-based) belief in their existence is impossible. (Even to appear in dreams, they would have to be able to interact with our brains.) So, not only would entertaining this possibility generate an uninteresting "by definition" conclusion, the assumption on which it is based grants my thesis in the cheapest way possible. I would have simply defined spiritual entities as that in which justified belief cannot be had.

Second, that is not what true believers think. They think belief in such entities is justified and, indeed, many who believe in such entities do so because they believe stories in which spiritual entities have interacted with the world: hauntings, possessions, appearances, and healings. And even if they find no one such story convincing, they believe that such entities could perform (and have performed) such things. So, if I, instead, wondered whether belief in spiritual entities that cannot interact with the world could be justified, I would be answering a question that practically no one was asking. Of course, the true believer might change their definition of spiritual entity, now that it is clear that evidence of their existence is lacking, so that evidence of their existence is impossible. But this would simply be an "ad hoc" excuse to save the theory from falsification.

The true believer might also say that I have set the epistemic standards too high. I have not. I did not set the standards. I am merely clarifying what follows from the facts—facts about what good explanations must accomplish and the fact that, in order for belief in spiritual entities to be justified, their existence would have to serve as the best explanation of some event or fact. It is as simple as that.

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Notes

1 I assume here that belief in the devil entails belief in demons. In fact, belief in demons may be more abundant. A 2009 survey found that, while a majority (59%) of self-described Christians agreed that the devil is *not* a literal being, a majority (64%) agreed that persons could fall under the influence of demons or evil spirits. (Although the disparity might be due to asking people to agree or disagree with a negative statement: "Do you agree that Satan is not a living being but is a symbol of evil?" "Do you agree that a person can be possessed by a demon?") see The Barna Group (2009).

2 Interestingly, at 41%, belief in ghosts among Protestants is lower than among Catholics (57%) or the national average (44%) and is lowest among those who attend church services most regularly at 38%. The latter is actually one point lower than among those who never attend services (39%) and is quite a bit lower than the highest percentage (56%), which is among those who attend services less than once a year. One reason for this might be that belief in ghosts does not quite square with Protestant doctrine regarding the afterlife, which suggests that upon death, one's soul goes directly to heaven. The reason belief in ghosts might be more prevalent among Catholics is their doctrine of purgatory—a place where souls go before they go to heaven or hell. It is not much more of a stretch to believe that purgatory is an earthy affair. Another reason may be that those who profess to be Catholics are more likely to be culturally Catholic (while cultural Protestantism does not seem to be a genuine phenomenon), and cultural Catholics—because of their lack of religious involvement—have simply not given thought to how belief in ghosts is contrary to the church's teachings about the afterlife. This is why, I suspect, belief in ghosts is highest among those who are nominally religious. See Harris Harris Interactive (2008). This comports with a poll conducted by Public Policy Polling in 2013, which suggests that, despite religiosity being on the decrease among 18–29 year-olds, belief in demonic possession among them is up to 63%. See Wilson (2013).

3 The term "abduction", while often used as a shorthand for such reasoning, is not quite accurate. See Mcauliffe (2015), pp. 300–19.

4 It is also the case that, while there is no official ranking of the criteria, which criterion is more important might vary by circumstance. There might also be ties, where there is no clear winner and thus no justified conclusion about which explanation is best. Neither of these considerations will be relevant here because, when it comes to seeing why supernatural explanations are inferior to their competitors, breaking ties and ranking criteria are never necessary.

5 How to interpret what the theory entails, however, is still debated. See Rosenblum and Kuttner (2011, pp. 153–66).

6 In a recent article, I suggest that the different explanations for the stories about the resurrection of Jesus are like this. Because they are about events that lie in the unobservable past and make the same predictions about what we would presently observe if they are true, testability and fruitfulness cannot distinguish between them. Nevertheless, the resurrection hypothesis is by all accounts—indeed, by definition—the least simple, wide-scoping, and conservative explanation among the various alternatives; thus, it is the worst explanation for the evidence in question. See Johnson (2021, pp. 26–51).

7 Of course, Soren Kierkegaard or John Bishop might suggest that belief by faith (i.e., belief without evidence) in spiritual entities is acceptable or even preferable. (See Bishop (2007).) But such a suggestion is not only wrong (see Clifford 1877), it is beside the point. The question at hand is whether belief in spiritual entities can be justified, not whether it is acceptable to believe in them, even though it is not justified.

8 To be fair, they might also be invoked to explain religious experiences—such as a vision that only one person can see and hear. I have already argued elsewhere, however, that religious experience cannot justify belief, so I will not bother with this issue here. (See Johnson 2020b).

9 I debunked a similar story in 2014. (See Johnson 2014)

10 In *Where Angels Walk*, Joan Anderson (1992) relays the story of Sharon W. "(not her real name) [who] in rough Michigan weather . . . skidded dangerously toward a light pole [and cried] 'Oh, angels, help me!' [before] the car righted itself". (p. 43) It is worth noting that the angelic stories in Anderson's book negate each other because they are contradictory. In the same chapter in which Sharon's story appears, angels are able to lift (or transport) cars from one place to another to prevent an accident, but then in other stories are unable to prevent anything and only encourage the subject to put on a seatbelt so the subject only suffers injury rather than death. Other times, the angels demand the person pray before they save them; other times, their action is not requested.

11 Ed Strand concluded a child was an angel because he gave him a lift to school but then could not confirm his attendance (Anderson 1992, pp. 67–70).

12 Sandy Smith thought she saw a fair-haired angel (who she concluded must have been her recently deceased mother) at her hospital bedside after an accident, even though her nurse realized, "It must have been a dream" because the incident occurred as she was slipping in and out of consciousness (Anderson 1992, p. 108). Of course, it is possible that an angel appeared to her in a dream (i.e., it is possible that an angel caused the dream), but such a hypothosis would invoke an unecessary extra entity and thus not be as simple as the "it was just a dream" hypothosis. This would be like inisting that we still invoke "caloric" or "phlogiston" to explain the increase in molecular motion in heated objects, depsite the fact that the motion itself is sufficent to explain the increase in temperature.

13 I will use the phrase "(seemingly) unexplainable" to refer to events that people claim to be unable to find natural explanations for. I will reserve the term "inexplicable" to refer to entities or explanations that have low scope because they raise unanswerable questions and the like.

14 Notice that saying they are "immaterial" is not a positive description; it just tells us they are *not* material.

15 All evidence suggests that material events have material causes. That is not to say that attempts at explaining immaterial/material interaction have not been made, but Nancy Murphy has pointed out that they are only possible if we completely reform our notion of what causation even is, and Nicholas Saunders has described the argument that such interaction is possible as being in "crisis". Both are talking about divine action, not spiritual action—but their arguments apply. See Murphy (1996) and Saunders (2002).

16 Robert Larmer (2009) has argued that divine action that involves the creation of energy does not violate simple conservation laws (i.e., the total amount of energy in a closed system remains constant); it only violates a more general metaphysical principle that "energy cannot be created nor destroyed". We have scientific evidence only for the former, Larmer argues, so only it is a natural law—and positing the latter simply begs the question against the theist (by assuming the universe is a necessarily closed system with which God never interacts.) If he is right, one might suggest that immaterial spiritual entities can interact with the world, in the same way, without violating conservation laws: by creating energy. But there are multiple problems with his argument. For example, contrary to what he suggests, evidence for the law is good evidence for the general principle; it may not be proof, but science does not deal in proof. Evidence for the law is good inductive evidence for the principle—as is the fact that we have looked but never found an instance in which energy was created. What is more, as Ed Tryon (1973) points out, the fact that our universe has zero net energy is "supported by, or consistent with, all present observations". (p. 397) Consequently, all scientific observations stand contrary to the idea that spiritual entities add energy to the universe; if they did, the universe's net energy would no longer be zero.

17 I have argued elsewhere that he is exactly right, although not for the reason that he thought. See (Johnson 2015).

18 It would be different if the experience could be repeated in controlled conditions; I will address this possibility later in this article.

19 Although such explanations invoke an "extra entity" (e.g., alcohol), since the entities in question are known to exist, and that and how they cause such effects are well understood, such explanations do not lack simplicity or scope. This is not true of spiritual explanations.

20 Such experiences might also come with a sense of awe that makes one believe they have encountered a spiritual being. This happens to Carol when she concluded the white-shirted man who pushed her stalled car from the train tracks was an angel (Anderson 1992, pp. 138–40). But "awe" cannot justify belief in spiritual entities either. First, there is an obvious better explanation (e.g., that does not invoke extra entities) for such experiences: that the person was just an ordinary generous human. Second, this

is analogous to the idea that religious experience can justify belief, but it cannot. Religious experiences happen in all religions (and yet only one could be true); thus, religious experience is not a reliable source of belief. What is more, there are natural explanations for all religious experiences that are (by definition) better explanations because they do not invoke extra inexplicable entities. See Johnson, (2020b).

21 The example Hunt mentions on page 262, about the "charity-mugger", is irrelevant because it involves a change in judgment about the kind of person the agent is (not whether it is a different agent altogether).

22 Even if you mistake one twin for another, you simply think that the other twin is in a different room. And even in the case of someone with Dissociative Identity Disorder, you are speaking to an alternate personality (not an entirely different person).

23 If the "possessed" person says they are someone else, it is more likely they are lying—but such a person speaking in a foreign language to prove it might push one towards the "second person" hypothesis. However, the observer would have to be fluent in that language (to make sure the "possessed" is not speaking gibberish) and have absolute proof that the person did not learn that language (even a few phrases) beforehand. Many stories of such things happening have been debunked (see Dunning 2020).

24 Pyrotrons (aka Pyrotons) are a pseudoscientific explanation for spontaneous human combustion.

25 In my original article, I pointed out that it is no surprise that the priests conclude that the (supposedly) possessed person has a demon; they already believe in demons. This creates a bias in them that makes them more apt to "see the demonic" in the behavior of the person, thus tainting the reliability of their conclusions. H. tries to dismiss this worry. "[A] a young chemist already believes in atoms and electrons before conducting her experiment, but this surely does not defeat her belief that atoms and electrons exist, or her belief that atoms and electrons are involved in the best explanation of the experiment's results". (p. 267) H.'s analogy fails for multiple reasons. First, unlike with demons, the existence of atoms is already well established, and the young chemist is not testing for them; they undergird her theory. Second, the chemist is using the scientific method that is specifically designed to guard against the way our experiences and biases can lead us astray; the priest is not. Consider the historical example of N-Rays. French scientists, who convinced of their existence, performed experiments to prove N-Rays existed which merely relied on seeing—literally just looking to see—whether certain surfaces seemed brighter to them when N-Rays were supposedly present. *They* saw the effect, but no one else did; and when proper controls were put in place, it was revealed that the French scientists were just seeing the surfaces as brighter when they believed N-rays were present. Priests, who already believe in demons, and who are not using scientific procedures to test for demons, are analogous to the French N-Ray believing scientists, not the young chemist. As such, their conclusions, based on their own subjective experience, cannot be trusted, especially given the bias created by their preexisting supernatural beliefs.

26 For more on this problem, see Moore (n.d.), "Mind and the Causal Exclusion Problem". *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at https://iep.utm.edu/causal-e/ (accessed on 20 June 2022).

27 I leave out the criteria fruitfulness here because, usually, priests are not making falsifiable predictions to test whether a demon is present; they are not conducting science. That said, I will respond to H.'s claim that naturalism does not predict episodes of seeming demonic possession. Actually, it does. Not only are such episodes predictable once you understand how the brain functions (and how it can malfunction), but (as Schick and Vaughn (2020) put it), "though our experiences (and our judgements about those experiences) are reliable enough for most practical purposes, they often mislead us in the strangest, most unexpected ways—especially when the experiences are exceptionally mysterious . . . Because of them, as several psychologists have pointed out, we should expect to have many natural experiences that seem for all the world like supernatural or paranormal events. So even if the supernatural or paranormal didn't exist, weird things would still happen to us". (p. 108)

28 How to apply this same argument to ghosts and angels is obvious. The fact that an enthusiast or true believer has tried and failed to find an explanation for a supposed ghost/angel encounter is not a good reason to conclude that there is not one, and does not make the ghost/angel explanation any better. This is still an appeal to ignorance that does not justify the conclusion that spiritual entities exist.

29 It must be noted that to protect the theory from a lack of evidence by saying "they always hide" would make one's position unfalsifiable and thus irrational.

30 For more on what is fallacious about ad hoc reasoning, see Schick and Vaughn 2020, pp. 177–78.

31 This is one reason science cannot 100% deductively prove anything. Another reason is that IBE is an inductive method of reasoning, and thus does not deal in proof. This is why science's inability to *prove* that ghosts do not exist is not a reason to conclude they do; not only is that an appeal to ignorance, but science does not prove anything. It just demonstrates the truth of theories beyond a reasonable doubt. That spiritual entities do not exist is something that undeniably has been demonstrated by science beyond a reasonable doubt. For more on this aspect of science, see Lewis (2014).

32 One might argue that such reasoning just assumes what it is trying to prove. "What evidence has science provided for the metaphysical theory of materialism? It cannot be that all our investigations of material reality have shown us only material objects and forces because that begs the question". But this argument itself endorses the errionious understanding of science that is being debunked here—that science is just an investitation into material reality, that only deals with material explaintions, and so could only reveal material objects. As I have explained, science is simply inference to the best explaination, and if immaterial objects such as spiritual entities existed, that method of reasoning could reveal their existance. The fact that it has not been revealed is, therefore, evdience that such entities do not exist.

[33] "The body of parapsychological results is . . . disappointing; reminiscent, indeed, of cold fusion. There are lots of barely noticeable and inconsistent size effects, little success at replication, and no consistent and strong signal that rises above the noise". (Edis 2021, p. 68)

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How Not to Object to Demonic Realism

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Abstract: There are few academics today who actively argue against demonic realism. Much of this is perhaps due to the fact that there are comparably few defenders of such. This has created a vacuum for critics to comfortably object to the existence of demons without sophistication (for it is only in the professional exchange of ideas do bad arguments get weeded out and good arguments gain vitality). Add to this the common perception of demonology as an anti-intellectual superstition and we end up with a threshold for the success of anti-realist arguments to be set quite low. In this paper, I shall survey three of the most familiar objections to demonic realism to arise out of this skeptical intellectual environment: First, and most ambitiously, there is the impossibility of justified belief objection that proffers that belief in demons cannot even in principle be justified no matter how much (scientific) evidence there is. Alternative explanations are always to be preferred. Second, there is the demon-of-the-gaps objection (or category of objections) which insists that demonic realism is hastily posited as a pre-scientific explanation for physical, medical, and psychological mysteries. Third, there is what I call the ethical argument from scapegoating that questions the existence of demons on grounds that, if they in fact exist, such a fact would preclude moral responsibility and the possibility of retributive justice since we could never know if a bad actor was himself morally culpable for his own evils or if he was under the coercive influence of demonic agents. I argue that, despite their rhetorical appeal and kinship with the anti-supernatural sentiments of many academics today, these three arguments are not successful, for these are either based on egregious philosophical assumptions or assumptions about demonology few if any adopt.

Keywords: demonology; Satan; metaphysics; gaps-based objections; mental disorders; cognitive science; demons; devil; angels; explanatory reasoning

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1. Introduction

Demonic realism is the view that there are nonhuman spirits that reside beyond the spacetime universe and are oriented toward moral turpitude.[1] It is not a popular position held by mainstream philosophers. This is not surprising considering that only about 31.1% of professional philosophers recently polled even identify as metaphysical non-naturalists (Bourget and Chalmers 2021). Additionally, those who do hold to a demonic realism rarely offer any rigorous defense of it. However, there have been a few recent exceptions to this (Adler 1982; Kreeft 1995; Williams 2002; Wiebe 2004; Guthrie 2018; Hunt 2020; Van Eyghen 2022). The number substantially increases if we include the teeming number of theologians following a conservative and/or supernaturalist tradition (Dickason 1975; Twelftree 2007, 2010; Heiser 2015, 2020; Gilhooly 2018). However, such theologians tend to be dismissed outright despite any assessment of the evidential merit. Instead, they are perceived as religious partisans blindly operating in deference of their orthodoxy. The dismissive treatment of conservative theologians regarding demonology in all religious traditions is quite like how such theologians have been summarily dismissed regarding their opinions on a theological protology when it comes to human origins and cosmogenesis. Since these are supposed to be under the provinces of science and philosophy, any theologian's contributions are dispensed with at the outset.

The overall absence of substantial and thoughtful defenses of demonic realism by philosophers and scientists have thus permitted bad arguments by anti-realists to survive unabated. The same seems to be true in the public square. For when it comes to popular public discourse, believers in things like demonic spirits are dismissed as sensationalists, hacks, grifters, charlatans, and opportunists sporting a naïve and uninformed metaphysical vagary. Positing demons as an explanation for anything is tantamount to positing fairies, unicorns, and garden gnomes. This paves the way for demonic anti-realists to make their case expeditiously and without much rigor (for, who would bother to spend any time dispelling fairies, unicorns, and garden gnomes in academia?). Consequently, some anti-realist arguments are underdeveloped, poor, and even involve the kind of reasoning that would never pass as substantial criticism of other more mundane matters.

This does not mean that there are not good and challenging objections to demonic realism. Indeed, there are a few arguments worthy of one's attention (e.g., Bamberger 1952, p. 203; Schleiermacher [1821–1822] 2016, p. 161; Van Eyghen 2018; Guthrie 2018, pp. 69–96). But these other, more visible objections that I shall be discussing tend to be (unfortunately) missed opportunities for having a real conversation about the case for demonic anti-realism. Instead, the more familiar objections that tend to circulate today are less impressive. In this paper, I shall survey three of the most familiar objections to demonic realism to arise out of this skeptical intellectual environment: First, and most ambitiously, there is the impossibility of justified belief objection that proffers that belief in demons cannot even in principle be justified no matter how much evidence there is. Alternative explanations are always to be preferred. Second, there is the devil of the gaps objection (or category of objections) which insists that demonic realism is hastily posited as a prescientific explanation for physical, medical, and psychological mysteries. Third, there is what I call the ethical argument from scapegoating that questions the existence of demons on grounds that, if they in fact exist, such a fact would preclude moral responsibility and the possibility of retributive justice since we could never know if a bad actor was himself morally culpable for his own evils or if he was under the coercive influence of demonic agents.

After presenting each one, I shall argue that, despite their rhetorical appeal and kinship with the anti-supernatural sentiments of many academics today, none of them are remotely successful. The reason for this is because these are based either on egregious philosophical assumptions or assumptions about demonology few realists if any adopt. Let us now turn to these objections individually and consider these as to how one should not object to demonic realism.

2. The Impossibility of Justified Belief Objection

There are certainly good grounds for concluding that a particular belief may be impossible. With respect to belief in demons in particular, there are formidable arguments that would render belief in such spirit beings impossible if, say, one adopts a certain metaphysical framework. Thomas Hobbes, for example, believed that to identify a being as an "incorporeal substance" was to invoke a contradiction (Hobbes [1651] 1985, pp. 429–40). Since "substance" is the same thing as "body", according to Hobbes, to say that a spirit is an "incorporeal substance" is to speak of a bodiless body—words that "destroy one another" (pp. 429–30). It is to imply that beings "seeming to be *somewhat*, are *nothing*" (p. 434). Accordingly, if one adopts this Hobbesian framework, belief in immaterial demons will surely be an a priori impossibility. And that would be a legitimate, if not effective, way to object to belief in demons if and only if his metaphysics are sound. But the particular versions of why belief in demons is considered impossible are not due to such prior ontological or metaphysical commitments. They are (wrongly) considered impossible due to epistemological factors. Let us zero in on how these objections are made and why they are instances of how not to object to demonic realism.

In his paper, "Justified Belief in the Existence of Demons is Impossible", David Kyle Johnson (2017) offers us one of the most robust critiques of demonic realism to date. For many demonic realists, there is explanatory value in pointing to the evidential contribution

of diabolical experiences as inductive grounds for believing that demons exist (Wiebe 2004; Montgomery 2015; Gallagher 2019). Johnson asks if "stories of demon possession or personal experiences of seeming demonic activity provide sufficient evidence for such belief?" to which he answers, "no" (p. 176). Johnson's thesis is actually quite aggressive, for he insists that the very "method of reasoning that must apply to [diabolical experiences] entails that it is impossible for belief in the existence of demons to be justified" (p. 176). This "method of reasoning", he explains, involves the assessing of the probability of a hypothesis over any rivals on the basis of certain explanatory virtues: fruitfulness, scope, parsimony, and conservatism. He thus opines:

> I have considered both the natural and supernatural explanations right alongside each other and weighed them according to the same criteria. [. . .] [T]o be the best explanation, the "demons did it" hypothesis would have to be the simplest, most conservative, and wide-scoping explanation. By their very nature, however, demonic explanations are not simple, conservative or wide scoping. Thus, they will always fall short when compared to the available natural explanations (pp. 186–87).

It might seem that perhaps all he is saying is that the probability that any given belief in demons for any putative demonic harassment has always been comparatively less than any rival naturalistic alternative given the relevant explanatory virtues. This would be a more modest, *de facto* thesis as it were. But he says "by their very nature" such explanations lack any such virtue. And just in case any ambiguity remains, he overtly insists that his explanatory argument shows that "even if you see one with your own eyes, belief in demons is always unjustified" (p. 186). This is a sweeping extrapolation, and it creates an *a priori* umbrella over all future claims to the demonic.[2] It is an intrinsic deficit for the demon hypothesis. And it is for this reason he says that the inference to demonic realism "will always fall short". It underscores the fact that this is indeed a principled objection to anyone's appealing to the demonic, regardless of the evidence, in order to explain any would-be diabolical encounter.

Straightaway we can see that Johnson's thesis is unnecessarily overstated. Had he relegated himself to the mere notion that naturalistic alternatives tend to be better than appeals to the demonic, such would be fair game.[3] But his conclusion is that *in principle* no demonic explanation could ever be better than a naturalistic one without the kind of prohibitive metaphysics assumed by Hobbes. Accordingly, all one needs by way of response is a just-so story that exposes the obvious: that it is possibly more reasonable that a demonic encounter took place than any naturalistic alternative in at least one set of circumstances. For, if demonic realism is possibly a better explanation in at least one instance, then that is enough to demonstrate *contra* Johnson that justification for belief in demons is not impossible.

Suppose you are in your room in the middle of the day completely sober and under no circumstances that would potentially defeat any beliefs formed in that moment. Suddenly, a ghastly apparition appears in your room and identifies himself as a demon. Let us just stipulate that there are no good reasons to think that survivalism (the notion that human beings and/or animals survive their deaths and endure) is true. Let us also suppose that living-agent psi (that apparitions might be generated psychically by living beings) is not true (Sudduth 2016). These are to rule out possible alternative, even extraordinary, explanations for the ghastly apparition. Now suppose the apparition then proceeds to spend hours with you submitting to any tests you can imagine and proceeds to communicate thoughts and details that only you know (and you know that only you know those details). Surely this might reasonably convince at least one skeptic of a demonic presence, would it not? And it does not matter that this has never happened, it only matters insofar as it is a counter-possible to the notion that belief in demons cannot in principle be justified. As a nonbeliever in Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster, I can certainly imagine scenarios wherein concluding that they exist (as creatures of a sort residing in this world) could be well-justified for a fair-minded person. As far as I know, Bigfoot and Loch Ness anti-realists do not predicate

their beliefs on the lofty standard of impossibility of any would-be justification to the contrary. As with Hume's approach to any evidence for miracles, or miracle identification, Johnson's coopted uniformity approach has no real currency. That is, no one today who was confronted with evidence for some unique, even extraordinary, event would dismiss it outright simply because up to now no such evidence was presumptive. For almost 50 years, scientists had been searching for evidence of a massive scalar boson (the Higgs particle) that gives some other particles mass. In 2012, this extraordinary particle was eventually discovered by a series of experiments at the Large Hadron Collider at CERN's accelerator complex. If one coopted the preemptive epistemic methodology of Johnson here, the 2012 research project should have been inconclusive because "even if you see one with your own eyes, belief in the Higgs particle is always unjustified".

Johnson's thesis that justification for belief in demons is impossible is ambitious and unnecessary. It detracts from his otherwise less offensive argument that, historically, naturalistic alternatives tend to better explain any of *those* alleged demonic encounters. For him to preemptively dismiss any counter-possibles that are so easily conjurable makes his brand of anti-realism dead on arrival. In short, the preference of an explanation on the basis of certain explanatory virtues should never mean that a defeated explanation is impossible or could not ever conceivably be right someday.

It turns out that there is a second species of the impossibility of justified belief objection. This one is not as presumptuous as to declare that a demon hypothesis is impossible to justify on the basis of any reasoning *simpliciter*. Instead, it is considered impossible to justify a demon hypothesis on the delimited basis of *science*. The objection is leveled by the theologians John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton in their recent book on demonology, *Demons and Spirits in Biblical Theology* (Walton and Walton 2019). Therein, the Waltons begin by making the uncontroversial distinction between that which is supernatural and that which is scientific (i.e., empirically verifiable). They then point out that science is assumed by many demonic realists[4] to be a "means of gathering knowledge that is suitable for some subjects but not for others [and] that the demonic realm is not a subject that is suitable for scientific study" (p. 44).[5] Since demons are immaterial beings, the empirical tools of science will be unable to verify or falsify their existence. But then a tension arises. For, such demonic realists tend to "warrant their claim for the real existence of evil spirits by pointing to observable phenomena such as 'radical evil,' possession, and the results of 'spiritual warfare'" (p. 44). Accordingly, the Waltons agree. But they seem to also be suggesting that while science cannot verify (or falsify) the existence of supernatural things, demonic realists unwittingly believe that science can be used to verify the existence of demons—an apparent contradiction on their part. So, the Waltons advert to say that if demonic realism is to be shown to be true, it will need to amass nonscientific support (since even realists agree that demons are nonscientific things).[6]

To be clear, the Waltons are not card-carrying demonic anti-realists or even interested in falsifying demonic realism.[7] But they mean to show that a certain kind of justification (=scientific) can never support belief in demons. They do this by attempting to catch demonic realists in a methodological discord. For, one cannot affirm that science is unable to verify the existence of supernatural things like demons and then subsequently use science to verify the existence of demons. And for those who will insist that science can indeed verify the existence of demons, they would be "scientizing" demonic beings against their better judgment. And doing so will lead to a poor metaphysical demonology no self-respecting realist would adopt. The Waltons explain:

> If a thing is "supernatural" it means it cannot be known by the methods of science, period. It does not mean that it can be known by applying the methods of science in a haphazard and imprecise manner. If the scientific methods offered by conflict theologians [see n. v][8] to defend the existence of spirits are actually evidence of anything, it means that spirits are knowable by scientific methods and therefore are not "supernatural" after all; they are a subject for scientific

> inquiry that happens to be largely undocumented and poorly understood, like "dark energy" or "antimatter" (p. 47).

While such a move allows the realist to employ science, it does so at a cost—a cost that saddles the realist with having to deny that demons are superhuman agents. It is an implication that is counterproductive to, if not downright destructive of, a more orthodox demonology.

All of this so far reveals that the Waltons believe demonic realists are inconsistent in their approach to arguing for the existence of demons. They are saying that either science cannot be a tool in this regard or realists will have to bite the bullet and no longer think that demons are ultramundane things. It's a lose-lose situation.

Let us consider a specific, scientific case that the Waltons cite as an example (which is not the charitable choice on their part). In Clinton Arnold's book, *Three Crucial Questions about Spiritual Warfare* (Arnold 1997) and quoted by the Waltons (p. 46), Arnold seems to be saying that in some cultures (e.g., Korea, Argentina, and Canada) there have been statistically significant observable successes at the hands of certain Christians. These successes are due to their having "battled" demonic influence (whatever that looks like) over neighborhoods, cities, and entire countries. The Waltons complain that this is a bad argument because it evinces a "scientific process being used to investigate a topic that is not supposed to be a subject for scientific investigation" (p. 47). This is remarkable. According to the Waltons, it is not that Arnold's conclusion was not the best explanation or that the metric for favoring that explanation is unsatisfactory (i.e., "effective" and "successful" are not appropriate standards). Neither did they object by suggesting that there are better explanations for the *explananda* in question (which is what they should have said), rather it is that Arnold just is not supposed to employ science at all. But this amounts to circular reasoning. Presumably this example is to show how science cannot effectively show that demons exist. While rightly noting the imprecisions of what it takes for something to be "effective" and "successful", their complaint is not Arnold's lack of clarity, it is that he is epistemically forbidden from doing this even if sufficient clarity were offered—the very matter under dispute. But a bad metric does not imply that *any* metric is, therefore, inappropriate.

If this were not bad enough, they then ascribe to Arnold (and others, all without support) a theoretical hypocrisy. That is, had "the results of scientific investigation [been] undesirable, they [would have been] dismissed out of hand because the subject is 'supernatural' and therefore not a legitimate subject for scientific inquiry" (p. 47). The additional "support" for the Waltons' own push-back goes from circular reasoning to now insinuating a methodological hypocrisy on Arnold's (and others') part. This is not an improvement on their original complaint against Arnold's right to use science here. It is instead a complaint about his character (all on the basis of what looks to be something of a *tu quoque*). So, this was all a missed opportunity by the Waltons to easily critique Arnold's case. For, where Arnold erred is not that he violated some principle of scientific applicability, it is that his preferred explanation of the scientific data that was invoked was unwarranted. And it is unwarranted because either the representative sample was not selective enough (e.g., perhaps only being reported by biased sources) or there are better explanations than the "success" of the community's spiritual warfare (e.g., that any improvements are due to other concurrent factors). Nevertheless, even if Arnold was an epistemic hypocrite, this is not enough to imply that science cannot be used in some way to support a demon hypothesis.

Despite the ill-contrived way the Waltons object to Arnold's use of science, it is important to clarify precisely *what* is supposed to be scientific or not regarding this subject.[9] On the one hand, demonic realists have solidarity with the Waltons in that demons themselves are unscientific things. Unsurprisingly, none of the instruments of science can therefore detect or measure them. This is no more controversial than a theist who insists that God is also not a material being and, so, is not directly scientifically detectable or measurable. But these admissions are not the same thing as saying that science cannot in any way help support the conclusion that a supernatural being exists. We can underscore this by

considering another, but nonreligious, example of how science can be enlisted in support of a supernatural conclusion.

Suppose that philosophers of mind all come to agree that substance dualism is true—that any embodied sentient and self-conscious being (whether carbon-based or not) must also have an immaterial soul. We know that Turing tests, for example, are designed for investigators to discern whether a given artificial intelligence is in fact a conscious being (Shieber 2004). And let us suppose for the argument's sake that it is settled amongst philosophers that consciousness is located within or is itself the soul. Consciousness itself cannot be directly detected except by the one whose consciousness it is. However, neuroscience and perhaps Turing tests can, at least possibly, provide empirical (=scientific) data. For example, how a prospect answers certain Turing test questions and/or whether certain neural synapses are firing (if applicable) could be used in a larger argument for the presence of consciousness in that being. And we would have a separate premise in the larger argument that affirms this imagined settled metaphysical anthropology: "If a being is conscious, then that being is ensouled" (or something like that). This would be a perfectly acceptable probabilistic argument for the presence of a soul in a being suspected to be conscious. Consciousness itself (which would not be a scientific thing if substance dualists are right) does leave empirically detectable and measurable indications in the world if it is present. And to rely on such data would not be to naturalize said consciousness.

Likewise, there are conceivable ways to see how science could be used specifically to support a larger explanatory argument for demons. Suppose someone claiming to be possessed by an immaterial demonic spirit is relocated to a scientific laboratory. Further suppose that prior to the possession case, the victim has been properly vetted and subsequently contracts that if a possession should happen, he would be willing to submit to laboratory observation by dispassionate, unbiased scientists. When under observation, the demoniac then proceeds to speak a language everyone is satisfied he does not know or communicates truths he could not possibly have had access to (say, what a physician in another state wrote down on a ledger three minutes ago). The demoniac also performs extraordinary feats such as levitation and moving objects on demand with his mind. Being within a laboratory context, these things are clearly detectable, observable, and measurable (e.g., the demoniac levitates 12.6 m into the air). And the information about the ledger-writing physician can be confirmed by perhaps accessing a security camera. But why think that such scientifically established phenomena (if such were to occur) would not positively contribute to an argument for the existence of demons? Surely the scientifically derivable data here would figure prominently as the *explananda* with a demon hypothesis *qua* possession as the *explanans*. And nothing here contradicts the idea that the demon in the demon hypothesis is nevertheless an unscientific *qua* supernatural thing.

Therefore, the Waltons' sweeping complaint that one cannot believe in demons on the basis of science is quite mistaken. It is mistaken because their reasons for this are that (i) demons themselves are not scientific things, (ii) certain scientific metrics used are imprecise, and (iii) demonic realists are hypocritical in their methodologies. But though all of these may be true, they have no currency in showing how science cannot be used in support of a wider explanatory argument for a demon hypothesis.

Let us now move on to a different category of objections to demonic realism that no demonic anti-realist should utilize.

3. The Demon-of-the-Gaps Objection

Readers are perhaps quite familiar with the God-of-the-gaps objection to design arguments for the existence of God. As an objection, it tends to caricature the theist as saying something like: "I don't know what caused this mysterious event, therefore my favorite cause—God—did it". According to the charge, the theist is declared guilty of a non-sequitur, supposing that her theism is just an ersatz explanation for some mysterious event(s) on grounds that no known natural explanation is currently available.

To be clear, gaps-based objections are not in and of themselves arguments. They are only expressions of protest. A gaps-based objection is only a circumlocution for saying that one's proposed hypothesis is either (i) unjustified in concluding that a supernatural cause is the best explanation for some mysterious event (Johnson 2017, p. 180) or (ii) a lazy way to avoid naturalistic (would-be) alternatives for some mysterious event (Cupitt 1961).[10] But (i) is just a counterclaim and amounts to nothing more than question-begging if no accompanying argument is offered; (ii) is nothing short of an *ad hominem* which nevertheless assumes that (i) is true. In the best light, this serves as a perspicuous way to begin one's protest. Enter the demonic realist who proposes a demon hypothesis to account for certain mysterious events. As for which mysterious events are in dispute, there are approximately two kinds: First, there are certain physical events specifically involving alleged alterations and manipulations of physical objects and/or physical laws. That is, sometimes demons are posited as manipulators of natural laws and/or as causes of some natural evils (including biomedical instances of organic damage), or perhaps the very genesis of natural evil itself (e.g., Murray 2008, pp. 103–6; Boyd 2001, pp. 293–318; Kelly 1997, pp. 29–42; Penelhum 1971, p. 249; Lewis 1962, chp. 9; Mascall 1956, pp. 301–2; Trethowan 1954, p. 128). Second, there are certain psychological events involving erratic or dysfunctional forms of human behavior. Most notably, there are some episodes of maladjusted human behavior that have been alleged to be due to demonic possessions. To both of these, anti-realists are quick to accuse those who would dare to invoke a demon hypothesis as shirking or ignoring obvious developments in the physical and cognitive sciences. They declare (sometimes without support) that the demonic realist is guilty of embracing a demon of the gaps.

Now, surely appeals to modern science and the cognitive sciences are good ways to push back against demonic realism, are they not? It is not that this is a bad strategy for the anti-realist, it is that some anti-realists either make their case on the basis of a straw man or on the basis of outright gaslighting readers about what the relevant sciences actually tell us. We're supposed to think the matter is quite settled, but this is far from obvious.

Let us consider the gaps objection to mysterious physical events first. When a demonic realist proposes that a demon, devil, or the Prince of Darkness himself is or may be responsible for some mysterious physical event, he is not necessarily arguing for the existence of Satan and his cohorts on the basis of those mysterious events. Indeed, academics like Michael Murray (2008), Gregory Boyd (2001), Stewart Kelly (1997), C. S. Lewis (1962), E. L. Mascall (1956), and Dom Trethowan (1954) are not offering up a natural diabology. Instead, such thinkers are using the demon hypothesis as an explanatory option in the context of a wider (often Christian) *Weltanschauung*. That is, *if* demons exist, such *might* explain the physical mysteries under investigation. However, finding truly alternative causes to such events would not necessarily be a refutation of the existence of demons just in case one's demonic realism is not based on such *explananda*. Suppose an African American church was burned down in the U.S. city of Denver, Colorado due to arson. If there are violent racists living in the area, such might account for the incident. That the church's demise should end up being due to a group of local satanists instead would not subsequently constitute a refutation of the existence of violent racists in the area who just happen to not be involved. X's not confirming Y does not entail or imply that, therefore, Y does not exist.

But what if science shows that *no* physical events turn out to be due to demonic causes? Is this not an impressive inductive argument against such realism? Perhaps.[11] But herein lies a second problem not considered by gaps-based objectors. There is nothing about demonic realism that entails or implies that demons (or Satan himself) should directly interact with anything physical. In Scripture, we find no such example of this much less any didactic teaching on it. And given that demons are supposed to be evil *spirits* gives us *prima facie* reason to *not* expect that they should. And from passages like Numbers 22.31 and Revelation 7.2 even the good angels, from whom the demons allegedly derive, depend on God for their physical or psychokinetic interactions within the created order. Presumably demons do not work for God and, therefore, cannot obtain the same resource. We should not neglect the force of this. For, not only are demons not the kinds of things that

are expected to directly interact with the physical world, not even the good angels can do so without God's intervention. So, finding putative naturalistic alternative explanations to mysterious physical events would not render demonic realism improbable but would only confirm a more faithful biblical demonology.[12] That is, by virtue of the scientist shrinking those physical mysteries that one might have thought was caused by demons is in perfect accordance with what Scripture implies (even to the chagrin of some demonic realists throughout history). As an existential critique, it is only a straw man. The only thing that follows from this objection is that one must adjust their doctrine of demonology, not that demons do not exist.

Much more could be said about this, but this is enough to show the non-sequitur nature of the demon-of-the-gaps objection when used as an attempted refutation of demonic realism on the basis of the ongoing demystification of physical events.

We thus segue into the secondary target of the demon-of-the-gaps objection: mysterious psychological events. Specifically, there are demonic anti-realists and skeptics that confidently and ostentatiously pronounce the triumphs of modern-day psychiatry, psychology, and neuroscience to show that believing in things like demon possessions as explanations for strange human behaviors is passé. With fervor and finality, they herald the demise of a prescientific demon hypothesis because cognitive scientists now know what causes possession-like behavior. Examples of such pronouncements abound but let us consider just a few. Atheist John W. Loftus (2021) writes the following with a tinge of chronological snobbery:

> Today we just don't think sick people are demon-possessed. With the advent of modern medicine we treat the physical causes, and with psychology we treat the mental causes of illnesses the best that we can. . . . All I can say here is what a mixed-up world the superstitious first century must have been! Formerly epilepsy was viewed as demon possession. But now we know some of the causes and can minimize the effects. Mental disease also has its known causes, and some specialists can help with brain surgery. (p. 282)

In a more dismissive manner, Matthew McCormick (2012) writes that

> when our knowledge of the phenomena developed and we began to understand mental illness as a nervous-system pathology, we ultimately abandoned the concept of demons altogether. The idea was too embedded in an outmoded, nonfunctional, unhelpful ontology to make it usable in the better description of the world. Demons were eliminated in favor of a new concept; the term *mental illness* explained the symptoms in the context of a theory that conceived of the problem in terms of a physical illness and neuroscience rather than the elaborate metaphysics countenanced by the demon-possession explanation. (p. 283)

Not just wild-eyed atheists are decrying the legitimacy of a demon hypothesis in psychopathology, there are some professionals in the cognitive sciences that are doing the same. One group does not hold back:

> Delusions of possession are a separate sub-category of religious delusions in psychosis. They involve a distorted perception of having one's mental processes or actions controlled by demons or spirits associated with local religion. (Pietkiewicz et al. 2021, p. 8)

Believing that possessions are real occurrences is to be deluded (I sense a Richard Dawkins sequel here.) From these pronouncements we are to believe that the devil is dead, and that the psychiatrist, the psychologist, and the neuroscientist have killed him.

Actually, the truth of the matter is quite scandalous and deserves considerable attention here. For, not only are these declarations about the displacement of the demon hypothesis "with the advent of modern medicine" in accounting for alleged possession cases grossly overstated, but these same industries are also not even able to adjudicate the etiologies of the more "ordinary" mental disorders (e.g., clinical depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and the various anxiety disorders). The infighting between psychologists and psychiatrists,

and now the neuroscientists, reveals the lack of solidarity as to the pathogeneses and causal pathways that give rise to these exemplary disorders. *Nobody knows what causes clear-cut mental disorders much less those that may or may not be mental disorders at all!* Is a possession case merely the misdiagnosis of a mental disorder? Well, what would it mean for a mental disorder to be the preferred explanation? One might point to the major diagnostic canon of the industries—the fifth *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) of the American Psychiatric Association (2013)—to answer this question. The anti-realist will feel sanguine to pontificate something like this: "See! Possession symptoms are actually due to known conditions diagnosed variously as Dissociative Trance Disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder, schizophrenia, and the like!" It is implied, if not overtly declared, that the cognitive sciences now have explanations for possession-like behavior. Everyone can move on now.

There are three reasons why this is gaslighting at its finest. First, despite their utility, this and other diagnostic manuals are hotly disputed by the professionals themselves. Among the numerous complaints of DSM-5, one of the most significant has to do with the fact that the diagnostic criteria are not predicated on proximate causes. Unlike somatic illnesses like influenza, epilepsy, and COVID-19, such diagnoses do not pick out, nor intend to pick out, etiologies for the disorders one might describe. A Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), for example, is a class or cluster of symptoms that clinicians agree characterize the disorder. But no causes are either being affirmed or excluded. And just to be clear, the same happens to go for a number of somatic illnesses such as tinnitus, urticaria (=hives), and hypertension. To diagnose a patient with any of these conditions is not to identify a cause or even pretend to.[13]

Now this is significant because it is an instance of explanatory legerdemain on the part of the skeptic through the nescient or unscrupulous use of medicalspeak. If such an objection were offered in any other situation it would be rightly eviscerated as a faux response. Let us illustrate how this medicalspeak can come across (wrongly) as an explanation. Suppose a woman is exhibiting mild but persistent bouts of depression that interferes with her ordinary life following a sexual assault. A psychologist determines that the patient is thereby suffering from dysthymia. It would be wrong for the assailant to subsequently think he had been exonerated because the victim's condition was clinically diagnosed as dysthymia. Imagine this assailant with a straight face counter-accusing the victim of being guilty of an "assailant of the gaps". To understand the absurdity here one would need to know that dysthymia is not itself a cause or an explanation but is a mere label for a condition that can be caused by any number of biological, social, and/or psychological factors. It just is a chronic, persistent depressive condition (American Psychiatric Association 2013, p. 155). And that can certainly be inaugurated or triggered by a perpetrator's assault. Accordingly, to identify one's condition as dysthymia is not to rule out this or that cause, it is merely to identify a group of symptoms one experiences so that certain treatments can be authorized. If a rapist really attempted this kind of assailant of the gaps objection, we would consider his position desperate if not malicious.

When it comes to possession symptoms in particular, similar forms of medicalspeak are being invoked. As noted, before, a critic might invoke DID as an explanation for (some) so-called possession cases. But, as it turns out, the diagnostic description of something like DID is quite consistent with a genuine possession taking place. In fact, it's quite consistent with there being any alien causes that may or may not be supernatural. The DSM-5 merely says that DID involves a

> [d]isruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession. The disruption in identity involves marked discontinuity in sense of self and sense of agency, accompanied by related alterations in affect, behavior, consciousness, memory, perception, cognition, and/or sensory-motor functioning. These signs and symptoms may be observed by others or reported by the individual. (p. 292)

The DSM-5 makes space for *any* cause—exogenic or endogenic, proximate or distal, material or nonmaterial—that might account for one's "disruption of identity", their "experience of possession", and the various "related alterations". At best, clinicians can only speak of causal pathways, stressors, triggers, and the like. While it's true that psychiatrists and neuropsychologists both attempt to proffer a Biomedical Disease Model of mental disorders (that all mental disorders are reducible to biological diseases), such a model is far from settled and, instead, faces insuperable problems that likely prevent it from ever being a viable etiological candidate (Graham 2012, pp. 53–63). There just is no suitable contender for a disease model, or any other kind of model, which is why DSM-5 simply does not *bother* describing mental disorders in terms of causes. Calling something a mental disorder is not to clarify the cause of one's condition, it is only to categorize it. The unsettledness of the relevant industries as to what a mental disorder is telegraphs that the science is being unfairly weaponized by anti-realists in service to their narrative. And that is just argumentative malpractice.

Second, the relevant industries are taking a second look at the therapeutic contribution of the practice of exorcism. Now, anti-realists presume that remedies to mental disorders (regardless of etiologies) never or should never include exorcism as an option. It would be, they say, an antiquated mistreatment of someone in a vulnerable and volatile condition. But, again, the industries are not able to identify much less isolate any causes; and in cases where causal pathways are discernible, therapeutics are rarely targeted toward *per impossible* elimination. The contemporary clinician will often take a holistic approach to therapies and avail herself to implementing what it takes to rehabilitate the patient. Her therapeutic arsenal will thus focus on the utility of psychotropic drugs, counselling, behavioral therapy, cognitive therapy, hypnotherapy, and the lot. Only those with a metaphysical axe to grind will preclude something like an exorcism from the clinician's repertoire. The fact that we cannot identify singular or determinate causes for even exemplary mental disorders has moved professional clinicians, to the chagrin of anti-realists, to make space for a symphony of therapeutics. When it comes to possession cases, there is a growing interest to give the exorcist a chance at remedy. Yes, exorcism is being taken seriously as a therapeutic approach to such cases—and not just by wild-eyed, conservative Christians or elitist Catholic priests dispatched from Vatican City, but by concerned non-partisan practitioners who wish to expand their therapeutic resources (Crooks 2018; Irmak 2014; Betty 2005). That exorcism is once again being taken seriously as a contributing therapeutic is a testament to the ambiguity of any causal factors involved in the so-called possession cases. As such, it serves as a backhanded compliment to realists by subtly implying that they have been prematurely discarded.

Third, even if one assumes a disease theory of mental disorders, the anti-realist would still not be in the right epistemic position to preclude the explanatory contribution of demonic influence. That biological etiologies might be in one's history and be detectable (say, as biomarkers in the blood), this alone would not preclude the presence of a secondary condition at work. In fact, even if there was a known biological cause in place for, say, depression, this would not itself be a guarantor of one's developing the experience of depression or any of its symptoms (Olbert and Gala 2015). It's possible for the pathology to be present in someone and, yet, for them never to become depressed. But psychopathologists are aware of there being comorbid conditions present in a particular patient that may be the right recipe for what it takes to trigger such depression, even if biologically rooted. A patient has a comorbidity if she is simultaneously suffering from two or more disorders or illnesses. Sometimes the multiplicity of disorders is merely coincidental—that they are causally unrelated, having nevertheless arisen concurrently and for their own independent reasons. Sometimes the comorbidities are interrelated, serial occurrences—having both arisen because one has proceeded from or is triggered by the other. We find instances of this with the concurrences of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression where the latter is often triggered by the former. Comorbidities may even be identified solely as matters of what a clinician might anticipate based on population groups. Regardless, the point here is

that designating someone as suffering from this or that mental illness, even if biologically ordained, does nothing to rule out or exclude a comorbid condition that would act as a trigger. And why could not a demonic possession be that trigger in some victims?

It is entirely possible, for example, that a patient that is schizophrenic is also under spiritual duress by a demonic intruder. And it is possible that the manifestation of schizophrenia only presents itself when triggered by another (causal) presence. For example, DSM-5 reports that "[r]ates of comorbidity with substance-related disorders are high in schizophrenia" (p. 105). Mechanic et al. (2014) report that studies "also [show] that there must be environmental factors at play" (p. 104). These environmental factors range from things like psychoses to stressors to even the emotional context of one's family life and geographical residence. All this even though studies indicate that there is "a strong link . . . between genetics and schizophrenia" (p. 104). The fact of the matter is the causal pathways involved are quite diverse and may be necessary in some cases to realize schizophrenia in some patients. We are showing that a condition's having a strong genetic link still does not preclude the cooccurrence of another condition that acts as a trigger. As such, it is not impossible or even unusual for someone to have a genetic predisposition toward schizophrenia at $t = 1$ but to never have such a disorder manifest at a later t. A subsequent trigger, like trauma, at, say, $t = 2$ could bring about schizophrenia in a patient such that the symptoms do manifest at $t = 3$. There is no clinical reason why that trigger at $t = 2$ might not or could not be an instance of demon possession (and what could be more stressful than a demonic harassment of the kind that gives rise to a possession?). That someone is diagnosed with schizophrenia at $t = 3$ is obviously no indication that there was no trigger at $t = 2$ given that, in this case, the patient's schizophrenic symptoms would not manifest without the trigger at $t = 2$. So, the anti-realist cannot insist that if someone is diagnosed with a schizophrenic disorder that this inexorably implies that a demon possession could not be a comorbid condition.[14] Thus, even if mental disorders just are biological disorders, they still are not necessarily counter-explanations to a demon hypothesis.

So, nobody knows what causes mental disorders, only what may contribute to or trigger such conditions. Matters will be different in each patient revealing that there are never sufficient or necessary conditions for one's mental disorder, for no two expressions of the same condition are due to identical antecedents. Even if we grant a disease model, the alleged presence of a disease is not enough to rule out other compossible etiologies and triggers (including demonic beings). There is a continuum of factors that may or may not be present that ultimately give rise to a patient's disorderly behavior. Accordingly, critics need to stop hoodwinking us into thinking that on any notion of a mental disorder that this automatically excludes other exogenic causal possibilities—including the ones that may offend their metaphysical sensibilities. In addition to the fact that it is almost impossible to identify (singular) causes for most mental disorders (which is why DSM and other diagnostic canons do not even predicate a diagnosis based on causes), some anti-realists unapologetically believe and proclaim that mental disorders have natural (and organic) causes just by virtue of being a mental disorder and that this *a priori* precludes any other cause as a contributing factor. But, as I also pointed out, even on a disease model of mental disorders (on which this gaps-based objection largely depends), the presence of the putative disease still does not rule out the contribution of other conditions (i.e., possessions) that may ultimately give rise to a mental disorder being realized in someone.[15]

Therefore, the demon-of-the-gaps objection is definitely not how the anti-realist should rebuff the existence of demons. When deployed against physical mysterious events, such an objection is based on faulty presuppositions not essential to a biblical demonology. The scientist closing the gaps in nature may serve as red meat for the anti-realist, but it only amounts to a red herring to the realist. When a demon-of-the-gaps objection is deployed against mysterious psychological events (i.e., possession cases), such an objection amounts to nothing more than gaslighting—pretending that clinical diagnoses of mental disorders have long displaced the demon hypothesis and that religious folks have yet to catch up to

the science. "Follow the science!" they might say. But to suppose that the science, in all its forms, has very clearly displaced a demon hypothesis is to be bedeviled oneself.

4. The Ethical Objection from Scapegoating

There is one more objection to the existence of demons no one should use that deserves our attention—our contempt, really. This one is predicated on concerns about the volitional impact of belief in demons. In some cases, objections highlighting the implications of certain propositions or hypotheses can be good grounds for rejecting them. For example, believing that leeches cure fevers or that ethnic minorities are not fully persons will have obvious harmful implications. That people will be harmed and/or killed can be good grounds for rethinking the hypothesis that provided the impetus for such atrocities to begin with. Of course, one might object by pointing out the obvious here—that such beliefs are simply false irrespective of their implications. But we can suppose that those beliefs are unknown to be true for the sake of argument. If we did not know, say, that leeches do not cure fevers and that swaths of people continue to die because of such medical "remedies", it may still be grounds (for some) for choosing not to believe in the initial proposition.

When it comes to demonology, some skeptics and anti-realists do not hold back a similar strategy in their objecting to the existence of demons. De la Torre and Hernández (2011) imply such an objection in the context of a popular caricature:

> The devil made me do it, and Jesus cleaned up my mess. As a new creature in Christ "I" can move on without really addressing the consequences of or restitution for those sins the devil made me do. Hence, Nazi concentration guards can torture all week long and still attend worship services on Sunday mornings. Politicians can lead armies to war under false pretenses without addressing the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, who are killed or maimed because, after all, our intentions were pure–it was the enemy who was really evil. (p. 198)

The consequences of believing in the devil (or, by extension I surmise, all evil spirits) is proffered to be unconscionable. For, if Satan and his cohorts do in fact influence human beings toward malice, it is a wonder how anyone who does evil, nay *significant* evil, could ever be at fault. If one believes he is under the influence or control of evil forces operating within him, he may even, as De la Torre and Hernández muse, absolve himself of a guilty conscience. Don Cupitt (1961) deploys this sentiment in a succinct argument:

> Explanations of moral phenomena which have recourse to the Devil or devils must be repudiated because they are a device for shuffling off responsibility. (p. 413)

Some atheists have attempted to utilize this argumentative strategy against belief in God. They say that some believers in God find clever ways to "shuffle off responsibility" for their own atrocities (Hitchens 2007, esp. 15–62; Harris 2005, esp. 80–152). On a charitable reading of Cupitt, we could say that once the demon hypothesis has been rendered more improbable than not on other grounds, the ethical argument from scapegoating simply provides us additional motivation to resist such a hypothesis. But, so construed, it is no longer an argument against the hypothesis itself as much as it is an argument against the virtuous character of those who would abuse the belief.

What makes scapegoating arguments like these poor arguments is twofold: First, they do not actually change our doxastic attitudes about things like God and demons; second, as with some gaps-based objections, the objector sorely misunderstands the hypothesis to which she is objecting. Regarding the first point, a believer in demons is more likely to bite the bullet despite her actions being considered morally egregious. No amount of posturing about how awful one's actions are in the name of God or in the name of Satan will change the truth-value of the proposition under dispute. Instead, she is more likely to adjust her behavior to be less visible to critics. Her response is, not to question a metaphysical hypothesis, but to be more clandestine in her behavior. Also, consider that if

a clever and powerful hypnotist was able to manipulate someone to perform an atrocity, we would hardly think that a scapegoating argument would be an effective refutation of the hypnotist's existence. Maybe those under similar influence by demons are rightly deflecting responsibility, one could retort. As unwelcoming as this may be, we should only reject such a hypothesis if it is genuinely wrong, not whether it is unsavory.[16] This is why we do not reject the *existence* of oppressive dictators but, rather, their *esteem*. While we do repudiate the unethical dictator himself, we do not derive dismissive metaphysical conclusions about them. And that is the point: people can be repudiated on such grounds, not propositions. If a valueless, factual proposition entails unfair or unjust moral consequences, then all that that means is that there will be at least one truth we are going to hate.

But that is all assuming that deflecting moral responsibility is indeed entailed by demonology. This brings us to the second thing that makes scapegoating arguments poor: that the objector sorely misunderstands the hypothesis to which she is objecting. It turns out the demonic realist need not bite the bullet. Demonic realism is not a license for "shuffling off responsibility" at all under any rubric. Traditionally, the only kind of demonic influence that could be construed as that which circumvents or displaces the will of a human actor is a possession case. But there are only two kinds of possessions: (i) discordant possessions (those that are unwilled) and (ii) harmonious possessions (those that are willed). It cannot be (ii) that one would have in mind because that would involve the host giving consent to his possession and aligning with the will of the invading demon. This would not be grounds for scapegoating. The objector must instead have (i) in mind. Indeed, the more familiar kind of (malicious) possession tends to be (i). When a person is allegedly possessed by a demon, most understand by this that the host, whose will be not in accord with that of the demon's, has been hijacked in some way. Their ascendancy over their own body has been seized and supplanted by the invading demon's. Such possession cases almost always involve some measure of involuntary bodily resistance (manifesting as seizures, foaming at the mouth, self-harm, etc.) as well as some measure of mental resistance (i.e., that the victim-host seeks remedy from the invasion). But no one attempting to scapegoat their atrocities affirms that they have been controlled in this way. Instead, those who may seek self-exoneration tend to blame a more moderate form of influence over their will. That is, an assailant who claims to be influenced by demons is more likely to construe that influence in terms of hearing voices or some similar phenomenon.[17]

This leads us to consider that the critic instead has in mind demonic *temptation* as the mechanism for concerns about self-exoneration. If so, this will not serve the scapegoating objection either. It is obvious that those succumbing to temptation nevertheless bear the responsibility, at least in part, for their actions. If a Nazi soldier overtly stated that it was demonic temptation that led to his actions, this would not itself be exculpatory. Everyone recognizes that temptations from without are ubiquitous and come in a variety of forms and degrees. Billboards with attractive men and women, a neighbor's flirtatious behavior, and movies containing sex acts will be sources of temptation for sexual assailants, but one can hardly exonerate the assailant merely given the presence of those temptations in the world. The same goes for one's being moved or motivated by certain political rhetoric to take violent action. This is why there have been moves to regulate so-called disinformation and misinformation, particularly in social media. The concern here is that such influence drives some forms of human deviancy. But no one thinks that the one who finally acts on such rhetoric is himself exonerated.

According to most demonologies, demons only suggest or prompt human beings to engage in unscrupulous activities. It is considered a form of temptation. For those with deference to the New Testament, this notion has some direct and indirect support (e.g., John 8.38, 44; Acts 5.3–4; 1 Cor 10.13; 1 Pet 5.8–9; James 1.14–15; 4.7). And even before events like the Jewish holocaust, Christians were careful to speak about devilish influences in terms of such temptation. For example, as the seventeenth-century devotional work, *The (New) Whole Duty of Man*, argues, blaming the devil for one's giving in to temptation is unreasonable because it "is an error arising from a very false notion of the devil's power of

tempting men; it being nothing more, but like that of wicked men tempting one another" (Allestree [1658] 1810, pp. 326–27).

Thus, the mere fact that these sources of influence obtain are not even *prima facie* grounds for dismissing the acting agent's culpability. Nor was it considered to be such. For such an agent is never constrained to act as she does. And because of that, one should not object to a demon hypothesis on the basis of an ethical argument from scapegoating.

5. Conclusions

It's understandable why some hesitate to affirm the existence of demons given how much the hypothesis itself has been, well, demonized by critics. We have been largely conditioned to think that a demon hypothesis is nothing but a contemporary vestige of a prescientific age that stubbornly persists despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. While there is evidence to the contrary that realists should ponder, the ones surveyed in this paper, despite their popularity, are not among them. Herein we examined three of those arguments skeptics and critics should not use.

First, we looked at two versions of the impossibility of justification objection. The first version as proffered by Johnson ambitiously overstates the implications of drawing inferences to the best explanation. While natural explanations may be preferable in most or even all cases where demons are suspected, this has no currency toward showing that there can be no justification for the demon hypothesis. The Waltons' version, though much more modest in scope, is predicated on a misunderstanding about the applicability of science in existential questions about demonology. Since demons themselves cannot be scientifically detected, the Waltons surmise that it is impossible to justify belief in demons on the basis of science. But this was demonstrated to be wrong by showing how this can be appropriately done in a variety of contexts—religious or not.

Second, we looked at gaps-based objections. These involve the twofold notion that the physical sciences and the cognitive sciences have long refuted the demon hypothesis when it comes to adjudicating what causes mysterious natural events and mysterious instances of disorderly behavior in human beings. Critics of a demon hypothesis unapologetically affirm that realists hold on to jaded vestiges that flout the science. They accuse them of defying the unmitigated success of science in increasingly closing those mysterious gaps in nature. But such is predicated on the false notion that demonology bases its justification on such mysterious physical events. Instead, realists are merely accommodating such mysterious events as possibly caused by demonic beings in the absence of a better explanation. Furthermore, the anti-realist's position here is predicated on a misunderstanding about demonology altogether, for a particularly biblical demonology does not so much as imply that demons directly cause physical events.

And then there are those anti-realists who think that mental disorders are what cause the relevant disorderly behaviors in people that occasionally manifest and that this is well established science. However, as I have shown, the diagnostic canons of psychology and psychiatry do not identify causes of the conditions at all because such causes cannot be found. Only triggers and causal pathways can be posited. Even if one adopted the controversial Disease Model of mental disorders, it still does not preclude the possible concomitance of an external, even spiritual, trigger from inaugurating or exacerbating the sequelae of a preexisting condition.

The final objection the anti-realist ought not to use is the ethical argument from scapegoating. This argument attempts to repudiate the demon hypothesis on grounds that it is exploited as a convenient device for wrongly evading moral responsibility. But even if it did have this ramification, demonic realism is not consequently falsified. More importantly, no demonology entails or implies that human actions (outside of possession cases) are irresistibly determined by demonic causes so that an abuser's blame-shifting does not follow from any orthodox demonology. It is yet another swing and a miss by the anti-realist.

Of course, none of this is to conclude that demonic realism is true or even metaphysically tenable. There are better reasons to be skeptical (Bamberger 1952, p. 203; Schleiermacher [1821–1822] 2016, p. 161; Van Eyghen 2018; Guthrie 2018, pp. 69–96). The objective here has been far more modest. I have attempted to show merely that anti-realists, if they are to disagree with demonic realism, should not consider these three particular objections in their argumentative repertoire. Adopting some kind of Hobbesian incoherence argument (i.e., that immaterial spirits are logically or metaphysically impossible) will afford the anti-realist a much more promising a priori case. Or the anti-realist could identify as an agnostic and more modestly argue that no past or present case for demonic realism has thus far been convincing. Either way, the anti-realist should defer to better arguments than the three profiled here and let the devil take the hindmost.

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Notes

1 This notion of demonic realism is most common in Western religious traditions. Since this is the most prevalent understanding, and the object of the particular objections hurled against it, it is the focus of this paper. Ancient notions of *daimon* and variants of animism are not being considered here.

2 This approach may remind us of another David: David Hume (1748). For, similar to Johnson, Hume's argument against miracles on the basis of "uniform experience" (§10) also prevents anyone from identifying whether a miracle ever obtains or will obtain.

3 In fact, I focus on his better case against demonic realism in (Guthrie 2018, pp. 120–22).

4 The Waltons use "conflict theologians" to designate those theologians who are demonic realists and believe in a traditional model of spiritual warfare where literal unembodied demons stand in an adversarial relation to human beings and God.

5 After noting the alleged cultural notion that science is just such a "repository", the Waltons overtly ascribe such a view to demonic realists (or "conflict theologians") who find empirical support for the existence of demons: "Conflict theology is a product of its own cognitive environment, and therefore has the same confused relationship to 'science' that pervades the entire culture" (p. 45).

6 The Waltons believe a more promising route is to turn to an authoritative source like Scripture to show that demons exist if indeed they exist at all. As for their own assessment of Scripture, the Waltons remain agnostic—finding neither biblical affirmations nor any biblical refutations of such beings. This is not to say that they think that demons are not mentioned in Scripture, only that any such mention is not assertoric. A scriptural author who refers to a demon, they say, means only to intimate a culturally familiar demonology as a narrative device to underscore messages unrelated to whether demons exist. Thus, Scripture is no more an affirming source for the demonic than it is an affirming source for, say, chaos monsters despite their being mentioned as well (e.g., Psalm 74.14; 89.9–10; Isaiah 27.1). See Walton and Walton (2019, pp. 99–105).

7 "In this book, it is not our intent to evaluate metaphysical realities" (p. 49).

8 See n. v.

9 Some responsible demonic realists are quite explicit about intimating science in support of the existence of demons. E.g., Boa and Bowman (2007) draw a comparison with natural theology and write: "Scientists have started finding positive evidence for God as a supernatural, intelligent Creator. . . . Likewise, some surprisingly rigorous investigations have yielded positive evidence for the existence of hostile supernatural forces. For example, careful research has shown that demonic possession is a real, if rare, phenomenon, and that it cannot be explained away as a natural psychiatric disorder" (p. 106).

10 Don Cupitt (1961): "Explanation by devils . . . is slothful and cowardly" (p. 414). Richard Dawkins (2006) prefers "fools" in describing such explanatory alternatives: "Those people who leap from personal bafflement at a natural phenomenon straight to a hasty invocation of the supernatural are no better than the fools who see a conjuror bending a spoon and leap to the conclusion that it is 'paranormal'" (p. 129).

11 The demonic realist might push back on me here for being too congenial, noting that there are in fact gaps science has not closed that could only be due to demonic interactions. Specifically, one might have in mind certain seemingly unambiguous instances of paranormal activity. However, even assuming the legitimacy of such instances, herein lies another straw man. For, there is a possible alternative interpretation of would-be demonic interactions that allegedly give rise to paranormal events that does not depend on presuming spirit-matter interaction but affirms demonic causation nevertheless—one consonant with a spiritual nature. Kant ([1766]1900) once offered such an alternative model:

> [P]ure spirits can indeed never be present to our external senses, nor communicate with matter in any other way than by acting upon the spirit of man, who belongs with them to one great republic. The spirits must act in such a way that the ideas which they call up in man's mind clothe themselves in corresponding pictures according to the law of imagination, thus causing any objects which fit into the picture to appear as if they were outside of him. This deception can affect any one of the senses, and, however mixed it may be with incongruous fancies, it should not keep one from supposing spiritual influences in it (Kant [1766]1900, p. 72).

Kant's speculation here allows for one's paranormal experiences to be interpreted as indeed being caused by "pure spirits" (e.g., demons) while at the same time not affecting the physical world, for these end up being "corresponding pictures" or "deception" that "can affect any one of the senses". It is a sort of demon-induced hallucination (vision? audition?). However, this would all be accomplished internally within the percipient and would not involve any physical manipulation in the external world whatsoever. The possibility of this alternative interpretation makes space for those who might have such genuine experiences without there being any scientific traces of those experiences.

Therefore, the realist's protest against my supposition that there are no instances of spirit-matter interaction assumes that Kant's alternative here is not a live explanatory option. Additionally, finding no gaps in the physics of it all regarding such paranormal experiences would not be a disconfirmation of the demon hypothesis unless Kant's alternative model is not possible.

[12] I realize this view perhaps stands in contrast to most demonic realists. However, speculations about a demon's alleged ability to move on the physical world are not informed by Scripture apart from the phenomenal *explananda* but, in the light of the *explananda*, are shown to be accommodated by that Scripture in order to make space within one's orthodoxy for retaining a supernatural cause of those events where no naturalistic alternative is forthcoming.

[13] The situation is even more acute when you consider that even given the so-called diagnostic criteria, it is difficult to even identify whether someone is suffering from a disorder much less to identify its cause. E.g., Bentall (2017); Cooper (2013).

[14] We could say something similar regarding epilepsy which indeed does have a biological component (and is often associated, for better or worse, with identifying extreme possession cases in the past). That is, neurological injury or maldevelopment of the brain can give rise to one's having a predisposition to epileptic seizures. However, such conditions may not necessarily be sufficient to realize an epileptic seizure in someone. It's possible that one with such a predisposition never or seldom has a seizure episode. Sometimes it is the presence of other factors that ultimately trigger an epileptic seizure. The onset of a fever, dementia, or the ravages of age can inaugurate or exacerbate seizure episodes. There is also photosensitive epilepsy which is triggered by visual stimuli such as flashing lights or certain geometric patterns. If a possession case facilitates trauma or fever or involves a visionary experience that could set off a photosensitive epileptic seizure, then merely one's having an epileptic seizure would not be *prima facie* grounds for dismissing the possibility of one's being possessed if other, non-epileptic indicators for said possession are present and reasonably assessed.

[15] Just to be clear, I am not suggesting, claiming, or affirming that mental disorders are always or even usually triggered by possessions. Nor am I associating any genuine mental disorder with a possession case in resisting a disease model of mental disorders. I am only suggesting that it is possible that in some patients a mental disorder only obtains as a debilitating experience when triggered by a demonic invasion. Additionally, this is enough to push back against the allegation that the presence of a mental disorder *ex hypothesi* displaces a demon hypothesis as a contributing explanation.

[16] The demonic realist could also coopt a notion of compatibilism to deflect the objection. If human freedom is compatible with having been determined or constrained by antecedent causes, then there's no problem; it is both true that "the devil made me do it" and that I am responsible for my egregious actions. For culpability is not based, say, on a principle of alternative possibilities, but perhaps in something like Strawson's (1962) notion of "reactive attitudes" which does not require a libertarian sense of free will.

[17] E.g., Nikolas Cruz—the Stoneman Douglas High School shooter in Florida—was reported to have been hearing such voices (Lynch et al. 2008). However, the phenomenon was not that of a discordant possession but something less coercive.

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Article

How to Fail to Debunk Animism

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Abstract: Perry Hendricks argues that my common consent argument for animism fails. The failure, he argues, comes down to the fact that there is widespread agreement in non-animism. Were animism correct, then it is improbable, argues Hendricks, that animism would ever be unpopular. Hendricks' argument is premised on several problematic assumptions, which I attempt to address. Once these assumptions are exposed, it is clear that Hendricks' argument is weaker than it first appears, leaving my position relatively unscathed.

Keywords: animism; common consent arguments; disagreement; social epistemology

1. Introduction

A couple of years ago, I presented an argument in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* which sought to defend animism. The argument was that animism (which is usually taken to be a false and superstitious way of understanding the world) had at least one very strong argument in its favour.

The argument I put forward was a form of *consensus gentium*, modelled on the traditional common consent argument for the existence of God (an argument which has found new life via discussions such as Zagzebski (2012) and Kelly (2011). But others, such as Van Eyghen (2016), have developed similar arguments relating directly to animism). My argument ran like this:

1. Near enough everyone, in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era, independently agrees that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits.
2. Whatever near enough everyone in near enough every isolated community, in near enough every historical era believes independently of the beliefs of outsiders is probably true. *Therefore*, it is probable that some rocks, rivers, mountains, and trees have causally efficacious spirits. (Smith 2020, p. 342)

The basic gist of my argument is that historically isolated human societies converge on the view that animism is correct, while theism garners relatively less agreement between such isolated societies. That is simply a matter of anthropological consensus (see Peoples et al. 2016). So, animism is the epistemic beneficiary of surprising *independent agreement*. Of course, theism is more popular worldwide. But the dominance of theism is the result of well-known, evidentially irrelevant historical events such as colonization, the introduction of foreign viruses, economic pressures, and missionizing. For this reason, widespread belief in theism is unsurprising and hardly speaks in favour of a god's existence. On the other hand, the independent agreement that remains between animist communities is nearly miraculous and lends support to the animist's claims.

And shouldn't I be so lucky, but Perry Hendricks agrees with me! Hendricks argues that surprising independent agreement about animism would indeed raise the posterior probability of animism. However, Hendricks says, I have failed to give any extra weight to the claims of animists, since the widespread *rejection* of animism across the globe is at least as strong evidence *against* it. According to Hendricks, the current widespread *unpopularity* of animism neutralizes any strength my argument might have given to the animist.

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Although Hendricks does not present an argument for it, he goes so far as to say that he is "inclined to think [that the current unpopularity of animism] is *far* stronger evidence against animism than Smith's evidence is for animism, and so we have good reason to reject animism, all things considered" (Hendricks 2022, p. 547). Of course, he is welcome to feel that way. But whatever his personal inclinations, the core of Hendrick's argument is narrower and rather simple in form: "Sure," thinks Hendricks, "*you* may have independent agreement, but *I* have the raw numbers!" Whereas I may have a rag-tag army of isolated animists, Hendricks has the full might of the non-animist mob behind him. So, this philosophical game was nothing but a tit-for-tat that ended in a draw.

Some aspects of Hendricks' argument are quite persuasive, but I do see several fundamental flaws. Let me outline my thoughts about Hendricks' paper which he titled "How to Debunk Animism".

2. Hendricks and Hiddenness

Hendricks argues that if there really are things like "nature spirits" then it is strange, to say the least, that the overwhelming majority fail to think so. While his argument could have made use of some recent work on the relative non-importance of independent belief (e.g., Lackey 2013), Hendricks instead grounds his argument on a variation of Schellenberg's argument from divine hiddenness. For those unfamiliar, Schellenberg's argument runs that nonresistant, nonbelievers exist. But if nonresistant, nonbelievers exist, then a loving God should have revealed himself to them. And he hasn't. Therefore, a loving god doesn't exist. That's the basic idea. As Schellenberg writes:

> God, if he is perfectly loving ... will always be open to being in a personal relationship with any finite person. However, if this is the case, then no finite person will ever nonresistantly not believe that God exists. (Schellenberg 2015, p. 103)

Adopting Schellenberg's approach, Hendricks develops what he calls "the problem of animistic hiddenness" which focuses specifically on non-believers in animism. There are some differences between the two arguments. Hendricks notes that since the omnibenevolence of nature spirits is not assumed, the notion of nonresistence is not at issue. And, cutting a fairly short story shorter, Hendricks concludes that the situation is basically the same for animism as it is for theism. If Schellenberg is right, there should not exist nonresistant nontheists if theism is true. And if Hendricks is right, there should not exist such a preponderance of non-animists if animism is true. If there were nature spirits, he argues, then "they are equally as likely to reveal themselves to past generations as they are to the current generation". He then goes on to make the stronger claim that "it would be very surprising if belief in nature spirits was not widespread during any historical era".

Even though his argument seems to be simpler than Schellenberg's, Hendricks nevertheless makes several assumptions—important ones—without which his argument would fail to land. If I may clarify what I think these assumptions are, I believe we may come to some better understanding as to the strength of his argument. As I will argue, once the assumptions are unpacked, the true strength of his argument diminishes. My rag-tag army of animists survives his mob attack. There are four assumptions that I will focus on in this article. Let me list them quickly, before taking on each in turn.

The first assumption is that raw numbers matter, at least when it comes to religious belief. So, the fact that there is overwhelming agreement about *some* religious proposition is at least prima facie evidence for that proposition. It does not ultimately matter, Hendricks seems to think, *how* any particular agreement is generated. Where there is a widespread agreement about x, there is evidence for x. Let's call this basic assumption the *popularity principle*, which runs that any proposition is afforded at least some prima facie justification if the majority believe it.

The second assumption that Hendricks appears to make has to do with the *constancy* of the behaviour of nature spirits (or non-human persons) over time. The behaviour of these religious entities should not radically change over time or place. As Hendricks

writes: "they are equally as likely to reveal themselves to past generations as they are to the current generation". So, no matter how different modern human populations are from their primitive forebears, there would be (according to Hendricks) *no difference in the rate of communication* from non-human persons to human persons. We can call this the *constancy principle*, which runs that non-human spirits would pursue communication with humans at roughly the same rate throughout human history and prehistory.

The third assumption that Hendricks makes is that human beings are as *capable of receiving* this spiritual communication during all eras and in all places. So, whereas the constancy principle states that spirits should communicate with us at a constant rate, this principle holds that *human beings* are roughly equally receptive to this communication at all times and places. We can call this the *receptiveness principle*.

The fourth assumption is that animism is currently unpopular. Indeed, this was an assumption that Hendricks borrowed directly from me. Although it is more than fair for Hendricks to accept my own assumptions in an effort to defeat me, I will argue that this assumption is too simplistic. But in any case, Hendrick's argument hinges on the idea that animism is a minority view, held only by a few outlier human communities (e.g., hunter-gatherers, neopagans, and perhaps a few rural Japanese farmers). I will label this assumption *Animistic Unpopularity*.

I believe that Hendricks' argument works perfectly well if we accept these four assumptions. However, I am inclined to reject each and every one of them. All four assumptions have serious problems which I hope to outline. Most prominently, the popularity principle cannot be maintained against what are ultimately rather bog-standard philosophical objections. Indeed, most of these objections were contained in my original paper, and yet none were dealt with by Hendricks. So let's take on that principle, the popularity principle, first.

3. The Popularity Principle

The popularity principle states that prima facie justification is given to a proposition about which there is widespread agreement. So, given the widespread popularity of the belief that animism is false, there is prima facie justification for the claim that it *is* false. Straight away we encounter a question (although not necessarily a difficult one): Precisely how much agreement is required in order to count as sufficiently widespread. 70%? 80%? Unanimous agreement? In turn, we may ask if the degree of justification given to a proposition is concomitant with the degree of agreement it generates (screening off that particular claim from any other evidence for/against it). None of this is discussed by Hendricks, so the precise nature of the popularity principle which he is defending is ultimately unclear. This muddies the water of his argument in no small way, as it is his contention that, *on balance*, the widespread unpopularity of animism neutralizes my argument from independent agreement. But without these questions about weights and measures having answers, we are facing little more than sweeping rhetorical maneuvers. A balance requires weights, and Hendricks has not done the work to show that the weights are thus and so on either side of the argument. (How many more animists, for example, would need to be recruited before Hendricks would have to eat his own hat?).

There may be good answers to the questions posed above about the popularity principle. But other problems may be unanswerable. Most importantly, Hendricks does not show how the popularity principle overcomes the sceptical view presented in my argument (Smith 2020, p. 4) i.e., that the present unpopularity of animism has been caused by off-track processes such as missionizing, war, mass conversion, tax kicks, breeding etc. Again, this is no small omission by Hendricks, who seeks to defeat my argument without addressing what is perhaps its strongest pillar.

Since Hendricks did not engage with these points, I can repeat what they were. No agreement which is manufactured by coercion can be taken as evidentially salient by honest philosophers. Most would agree that there exist at least some cases in which the conversion of animists away from their beliefs would not be seen as evidence against animism e.g., if an animist were threatened with the death penalty. So, the question of whether or not raw

numbers matter here will largely hinge on historical facts about the nature of the pressures that were faced by those who ultimately rejected animism. If the historical pressures were such that any reasonable person would yield to them, one can hardly fault the animists for so yielding (and so, one can hardly find reason to *doubt* animism because of their yielding). Overlooking such historical pressures is therefore an easy (if not positively lazy) way to justify the claim that animism is probably false.

Animist beliefs were decimated during the age of discovery (and have continued to be discouraged ever since) by a (violent) process of colonization and by the oppression of traditional cultures, languages, and religions. The introduction of foreign germs also took a devastating toll on the colonized, whose societies suffered wave after wave of decline. The superior technology and science of the invaders was often taken as evidence (by indigenous peoples) for the truth of the invaders' *religious* beliefs, despite the fact that the advanced body of technological and scientific knowledge had not been drawn from religion. For example, in Aotearoa New Zealand, indigenous Māori converted to Christianity en masse, often under the belief that the impressive medical skills of European settlers derived from magical processes associated with the cross. Interestingly, it is only since the so-called "Māori renaissance" beginning in the mid-1980s (a time during which Māori language and culture were reinvigorated) that animist commitments came to be both appreciated again and even effected by law (as in the 2017 *Te Awa Tupua Bill*).

What these historical facts present us with is a debunking argument for non-animism. The modern, widespread belief that animism is false is itself the result of off-track processes. It is not implausible that these processes would occur even given the truth of animism. Given the sorts of pressures faced by indigenous peoples to convert away from their traditional views, it is unsurprising that they did so. And if some form of animism is the ultimate truth about matters religious, then mainline believers have been seriously off-track in their beliefs for centuries.[1]

So, the *popularity principle* suffers for a lack of precision, as well as for failing to engage with the debunking arguments presented in my original paper, and which are quite obviously a key feature of the argument. I agree with Hendricks that raw numbers may matter in some, or even many cases. I agree that social epistemology needs to continue to inquire as to how raw numbers matter. But I disagree that one can point to the raw numbers *in this particular case*, a case in which the raw numbers are clearly non-evidential, and claim any kind of victory. On the contrary, The arguments discussed in the section suggest that the ascendency of anti-animism is a historical quirk of fortune, which can be explained away quite easily.[2]

4. The Constancy Principle

So we turn to the *constancy principle*, which states that non-human spirits would attempt to communicate with humans at roughly the same rate throughout human history. This principle can be seen at play in the following passage:

> If nature spirits are similar to us, then we would expect for nature spirits to reveal themselves roughly equally to all population groups at all times: if nature spirits revealed themselves to American Indians 500 years ago, we would expect for them to also reveal themselves to current North Americans—there are not substantial enough differences between us and our predecessors to warrant such silence. (Hendricks 2022, p. 547)

Why, indeed, are the spirits so silent? The rate of communication should be relatively stable through all eras, shouldn't it? It is for this principle, as well as the next one, that we will need to develop an animist "theodicy" of sorts. We will need to explain why it seems as though nature spirits are not behaving in accordance with the principle.

Why should we assume that the constancy principle holds? Hendricks seems to think that this principle is largely common sense, although he sees some justification for the principle in my argument, since I wrote that "some natural phenomena have spirits or an

interior life akin to our own" (Smith 2020, p. 341). "So," says Hendricks, "if nature spirits exist, then there are spirits that are similar to us that occupy bodies not usually thought to have mental states, such as trees, mountains and so on" (Hendricks 2022, p. 547). The idea seems to be that if nature spirits are *like* us, then they are as communicative as we are. Thus (to provide what should be taken as an obvious caricature), if I were to raise an axe to the tree, we should expect the tree to whelp "Oi! Stop that, you fiend!" And we should expect this just because *that is how we would behave* when facing the same sort of threat. And we should expect this communication as a matter of course.

There are, it seems to me, all sorts of reasons that we might expect animistic communications to be, in the current era, not forthcoming. A major reason for this could potentially be due to our own contemporary disregard for the good of the environment, and for our taking it as a mere resource for consumption. To give a very human parallel, it may be that nature spirits have decided to cut off all diplomatic ties with human societies. We have declared our position, we have assumed the role of aggressor, and in such a situation, animistic communication channels may presently be closed off to us.

And if we (taking the natural environment to be impersonal and beyond moral concern) set ourselves in a non-communicative position with nature, I see good reason why nature herself may take the same position with regard to us. And while we largely remain committed to this stance, I see no reason why it should be nature who reaches out first to end the impasse. Hendricks anticipates this argument and gives his own view on the matter:

> The way that we (modern civilization) treat the environment threatens nature spirits (if any exist) with extinction. However, the best bet for nature spirits to avoid extinction would be to reveal themselves to us, and this remains true even if they distrust us—even if they distrust modern civilization, the threat of extinction would override their distrust and make it likely that they would reveal themselves (to save themselves). And so a distrust of modern civilization will not suffice to explain animistic hiddenness. (Hendricks 2022, p. 548)

But in wartime situations, we do not expect diplomatic relations to hold in this way. Diplomatic channels may presently be closed to us. And if it is the case that nature has simply *capitulated* to our attack, then the case would be just as we find it. Nature has given up against such an overwhelming attack. Perhaps the silence that we encounter is the environment's closest approximation to a white flag. On the other hand, perhaps rivers that can no longer be swum in, perhaps disappearing lakes, perhaps a myriad of the environmental ills we presently face represent nature's last stand against our relentless abuse.

As an aside, it is difficult to understand how to interpret Hendricks' constancy principle in any way that is not cartoonishly anthropomorphic. He seems to take it that if nature spirits are so like us, they ought to communicate *in exactly the same manner*, as expressively, and as consistently, as we ourselves communicate with each other. But of course, that is not what we find. To my mind, this view of "nature's voice" simply conflates human and non-human communication in a way that can only be an Aunt Sally: a caricature of non-human persons as like the imaginary tree who might shout "Oi, stop that!"

Let's begin with some familiar cases. We experience non-human animal communications on a daily basis. We know that this communication is of a kind that is in many ways unlike human communication, and that such communication requires a certain degree of expertise and sensitivity to the creatures encountered. When the dog bares its teeth, or yawns, we know this may be construed in certain situations as a kind of threat. Yet when we humans bare our teeth, we are usually expressing affability or joy. When we yawn, there is no secret that we are tired. When the tree weeps sap, there was no sad story. The tree does not shout "Oi! Stop that!" when faced with an axe. Instead, communication between tree and human may amount to the human's applying respectful, honorific terms such as "grandfather" or "elder" to the tree, and acknowledging the tree's position as a member of the community, with the tree reciprocating in its own manner, by providing shelter or food or comfort. Dogs and trees communicate with us, but not in the precise manner of humans.

They are conceived of as persons, with cultures and communities of their own, but they are not just *more humans*.

Moreover, since we are dealing with beings who are neither omnibenevolent nor omnipotent, we are ultimately in the dark about the true communicative capabilities of these beings. This is a point that I must credit an anonymous reviewer for making. Sure, we may need to assume that the prevalence of animism among hunter gatherers (for example) has something to do with successful communication. But this assumption does not tell us much about how hard it was to achieve this communication in the first place. In addition, given the widespread destruction of natural ecosystems, the beings in question may be considerably weaker than they ever have been in the past.

So, the manner in which communication is advanced may be different enough from human communication to go unnoticed, especially by groups who have not cultivated the necessary relationships. The communications of nature are carried out in her own voice. Indeed, it is reasonable to think that the problem is not on her side, but on ours. Perhaps the natural world has been as communicative and as constant as ever, but it is we humans that fail to hear. Let us now look at that line of argument.

5. The Receptiveness Principle

Hendricks does not explicitly state the receptiveness principle in his paper, but it is an essential part of his argument. The receptiveness principle holds that human beings are as capable of receiving or are as open to communication with spirits in all eras and in all places. It is unfortunate that the only allusion to this principle is found in a footnote and credited to a reviewer:

> One reviewer suggests that it's possible that we're not able to connect with nature spirits because we lack the right technique, whereas our ancestors didn't lack this technique. This is, of course, a possible explanation. But for this to challenge my argument, it needs to be *likely*, and we have no reason to think it is. (Hendricks 2022, p. 549)

But there are various reasons that we may think it likely that the receptiveness of human beings differs from age to age. This may not simply be a matter of lacking a skill, but of adopting an infected theoretical framework. In communities which raise their young to reject the idea that there are any nature spirits to communicate with, a harder time will be had communicating with such entities. The communication itself may be subtle enough to go unnoticed by modern communities, who have discarded their animist commitments. For such people, the true source of spiritual communication may be clouded. I am reminded of Plantinga's laundry list of the sorts of experiences which are supposed to trigger an awareness of a divine being: "The marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us; the majestic grandeur of the mountains . . . ; the ancient, brooding presence of the Australian outback; the thunder of a great waterfall" (Plantinga 2000, p. 174).

Why do these wonders of nature evoke such a response, while swimming pools, ceilings, and light bulbs fail to do so (artifacts which, as it happens, speak to the testimony of man as in the image of God)? Where lies the difference? Has Plantinga's theoretical backdrop divorced him from the immediacy of his experience: one which undeniably suggests a communion with man *and sky*, man *and surf*, man *and mountain*, and so on?

So, the theory-ladenness of observation is, as ever, problematic. Indeed, the problem of theory-ladenness is not restricted to theistic theories. The ascendency of materialism as the dogma of the modern age must also be considered as a doctrine that could impede our communion with nature *qua* subject. Materialism is, after all, a lens through which we see only a few persons in the world.

Theories are not the only problem. As Hendricks' footnote indicates, our communicative abilities, skills, or techniques may simply be lacking at present. In communicating with non-human others, like dogs and falcons, some amount of patience and understanding is required. A degree of expertise is needed. Why would communicating with trees and

waterfalls be any different? The question needing answered is why these skills might be presently lacking in the majority of people.

One factor not discussed by Hendricks is urbanization. I find it surprising that Hendricks says, in yet another footnote, "if nature spirits exist, then we would expect them to reveal themselves to distinct populations roughly equally, since such populations are roughly equally exposed to nature" (Hendricks 2022, p. 546). Is it as simple as that? Are we all "equally exposed" to nature? A growing proportion of humans live in urban centers and, indeed, that proportion is now the majority. This trend has continued ever since the industrial revolution and counters Hendricks' claim that we are more or less equally exposed to the natural environment as ever. Even where rural populations persist, the landscape is far from a natural ecosphere of interdependent organisms and geographical features. Instead, vast expanses of flat, felled earth are used for farming just a few agricultural commodities in close quarters. In urban settings, the environment is even further removed from the hustle and bustle of a forest or jungle. The majority of us find ourselves living—packed like sardines—inside concrete tins, travelling to and fro inside machine horses, to eat dead plants and animals neatly packaged in plastic containers (where they came from, or who they were, we know not). To say that this lifestyle has much in common with the lifestyle of the hunter gatherer (who remains an animist) is absurd. To say that this lifestyle puts us in roughly equal contact with nature beggars belief.

So, receptiveness to animist communications is a factor that needs to be considered alongside the constancy principle. Our receptiveness to communications from nature may be affected by a contemporary lack of sensitivity or expertise in dealing with such communications, and it may also be affected by the relative lack of a natural ecosphere inhabited by humans. Even if Hendrick's constancy principle holds, modern populations may no longer be as receptive to nature spirits as they once were. And if the constancy principle fails, then we may need no rebuttal to the receptiveness principle at all, since the relative lack of communication would be explained by a lack of constancy in its rate. To sum up, the apparent silence may be *actual* silence, or it may be a cacophony of screams, which are simply falling on deaf ears.

6. Animistic Unpopularity

The last of Hendricks' assumptions that I wish to challenge is animistic unpopularity. Before proceeding, I want to reiterate that this assumption was one that I made in my paper. However, I am nowadays inclined to doubt the universality of this claim. In particular, there is a serious problem that arises with respect to childhood animism, which is a universal feature of human developmental psychology. This fact was first noted by Jean Piaget in his 1927 work *The Child's Conception of the World.* Since that time, Piaget's general claim (i.e., that children have innate animist tendencies in their thinking) has been repeatedly replicated in multiple studies (see, for example, Dennis and Russell (1940), Dennis (1943), Nurcombe (1970), and Madsen (1982)).

Piaget noted four stages in the development of this animistic attitude in young children (Piaget 2007, pp. 174–87). He characterizes this attitude as the extent to which children are willing to ascribe consciousness and will (interior states) to objects that are considered by most adults to be inert. The four stages are as follows:

First Stage: Any object may, at some time or other, be the seat of consciousness, when the object displays a certain degree of activity, or when it is in working condition, or when it is the seat of some action.
Second Stage: Consciousness is restricted to things that can move, that are ordinarily in motion, or whose special function is to be in motion.
Third Stage: Consciousness is restricted to things that can move spontaneously or of their own accord.
Fourth Stage: Consciousness is restricted to plants and animals.

By around the age of 12, these animist commitments start to evaporate. The very fact that children are inclined to take as animate what most adults take to be inanimate is strong

evidence against the assumption of Animistic Unpopularity. At any given moment, the majority of the world's children operate within an assumption of animism. The fact that childhood animism is a universal feature of human cognition (i.e., holds cross-culturally), alongside the fact that such commitments apparently need to be "taught out" of the child by elders shows that animism is the default position of human thinking about the environment, rather than an exception that is held by a mere handful of contemporary hunter gatherer societies.

One might argue that Piaget and I are speaking about different things. We both use the same term "animism", but the referents are different. For Piaget, the term seems more closely tied to notions of life, consciousness, and cognition. For me, the term relates more closely to what would usually be called "spiritual" or "soul" phenomena. Clearly, there are some differences here. But there are also commonalities. What is common to each of these views is a shared notion of *interiority* as something that only certain sorts of objects may have. This is the characterization of animism given by Philippe Descola. "Humans and non-humans are conceived as possessing the same type of interiority. [And so] non-humans are said to possess social characteristics" (Descola 2009, p. 151). This understanding of animism has deep connections with Piaget's. Indeed, consider Deborah Kelemen's famous example of how children account for the existence of "pointy prehistoric rocks". Kelemen showed that children invoke teleological explanations for the pointiness of the rocks e.g., "so that animals wouldn't sit on them and smash them" or "so that animals could scratch on them if they got itchy" (Kelemen 2004). Both explanations are animist in Piaget's sense. In the first case we seem to have a sly and wiley rock, mounting a clever defense against pesky animals. In the second case, we are invited to view the rock as part of the material culture of animals.

Whereas I previously argued that there is surprising independent agreement across extremely isolated human communities, I now believe that the independent agreement in animism is virtually universal in human thought. It arises in every one of us from birth, and remains robust until puberty. This is a point that shares overlap with Stewart Guthrie's account of anthropomorphism as an innate feature of human thought (Guthrie 1995).

One might argue that with the *wisdom* of adulthood, animist commitments are rejected. But why not say, equally, that the child's reliable intuition of nature spirits is lost to the disenchantment of adulthood? Why not ask, as David Kennedy asks, whether "young children, because of their different situation, have some insight into nature that adults do not? Does their "folly" actually represent a form of wisdom, or at least a philosophical openness lost to adults, who have learned, before they knew it, to read soul out of nature?" (Kennedy 1989)

Around 25% of the human population at present is under 12 years old. The overwhelming majority of these children are animists, who take the world to be filled with many non-human persons. So, at any given time, there are very many more animists in the world than we typically imagine there to be.

Putting aside childhood animism, there are also animist ideas prevalent in the adult population, which often go unnoticed. The ascription of full blown personhood to fetuses and newborns is an example. And a large proportion of evangelical Christians and Muslims accept the existence of a range of spirits, some disembodied like human souls, ghosts, and demons, others embodied in human form, like angels or the possessed, still others are embodied in non-human form, such as omens embodied in birds, crying statues, and the like. Thus, the picture of humanity as largely non-animist is misleading. Indeed, a probable majority of the modern human population accepts the reality of a wide range of spiritual phenomena. For the religious population, only an austere minority is committed to the existence of a lone omnigod. If Hendricks thinks he has the raw numbers, he may want to double check.

7. Conclusions

Before I conclude, I want to note that, in his paper, Hendricks actually considered three routes by which an animist might escape his problem of animistic hiddenness. I have explored only one of the options he proposed. His first suggestion was that an animist might propose "nature spirit extinction". According to this hypothesis, there used to be a large population of nature spirits, but there no longer are any. They have all gone like the dodo. I do not consider this argument remotely plausible or helpful because 1. The data I sought to explain is why there is surprising independent agreement about nature spirits between isolated human communities (positing that there are *no* nature spirits hardly helps here), 2. The metaphysical views of the various persisting animist societies are far too various to explore the plausibility of this view (according to believers of the Batak traditional religion *Malim*, for example, the death and dissolution of spirit is drawn-out, but inevitable. However, other animist traditions may accept eternally persisting spirits).

The other tack suggested by Hendricks that I have not explored has to do with developing a sort of "sceptical animism" analogous to sceptical theism. According to this defense, our understanding of the intentions of nature spirits is necessarily limited. I do not explore this approach because I do not believe it would not move the debate forward in a constructive way. If such an argument were to be mounted, it could only be an argument from ignorance: extremely easy to defend and virtually impossible to argue against.

As it stands, my argument is that Hendricks has failed to show the failure of my new common consent argument for nature spirits. Hendricks did not engage with any of the strong debunking arguments for non-animism that I presented. He also made several key assumptions which I believe are underdetermined by the evidence. Specifically, there is no special reason to accept the popularity principle, no special reason to accept the constancy principle, no special reason to accept the receptiveness principle, and the principle of animist unpopularity is, although one I previously accepted, ultimately not correct.

In sum, my argument survives this particular attack from Hendricks. My rag-tag army of animists stands firm against the non-animist mob. And ultimately, even if there are good reasons to think that my argument fails[3], the reasons that Hendricks has provided do not contribute to demonstrating that failure.

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Notes

1 Of course, there are still plenty of Christians and Muslims about the place. This fact alone (i.e., the persistence of the proselytizing religions well beyond the age of colonization) may lend *some* support to those religions.

2 Note that some of the problems here can be thrown back in my face. One might ask, for example, exactly how many isolated human communities need to agree about a proposition to make that proposition more probable than not.

3 For example, there may be better evolutionary debunking arguments that ought to be considered. Or there may be reasons to think that there is an important lack of metaphysical similarity amongst the denizens of the animists' various worldviews.

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Neoclassical Theism as Inherently Dialogical

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Abstract: The position usually called "process theism" is seldom called this by one of its most important defenders, Charles Hartshorne. The label he typically uses is "neoclassical theism". It is important to notice that these two designations are not equivalent. To speak of process theism is to accentuate the differences between this metaphysical view and an opposing metaphysical stance, that of traditional or substantialist theism. By way of contrast, to speak of neoclassical theism is not to accentuate *differences* but rather the *inclusion* of one metaphysical tradition within another. That is, the neoclassical theism of Hartshorne (along with that of A.N. Whitehead, John Cobb, and David Ray Griffin, et al.) is both "neo" *and* "classical". The compatibility between the best insights of classical theism and the best in neoclassical theism is evidenced in Hartshorne's startling claim that he learned almost as much from St. Thomas Aquinas as he did from Whitehead! Although Hartshorne spent a good deal of his career pointing out that classical theism was shipwrecked on certain rocks of contradiction (neo), Thomas, more than anyone else, has provided us with an admirable chart showing the location of the rocks (classical). Three different topics will be emphasized in my defense of the thesis that "process theism" tends to be a polemical designation, in contrast to the more irenic "neoclassical theism". The first of these is the contrast between monopolar and dipolar metaphysics. In the divine case, the neoclassical theist emphasizes the claim that, in partial contrast to the classical theistic God who does not in any way change, God *always changes*, and both of these words are important. The second topic is the commonplace in "process" thought that one of the most important passages in the history of metaphysical writing is in Plato's *Sophist* (247e), where it is suggested that being *is* power or *dynamis*, specifically the power, however slight, both to affect other beings *and* to be affected by them. The third topic is Whiteheadian prehension, wherein a metaphysical thinker in the present can literally grasp and include the best insights from previous metaphysical traditions and partially transform them by bringing them into a larger whole.

Keywords: classical theism; neoclassical theism; process theism; monopolar theism; dipolar theism; Charles Hartshorne; Alfred North Whitehead; Joshua Sijuwade

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1. Introduction

The position usually called "process theism" is seldom called this by one of its most important defenders, Charles Hartshorne. The label he typically uses is "neoclassical theism". It is important to notice that these two designations are not equivalent. To speak of "process theism" is to accentuate the differences between this metaphysical view and an opposing metaphysical stance, that of traditional or substantialist theism. By way of contrast, to speak of "neoclassical theism" is not to accentuate *differences* but rather the *inclusion* of one metaphysical tradition within another. That is, the neoclassical theism of Hartshorne (along with that of Whitehead 1978, 1996; Cobb 2007; Griffin 2001; Ogden 1996; et al.) is both "neo" *and* "classical". The compatibility between the best insights of classical theism and the best in neoclassical theism is evidenced in Hartshorne's startling claim (Hartshorne 1948, p. xii) that he learned almost as much from St. Thomas Aquinas as he did from Whitehead! Although Hartshorne spent a good deal of his career pointing out that classical theism was shipwrecked on certain rocks of contradiction (neo), Thomas, more than anyone else, has provided us with an admirable chart showing the location of the rocks (classical).

2. Monopolar vs. Dipolar Theism

Three different topics will be emphasized in my defense of the thesis that "process theism" tends to be a polemical designation, in contrast to the more irenic "neoclassical theism". The first of these is the contrast between monopolar and dipolar metaphysics. Though the logic of monopolarity speaks of being versus becoming, permanence versus change, the one versus the many, etc., the dipolar logic of neoclassical theism sees the latter element in each of these pairs as the more inclusive term. There are permanent (or relatively permanent) features or habits or enduring character traits exhibited in the constantly changing, multifarious world in which we live. In the divine case, the neoclassical theist emphasizes the claim that, in partial contrast to the classical theistic God who does not in any way change, God *always changes,* and both of these words are important (see Dombrowski 1996).

The contrast regarding the concept of God that is most dramatic is that between excellence and inferiority. Both terms cannot be attributed to God because, by definition, God is only excellent and cannot be inferior. In the tradition of perfect being theology, to speak of God is to speak of the greatest conceivable being who is all-worshipful and eminently worshipful. However, it would be a mistake to assume that all contrasts, when attributed to God, would be problematic.

One might ask what properties God, assuming for the sake of argument that God exists, would possess. A response to this question is facilitated by imagining two columns of properties in polar contrast to each other:

permanence	change
being	becoming
activity	passivity
self-sufficiency	dependency
actuality	potentiality
oneness	manyness
abstractness	concreteness
absoluteness	relativity
necessity	contingency

Traditional or classical theism (which is a philosophical/theological view that should not be assumed to be compatible with biblical theism or with the God of religious experience) makes matters too simple. One might say that because God would have to be strong rather than weak, God would have to be active but not passive. That is, there is an obvious tendency on the part of classical theists to favor the terms in the left column and to deny the terms in the right column when applied to God. As a result, God is seen as a strictly permanent being rather than as changing or becoming, and so on. This sort of monopolarity is prejudicial, a prejudice initiated by Aristotle in his truncated version of God and then passed on (ironically via the Neoplatonists) to various classical theists in the Abrahamic traditions.

The prejudice involves the assumption that divine excellence simply involves the separation and purification of terms in the left-side column and the rejection of terms in the right-side column. An analysis of the terms in the right-side column shows the problems with this assumption. Though classical theists hold not that God exists everlastingly throughout all of time but that God is eternally beyond time, this view also involves the belief that God cannot be receptive to creaturely feelings that are necessarily characterized by temporal change. Aristotle as the precursor to classical theism, as well as two great classical theists such as Augustine and Thomas, see God as strictly unmoved. The neoclassical alternative to this view sees positive *and* negative features to *both* activity and passivity. The fact that there are admirable types of passivity can be seen in the discourse regarding positive things such as sympathy, sensitivity, adaptability, and responsiveness, and the fact that there are negative types of passivity (or a problematic lack of passivity) can be seen in discourse about insensitivity and unresponsiveness, even inflexibility or stubbornness. To deny God *all* passivity (or change, contingency, relativity, becoming, etc.) is to deny God

some obvious excellences. Indeed, one wants to avoid claiming that God is fickle, but one also wants to develop a concept of God that is compatible with divine responsiveness to creaturely suffering and with divine personhood (see Hartshorne 1953, pp. 1–25).

It should be noted that there are also both positive *and* negative aspects to the terms on the left side of the above diagram. Unity or oneness can mean either wholeness or triviality/monotony. Further, whereas actuality can refer to definiteness, it can also mean nonrelatedness to others. One wonders what divine love could possibly mean if, as the classical theist maintains, God is strictly changeless. If I understand correctly, in the classical theistic view, God loves the world, but God is not intrinsically related to the world. Again, one wonders what sort of love this might be in that it is not analogous to any sort of human love (see Dombrowski 2004).

The goal is to attribute to God all excellences (on both sides!) and not to attribute to God any inferiorities (on both sides!). Though excellent–inferior is an invidious contrast, permanence–change, being–becoming, and the like are contrasts that are noninvidious. That is, in noninvidious contrasts, there are positive elements within each pole (as in excellent activity and excellent passivity) but also negative elements within each pole (as in inferior activity and inferior passivity). Neoclassical theism is characterized by dipolarity. This does not entail belief in two gods but rather the idea that supposed contradictories or contraries are often better characterized as mutually reinforcing interdependent correlatives. The divine life exhibits steadfastness in the midst of change and unity in the midst of variety. Too much unity (or the wrong sort of unity) leads to monotony, but too much variety (or the wrong sort of variety) leads to chaos.

In effect, classical theism was half correct regarding the concept of God. This counts in its favor, in that it is quite remarkable that fifty percent of this concept (that deals with the positive features of the terms on the left side of the above diagram as well as the negative features of the terms on the right side) was correctly analyzed by the 13th c. The task is to better understand the other half by not assuming that classical theism just *is* theism and contains *the* truth without remainder regarding the concept of God.

In order to avoid the cosmological dualism that characterizes classical theism, wherein religious belief somehow or other involves the effort to pole vault, as it were, from "this" world into "that" supernatural one, neoclassical theists see God as integrating the complexity of the world into a spiritual whole. The process of such integration involves both the necessary existence of God and the contingency that affects God through creaturely decisions. This view is in contrast to the classical theistic view, which can be characterized in terms of the stony immobility of the absolute. In the classical theistic view, we have real relations with God, but God is not really affected by or related to us. It must be admitted, however, that God's very abstract essence as the greatest conceivable in a way escapes the temporal flux. God's concrete relatedness to the world implies a divine becoming.

It is not noticed often enough that if all relationships to God are external to God, then not only is the claim that God is omnibenevolent compromised, but also God's nobility is undermined. Classical theists themselves have often noticed that if a sentient animal is behind a rock, the relation between the two is an internal relation to, say, the dog, but it does not affect the rock. The animal's consciousness is obviously superior to rocklike existence. This should lead us to notice the oddity in the classical concept of God, which is described in rocklike terms such as strict permanence, pure actuality, an unmoved being, having only external relations, etc.

It must be admitted that it is incumbent on neoclassical theists to account for the popularity of classical theism among philosophers and theologians, despite the defects in this view. Several possibilities come to mind. One is the apparent ease with which one can defend monopolarity rather than dipolarity. One simply accepts one and rejects the other of contrasting categories rather than opt for the labor-intensive job of showing how each category applies the logic of perfection. However, this ease of application has an intellectual price if one ends up with an unmoved, impassive deity incapable of love in any sense analogous to what we human beings understand love to be! It is not so much

the Thomistic doctrine of analogy that is the problem as the failure on the part of classical theists to consistently adhere to this doctrine. Another possible reason why thinkers adopt monopolarity is that if monopolarity is assumed to be the best route to take in the effort to develop an adequate concept of God, it is easier to see God as strictly permanent or absolute than to see God as changing or internally related to others. However, this ignores the possibility that God may very well be the most absolute of all as well as the most related of all to the extent that and in the sense that both of these are positive features. There need be no contradiction here if God is absolute (in existence) and relative (in actuality) in different aspects of the divine nature.

A third possible reason for the success of classical theism is the longing on the part of human beings to avoid the risks and uncertainties of life so as to find refuge in a divine being who does not change. The neoclassical response is not so much to deny the legitimacy of such longing as to point out other emotional considerations, as in the comfort that arises from realizing that our sufferings make a difference to an omnibenevolent divine life who could not remain unmoved by creaturely suffering. Finally, a fourth possible reason for classical theism's success over the centuries is due to the observation that it is easily made compatible with monotheism. However, monotheism necessarily deals with God as an individual, not necessarily with the idea that the divine individual cannot change or be passive in a positive sense or be really related to creatures, etc. That is, none of these four reasons really show the superiority of classical to neoclassical theism.

In neoclassical theism, we should become used to saying that the divine becoming is or that the divine being becomes. There is one divine reality, and the two poles in dipolar theism need not be seen as in tension with each other. As mentioned above, God *always changes,* and it would be a mistake to drop either of these crucial words. There is no problem in using contrasting predicates to apply to the same reality so long as they are applied to different aspects of this reality. Thus, the assumption that neoclassical theists are trying to replace "ontolatry" (the worship of being found in classical theism) with "gignolatry" (the worship of becoming) is mistaken. The everlasting permanence of divine *existence* is in contrast with (but is also logically compatible with) divine *actuality*, which exhibits a supremely excellent change in concrete relations with creatures at each moment. The thesis of the present article is that it is a mistake to think that classical theism is rejected by neoclassical theists. Rather, classical theism is placed within a larger whole when it is realized that divine permanence is an important part of the concept of God.

3. Being *Is* Power

The second topic is the commonplace in "process" thought that one of the most important passages in the history of metaphysical writing is in Plato's *Sophist* (247e), where it is suggested that being *is* power or *dynamis*, specifically the power, however slight, both to affect other beings *and* to be affected by them. Once Plato's "or" (*eite*) is replaced with "and" (*kai*), we have a metaphysical view wherein both action and passion are divinized in that the greatest conceivable being would be dynamically powerful both in what such a being could do to and in what such a being could receive from, the world. This give-and-take indicates that dialogue provides a model not only for divinity but for reality itself, even in its least significant instances (see Plato 1977, 1999).

It should be emphasized that belief in divine omnipotence is at odds with the Platonic metaphysical claim defended by neoclassical theists that being *is* power (*dynamis*—again, see *Sophist* 247e), specifically the dynamic power both to exert influence on others and to receive influence from others, in however slight a way. This is a major theme in neoclassical theism. If omnipotence refers not to the quite intelligible abilities to influence all and to be influenced by all, as neoclassical theists believe, but rather to the ultimate possession of *all* power, then the concept of God becomes unintelligible. That is, if each existent has *some* dynamic power of its own to influence and to be influenced, in however humble a fashion, then no being, not even a divine being, could have *all* power because such power would render everything else powerless, i.e., nonexistent. However, beings other than

God *do* exist, hence the unintelligibility of omnipotence. If being *is* power, then if being is divided, power is divided as well. This means that a thing is where it acts *and* is acted upon in some partially indeterministic way. That is, classical theism is not so much rejected by neoclassical theism as it is accused of dealing with only one sort of divine power—the power to act on others—at the expense of the power to receive influence from other beings with powers of their own.

The concept of omnipotence has been closely connected historically to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. However, this doctrine makes no sense due to the fact that, although *relative* nonbeing or otherness makes sense (as in the claim that a carrot is nothing similar to a corkscrew), *absolute* nonbeing or nothingness is a contradiction. To say that absolute nothingness *is* to talk gibberish and to turn absolute nothingness into somethingness, yet the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* says precisely this. It comes as a surprise to many classical theists to learn that the biblical account of creation at the beginning of Genesis is not *ex nihilo*, but rather consists in shaping or luring order out of the aqueous, disorderly muck that is there everlastingly on the scene along with the persuasive agency of God (see Levenson 1988; May 1994). This is creation *ex hyle* (out of matter) rather than creation *ex nihilo*.

It is true that a world without an omnipotent God involves risks in that a world that involves creative agency contains no guarantee that the creative agents will not sometimes be at odds with each other. That is, a world without risks is not genuinely conceivable in that a totally risk-free world would be a dead one without living agents. However, there are living agents. On the neoclassical view, by way of partial contrast with the classical theistic view, God's power consists primarily in divine unsurpassable love. In Whiteheadian terms, congenial to mystical experience, God's power consists in the worship and love that divinity inspires.

Of course, the classical theist will respond to the neoclassical critique of omnipotence by claiming that the neoclassical theist "limits" God and that the neoclassical God is not that than which no greater can be conceived. However, the overall point of the above criticisms of classical theistic omnipotence is to suggest that omnipotence is false, indeed an unintelligible ideal; hence, it is ironically the classical theistic view of God that is limited. In classical theistic omnipotence, evil becomes inexplicable, yet evil obviously exists; in the classical theistic view, the power of creatures is eliminated, despite the fact that such power clearly exists at several different levels; and in the classical theistic view, creation *ex nihilo* is affirmed, despite the logical contradiction involved in the claim that absolute nothingness is (or at least was).

Classical theists are much more willing to claim apophatic ignorance of God's goodness than of God's (allegedly) coercive power. The alternative neoclassical view of God's *ideal* (not omnipotent) power is both that God's persuasive agency influences all and God's admirable patience is influenced by all, in a dipolar, dialogical fashion. *If* by all-powerfulness or omnipotence one means the highest genuinely conceivable form of power, then the neoclassical theist has no quarrel. We have active power over only a small corner of the world; likewise, regarding our ability to passively receive dialogical influence. However, because many or most people think of all-powerfulness as coercive omnipotence, it is perhaps safer to altogether drop the word "omnipotence" in descriptions of divine perfection. In the contrasting neoclassical view, God has power uniquely excellent in quality and scope to influence all and to be influenced by all. Neoclassical metaphysics is thus well-equipped to deal with *dialogue* among metaphysical positions in that the Platonic *dynamis* it adopts sees reality itself in dialogical (rather than monological) terms.

The classical theistic view, in reality, involves a concept of a tyrannical God who leaves no room for chance, despite the chance elements that characterize contemporary explanations of reality in evolutionary biology and quantum physics. Intrinsic value provides the power to affect others and to be affected by them. Neoclassical theists feel the force of an old dilemma: either divine love or divine coercive power has to be rethought. Classical theists should be more forthright than they have been historically in the admission that they really worship divine coercive power and apophatically claim ignorance of divine

love. Further, there is much to be said in favor of the view that the historical problems with the concept of God involved not how much power God had but what kind of power was divine. Not even perfect power, on the neoclassical view, can guarantee perfect harmony. In their individuality, the details of the world can only be influenced, never completely coerced or determined. According to the Hartshornian maxim, power is influence, and perfect power is perfect influence. This insight is difficult to understand so long as *coercive* power is seen as the only sort of power, thus excluding the *persuasive* power that is more easily rendered consistent with the attribute of divine omnibenevolence.

To have *perfect* power over all individuals is not to have *all* power over them on the view I am defending. The greatest power *over individuals* cannot leave them utterly powerless but rather must leave something for them to decide *as* individuals. *All* power in one individual is impossible because power must be exercised with respect to something that exists with some powers of its own to influence others and to be influenced by them. The real cannot be merely inert for the reason that anything that has no active or passive tendencies at all would be nonexistent (or at least completely beyond our ken). If the something that is acted upon is itself partially active, then it must offer some resistance, however slight, to ideal power. In short, power that is resisted cannot be omnipotent. In addition to the analogy from dialogue, an analogy from friendship is appropriate here: a friend does not dictate the terms of the relationship down to the last detail. Rather, friends respect the partial independence of friends. If someone decided on all of the details of another's life, this person would not really be a friend but a tyrant who aspired to totalitarian rule.

As before, being *is* power. The fact that God cannot "make us do" certain things does not really "limit" God's power, as classical theists might allege because there is no such thing as power over the powerless or power to do nonsense. Power over us would not be power over *us* if our being counted for nothing. The mystic, in particular, counts for something in his or her active/passive powers.

4. Whitehead's Prehension

The third topic is Whiteheadian prehension, wherein a metaphysical thinker in the present can literally grasp and include the best insights from previous metaphysical traditions and partially transform them by bringing them into a larger whole. Though the common view is that of James Ross that there is an *impasse* between classical and neoclassical theism (Ross 1977), I think that a more accurate way to describe the relationship between these two enormously influential traditions is to say that classical theism is not so much wrong as that it has become victim to the mereological mistake of confusing an edifying part with the whole of theistic metaphysics. God's *existence* may be permanent (the fact *that* God exists), but God's *actuality* (*how* God exists from moment to moment) is constantly changing.

No doubt, a critic might allege that I am overly sanguine about the possibility of rapprochement between classical and neoclassical theists. The critic will say, perhaps, that neoclassical theism has swallowed up classical theism or, to use a different metaphor, has engaged in a hostile takeover of classical theism. A response to this imagined critic might include the recommendation that we look at the issue at hand with a wide-angle lens, as it were. Though Plato can be profitably seen as a dipolar theist (Hartshorne 1953, pp. 38–57; Eslick 1953; Dombrowski 2005, chap. 4), Aristotle simplified things in a troublesome way by rejecting divine dynamism found in the *Phaedrus* (245, etc.) and *Laws* (book 10) by emphasizing only the correlative principle of divine fixity (e.g., *Republic*, book 2; *Phaedo* 78–80; *Symposium* 202–203). Both poles in Plato's theism are brought together in the *Timaeus* and *Sophist*. That is, there is something historically contingent about Aristotle's appropriation of one pole but not the other in Plato's dipolar view. There is also something historically contingent about Aristotle's pervasive influence on important thinkers in all three Abrahamic religions, such as Philo and Maimonides in Judaism;

Augustine, Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and even Kant in Christianity; and Al Ghazzali in Islam (see Dombrowski 2016).

However, there are signs that the hegemony of classical theism over the concept of God may be gradually eroding. Although at one point in the 16th c. only the Socinians offered a dipolar alternative to monopolar classical theism (as well as to monopolar pantheism), since the time of Friedrich von Schelling in the 19th c. the dipolar, neoclassical alternatives to monopolar, classical theism have flourished. To cite just a few among many, many examples, in his famous book about the prophets, Abraham Heschel sees God, contra Aristotle, as the *most* moved mover; a similar move is made by Martin Buber and Bradley Artson (see Heschel 1962; Buber 1937; Artson 2013). Mohammed Iqbal and Mustafa Ruzgar offer a neoclassical alternative in Islam to historically dominant classical theism (see Iqbal 2013; Ruzgar 2008), and the numerous examples of dipolar, neoclassical theism in Christianity are well known. For example, two traditional Thomists who have moved toward neoclassical theism by carefully comparing Thomas and Whitehead are James Felt and Norris Clarke (see Felt 2001; Clarke 1979). Perhaps most significant in philosophy is the fact that William Alston and Richard Swinburne, arguably the two most influential analytic philosophers who defend theism, have permitted divine change and passibility, albeit grudgingly. Because of the dominance of analytic thinking in philosophy over the past 120 years, these two thinkers' concessions to neoclassical positions are noteworthy (see Alston 1984; Swinburne 2008).

The point that I am trying to make here is that the logic of perfection has a history of two and a half millennia, and it is by no means clear that classical theism will have the final word regarding what it means to be the greatest conceivable being. However, it is to be hoped that the great achievements of classical theism will be preserved. It must be admitted that Anselm himself, one of the crucial proponents of the logic of perfection, remained a classical theist, even if there is a case to be made to the effect that his great discovery in the ontological argument is more consistent with dipolar theism than with a monopolar view (see Dombrowski 2006; Hartshorne 1965). Granted, permanent *existence* is preferable to the temporary, as classical theists have correctly argued for centuries, but it is by no means clear that the greatest conceivable being would be changeless in every respect, say in the mode of existence exhibited at any particular moment, especially in response to the suffering of creatures. As before, the agonic character implied in "process" theism should not disguise the more conciliatory character of the label "neoclassical" theism (see Dombrowski 2017, 2019).

5. Sijuwade's View

The fact that the topic of the present article is a lively one in contemporary philosophy is evidenced by an article published in the past year by an astute analytic metaphysician. Joshua Sijuwade's "The Metaphysics of Theism: A Classical and Neo-Classical Synthesis" covers much of the same ground as the present article. However, Sijuwade assumes that God *has to be* omnipotent, as classical theists claim, because God has to be seen as the ultimate source of *everything* that exists. As I see things, this assumption makes any synthesis with neoclassical theism very difficult. By contrast, classical theistic defense of divine simplicity, permanence, immutability, and impassivity *can* be rendered consistent with neoclassical theism once one becomes clear of Hartshorne's greatest discovery: the distinction between divine existence and divine actuality. Sijuwade's view, however, seems to be that we need to avoid at all costs an "emasculated" version of God's power as merely persuasive. He thinks, erroneously, I contend, that creation *ex nihilo* is definitely both the biblical view and that of the tradition of religious experience. Sijuwade's gendered concept of God as masculine is rightly challenged by several feminist thinkers who have tried to purify theism of its traditional male bias by moving toward neoclassical theism (see Case-Winters 1990; Davaney 1990; Christ 2003). Further, rather than view the neoclassical God as a "wimpy" deity, it might be argued that the neoclassical God is twice as transcendent as the God of classical theism in that the former exhibits excellent permanence as well

as excellent change, etc. That is, dipolar transcendence is superior to mere monopolar transcendence (see Loomer 2013).

Sijuwade is correct to note that neoclassical theism is at a disadvantage to classical theism when the standard of comparison is what he calls "sacred tradition," but an important concession is made by Sijuwade to neoclassical theism when it is seen as superior to classical theism when the criterion is "sacred scripture" and/or religious experience. Unfortunately, Sijuwade initially adopts the aforementioned stance of Ross that there is an "impasse" between classical theism and neoclassical theism, in contrast to the thesis of the present article that neoclassical theism *includes* the best insights of classical theism. Hence, there is no impasse. To assume that there *is* an impasse is to concede too much to classical theism, which sometimes sees neoclassical theism as a threat (see Sijuwade 2021).

It must be admitted that Sijuwade tries to overcome this impasse by appealing to a view defended by some analytic metaphysicians (e.g., McDaniel 2017; Turner 2010) called ontological pluralism, wherein there are irreducibly different kinds or modes of being. This has the possible negative effect of leading to the bifurcation of nature, an effect that process thinkers have tried to avoid, along with many other thinkers engaged in what has been called the revolt against dualism. That is, Sijuwade leaves the relationship between the abstract and the concrete unexplained: they are just different.

What is of major concern to Sijuwade as an analytic metaphysician is that the Quinean association (see Quine 2013) between existence and existential quantification be secured, hence his novel distinction between abstract entities (as articulated by classical theists), and concrete entities (as articulated by neoclassical theists). *How* these different modes of being can be subsumed in a notion of generic existence is left unexplained. Indeed, Sijuwade thinks that ontological pluralism is "more natural" than whatever generic existence might be. Somehow or other, Sijuwade thinks, a modified version of David Lewis's theory of possible worlds will help us bring the two modes of being together (see Lewis 1986). This is in contrast to the Hartshornian world populated by concrete instances of experience. These instances of becoming are strung together in lines of inheritance that exhibit permanent (or relatively permanent) features or habits or tendencies or characters or personality traits, all of which are *abstract qualities of the concrete* units of becoming. The latter are the ultimate realities.

Sijuwade correctly sees Hartshorne as the thinker who introduced the label "neoclassical theism," although he does not see this position as including the best insights in classical theism or as necessarily opposed to divine omnipotence (in contrast to ideal divine power). Further, Sijuwade does not notice dipolar theism in Plato, thus making the accomplishments of Whitehead and Hartshorne appear to be far more "neo" than "classical". It has been my hope in this article to address this imbalance and to emphasize the fruitful dialogue that has occurred and can continue to occur between the "neo" and the "classical".

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The Hypostasis of the Archons: Platonic Forms as Angels

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Abstract: The thesis of this paper is that Platonic Forms are angels. I make this identification by claiming that Platonic Forms have the characteristics of angels, in particular, that Platonic Forms are alive. I offer four arguments for this claim. First, it seems that engaging in self-directed action is a sufficient condition for being alive. The Forms are, as teleological activities, self-directed actions. Second, bodies receive their being from their Forms, and some bodies are essentially alive. Third, in the Good, all the types of goodness, including life, are identical. The Forms are appearances of the Good. Fourth, since the Good imparts as much goodness as it can, the Forms are alive unless there is some bar to their being alive. There are good reasons to think that there is no such bar. I then show that ethical vices do not give body to human form, but give body to other forms—those that are evil angels. Lastly, I provide a survey of the relationships that various religious traditions posit between ethical vice and the demonic.

Keywords: angels; demons; philosophy of religion; Plato; platonic forms

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1. Introduction

I identify Platonic Forms with angels. I do so by advancing four arguments for the claim that the Forms have the characteristics of angels, in particular, that they are alive: from the characteristics of the Forms, from the characteristics of the bodies that participate in the Forms, from the simplicity of the Good, and from the imparting nature of the Good. For those who believe in Platonic Forms, or take their existence as a serious theory, the paper functions as an argument for belief in angels. I then show how ethical vices are not a part of the human body because they do not participate in the Form of Man, but in Demonic Forms, evil angels, demons. Lastly, I survey the association between ethical vice and the demonic across a variety of religious traditions.

The paper assumes God's existence and some Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics.[1] These assumptions locate angels within a metaphysical scheme that would be broadly recognizable to most of the religious traditions that teach the existence of angels: to Greco-Roman paganism, Sassanian Manichaeism, Byzantine Christianity, medieval Catholicism, Safavid Shi'ism, or Hasidic Judaism. These religious traditions are all infused, in their philosophical expression, with the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle (Feibelman 1959, pp. 163–88).

Though the existence of angels is taught by many religious traditions, they are generally not a focus of authoritative theological pronouncements, allowing for much internal diversity within each tradition. I intend my account to be consistent with traditional Chalcedonian Christianity. To my knowledge, the closest precedent for my claims about the relationship between vice and the demonic comes from St Antony the Great: "You will not find their [the demon's] sins and iniquities revealed bodily, for they are not visible bodily. But you should know that we are their bodies, and that our soul receives their wickedness, and when it has received them, then it reveals them through the body in which we dwell" (Antony 1995, Ltr. 6, vv. 50–51).

My account avoids the dichotomy between demons as cryptids wandering the *res extensa* and demons as metaphors for human evil. On my account, demons are ontologically

independent of human beings, but appear in us when we consent to be less than fully human. Though I argue for something metaphysically "spooky", I do not argue for "poltergeists" that violate the ordinary patterns of efficient causality found in the physical world, nor does my discussion appeal to unusual experiences. My claim that ethical vices are the bodies of demons does not conflict with or impinge upon the empirical theories or observations of psychology. By analogy, panpsychism makes claims about the nature of matter, but does not have strange empirical implications, for example, that your table salt is about to strike up a conversation with you.

2. Metaphysical Assumptions

Form (*eidos*) and matter (*hyle, hypodoche*) are a conceptual couple. I note a few of the important ways in which they relate. Form is pattern (Plato 1997a, 389b; 1997g, 28a). Matter is that which is patterned by form. Form is actuality, being (Plato 1997e, 508d). Matter is the potentiality to receive the actuality of form, "a receptacle of all becoming—its wetnurse" (Plato 1997g, 49a). Form is essence (Plato 1997d, 74d–e). Matter is that which is inessential subsisting within an essence. Form is activity (Plato 1997e, 508b–e). Matter is the patient of form's activity. Form is goal (Plato 1997d, 75a). Matter is that which is organized toward form as goal.[2]

The metaphysical relationship between form and matter is participation (*metechein*). For matter to participate in form is for it to become patterned by it, to become actualized by it, to receive its essence, to be activated by it, to be organized toward it. The participation of matter in form results in body (*hypostasis*), the presence of form in matter. For example, a particular body is a horse because it is matter in which the Form of Horse has become present; it has received this essence, is organized toward it as a goal, performs its activity.

Unparticipated form is form unmixed with matter, existing outside of the potentialities of space, time, and the physical. Participated form, form descending into matter, is form appearing within such potentialities. The participated form present in body is an image (*eidolon*, *eikon*, appearance, disclosure) of unparticipated form. Though participated form is an image of unparticipated form, an image of form is itself form. For example, looking at a portrait of Margaret, I see Margaret herself, present by participation in this image, who is also present by participation in innumerable family photos, and in the memories of her friends. These are not "Margarets", but one and the same Margaret present in different matters. Traditionally, "the Forms" is reserved for form *qua* unparticipated, form prior to its disclosure in matter. I follow this tradition and use "form" to indicate the more general idea of the conceptual partner of matter. Therefore, while a given body, a given horse, is not itself the Form of Horse, it does, by being an image of it, present that Form; it is that same pattern, actuality, essence, activity, and goal, disclosed in the potentialities of matter.[3]

God, the Good, is to Forms as Forms are to bodies. The Forms receive their being from the Good by participation; they are images in which the Good appears. The Forms are matter in relation to God, receptacles that disclose God into various different patterns, activities, and goals: Beauty, Knowledge, Virtue, and so forth. In turn, bodies are receptacles that disclose the Forms (and so, ultimately, God) into our world. Bodies cannot participate in God in an unmediated way since bodies are also images of a given Form. For instance, a human being can only be like God in the human way, rather than in some other way—the dog way, the mango way. Some Forms are the intelligible species of things, types with bodily tokens, though this is not to deny that there are Forms of particulars as well as species. As Plotinus says, individual men "result from different forming principles" (Plotinus 1984c, 5.7), rather than each being a token of the Form of Man, made particular only by their matter.[4] In Christian tradition, this idea is expressed by the guardian angel, in Greco-Roman tradition by the individual's *daimon*.

A Form is purely actual, lacking any potentiality—it does not become in the course of time, or go out of existence, and there is nothing that it could become other than it is. However, a Form is not pure actuality since there are some things that a Form is not (Plant is not Animal). God alone, the Good, is pure actuality, the All in All (1 Corinthians 11:58)

whose imperishable spirit is in all things (Wisdom 11:26). The Forms also stand in relation to one another as form and matter, receiving activity, goal, and so on, from one another (in the order of being, not the order of time). For instance, the Form of Courage is matter in relation to the Form of Virtue—it receives its being from it and is an image of it. Courage pre-exists virtually in Virtue, and Virtue appears through Courage. Again, the Form of Man is matter in relation to the Form of Life, the Form of Knowledge, and so forth, since the Form of Man receives its being by participation in these Forms, which are less specific and closer to the pure actuality of the Good. This accords with what Pseudo-Dionysius teaches about the hierarchies of angels, the higher angels energizing and illuminating the lower angels with what they have received from God (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 292D–293A, 693C).

Form is the object of thought (*nous*); it is the intelligible. Body is the object of perception (*aisthesis*)—for example, we perceive horses; we perceive virtue in a courageous action. Matter as such, matter *qua* matter, is not the object of any cognitive faculty (Aristotle 1991b, 1036a 7). While cognition is of being (Plato 1997e, 508d; Aristotle 1991b, 1075a 4–10), matter *qua* matter, lacking the being of any form, does not exist. Therefore, our world may be described as a hypostatic union of Being and nothingness, as the *kenosis* of the *pleroma*.

3. The Forms as Angels

All Forms are angels.[5] Many Platonist philosophers make similar claims. For Eriugena, the angel is not itself a "reason of things" or "primary exemplar" but "an angel is an essential intellectual motion about God" containing "certain theophanies of those reasons" (Eriugena 1987, 444c, 446c). For St Thomas Aquinas, angels are "self-subsisting forms" (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q50 A5 co.; 1955, SCG 2.91.5), and for Marsilio Ficino, angels are "forms that are totally free of matter" (Ficino 2001, bk. 1 chp. 5 sct. 10).

The claim that the Forms are angels also matches with some traditions of the Abrahamic faiths. In Second Temple Judaism, we find angels as personifications of "the forces of nature (lightning, clouds, rain), the reification of human concepts and constructs (childbirth, forgetfulness, nations), or the hypostasis of divine attributes (justice, love, forgiveness)" (Dennis 2016; cf. 1 Enoch 8). We find the same in Islam (Burge 2012, pp. 31–51). For instance, al-Ghazali describes angels as "the intellects that are principles for existence", "bestower of forms" (Al-Ghazali 2000, chp. 7 sct. 20, chp. 17. sct. 8; Griffel 2009, p. 151). In Christian tradition, it came to be the saints, who are like the angels (Luke 20:36), who personify various aspects of reality.

Angels have the following characteristics, some of these being perhaps more central to the concept than others:

- Life—immortality (Luke 20:35);
- Power (*dynamis*, 2 Peter 2:11);
- Agency, engaging in actions (Matthew 24:31);
- Ethical virtue (2 Samuel 14:17, 2 Peter 2:4);
- Joy (Luke 15:10);
- Desire (*epithymous*, 1 Peter 1:12);
- Knowledge (1 Peter 1:12);
- Spirit (*pneuma*, Hebrews 1:14);
- Ontological superiority to human beings (Psalm 8:5, Hebrews 2:7);
- Greater intimacy with God than human beings presently enjoy (Matthew 18:10);
- Praise God continuously (Revelation 4:8);
- Numerousness (Revelation 5:11);
- Social relations of some kind with one another (Hebrews 12:22);
- Exist since (at least) the creation of the earth (Job 38:7);
- Exercise providence over creation (Psalm 91:11);
- Communicate messages from God to human beings (Luke 1:26).

I identify the Forms as angels by offering four arguments for the claim that the Forms are alive. This should be understood as a proxy for many of the other angelic characteristics, or at least as a first major step in identifying the two. Plato's *Timaeus* expresses the view

that the Forms are alive; the demiurge creates the world from a model, where "the model was itself an everlasting Living Thing", which "comprehends within itself all intelligible living things". Our world, to be complete, "should possess the same kinds and numbers of living things as those which, according to the discernment of Intellect, are contained within the real Living Thing" (Plato 1997g, 37d, 30c, 39e).

3.1. From the Characteristics of the Forms

It seems that the characteristics of Forms show that they are alive. I take it as a sufficient condition for being alive that something engages in self-directed action (Aristotle 2016, 412b 17). If something runs away, or punches, or lectures—and is not simply, like an artefact, used to do these things by some other agent—then it is alive. Plausibly, action just is "activity that is directed at a goal" (Wilson and Shpall 2012; cf. Aristotle 2011, 1094a). Now, the Forms are self-directed actions because they themselves are teleological activities. Therefore, the Forms are alive.

Since Forms are purely actual—free of potentiality—they, like God, are themselves actions, rather than things that can engage in actions. In our case, as participated forms, our actions take place through bodily structures that have the potential for action, like eyes or brains. The Forms, being purely actual, do not act through matter, but just are actions. Again, the Forms are self-directed actions because their goals are not, like artefacts, externally pressed upon them by some other agent; Forms are teleological activities. Since Forms are purely actual, they are actions in a state of teleological fulfillment, in which the activity is not merely done in pursuit of a goal, but in which the activity and the goal coincide: the goal is to be in a particular state of activity, and that goal is continuously achieved and does not suffer from the potential of failing to be achieved. Forms are what Aristotelians call immanent actions, in which "it is the exercise that is final . . . seeing in the one seeing and contemplation in the one contemplating" (Aristotle 1991b, 1050a 25–40). The goal of seeing, to see, is achieved just by engaging in the activity; the activity and the goal toward which it is oriented are not separated by a lapse of time or other potentiality. Again, we engage in a sequence of actions, and this compound of actions just is our life, but, lacking potentiality, a Form is a single action. Again, our actions are oriented toward goals that involve things external to us—for example, to pick up a glass—because we are in a state of potentiality. By contrast, the action of a Form is internally oriented; its action is not one of change or motion, in itself or in another, but to be what it is—a specific hypostasis of the Good. This is not to say that the action of a Form is inert; like God's action, its effect is to bestow itself on matter by participation—and, through its images, to effect change in the world of potentiality. Whereas participated form struggles to become what it is, to imitate its Form in matter, Form is always teleologically fulfilled. For example, the Form of Compassion is the complete, perfected, act of compassion. In sum, a Form is a "life that is at once whole, united with itself, and not distant from itself" (Ficino 2001, bk. 1 chp. 5, sct. 10).

3.2. From That Which Participates in the Forms

At least some bodies are alive, at least some are beautiful (and so forth for every type of goodness). Each body has its being, including such types of goodness, by participation the relevant Form. Because there is a Form of Life, there can be living things. Because there is a Form of Beauty, there can be beautiful things.

Whatever being a body has, it receives by participation from the corresponding Form. Therefore, that Form cannot itself lack that being (Plato 1997a, 439d; 1997c, 301b). For instance, the Form of Life cannot be not alive; if it were, *per impossibile*, not alive, then none of the matter than it enforms would be alive; the Form would have no life to share with that which participates in it. Again, if the Form of the Beautiful were, *per impossibile*, not beautiful, then nothing would be beautiful. However, some bodies are alive; some are beautiful. Therefore, at least the Forms of those bodies are alive, beautiful, and so on.

This argument does not imply that, for example, the Forms are located in space and time, or that they are so tall and so heavy. Properties such as these pertain to states of potentiality and becoming, characterized by mutability, rather than being, characterized by immutability (Plato 1997g, 27d). The immutable, essential, properties of a body it has by virtue of its form, whereas the mutable, inessential, properties it has by virtue of its matter. Some bodies are essentially alive. For example, that I am alive pertains to the type of being that I am. It is a property that I cannot lose without ceasing to exist, whereas that I live in such a place, or have a freckle, and so on, are properties that I can lose without ceasing to exist. They pertain to my becoming rather than pertaining to my being.

3.3. From the Simplicity of the Good

God is simple—without parts, beyond plurality. God's existence is identical with his action, which is identical with his beauty, life, power, knowledge, moral goodness, and so forth. In God, all the types of goodness, all perfections, are identical.[6] This is a central teaching of classical theism (Vallicella 2019; Aquinas 1947, ST I Q3) and of the Platonic tradition (Cohoe 2017).

Since the Forms receive their being by participating in God, the Good, and since in God all the types of goodness are present, it follows that all the types of goodness are present in all the Forms. If beings receive their being from God by participating in him, if they are to be divine hypostases, if they are to disclose God, if they are to be appearances of the Good, all the types of goodness must be present in them. That is, nothing that exists is entirely without life, nothing is entirely without beauty, and so on. Suppose that something existed but was entirely devoid of life. Since God is alive, and since his life is identical with the other types of goodness that we ascribe to him, this thing that we are supposing would, by virtue of its lifelessness, be utterly unlike God. Therefore, this is an impossible supposition—such a thing cannot exist because unlikeness to God, Being, entails its nonexistence. Rather, nothing that exists is entirely devoid of life; "for being is not a dead thing, nor is it not life" (Plotinus 1984b, 5.4.2). Therefore, if the Forms exist they must be alive. Since the Forms are intermediaries between ourselves and the Good, they must not only be alive, but alive in a fuller sense than us—a sense briefly illustrated in the first argument.

One objection to this argument might be that so long as something is good in any one respect (beautiful but not alive, alive but not beautiful, etc.), then it is like God in some respect, and so can exist, despite lacking some types of goodness entirely. I deny that anything can be like God if it lacks any of the types of goodness. Of two things in the material world, we can say how alike they are by assessing how many properties they share. A slice of bread is like a langoustine in that they are both nutritious to eat. A crab is more like a langoustine than a slice of bread is like a langoustine in that, as well as being nutritious to eat, a crab is also a crustacean. However, since all of God's properties are identical with one another, there is not the same possibility of assessing likeness between God and a body in terms of the number of shared properties. Therefore, either something is like God—and so alive, good, beautiful, and so on—or unlike God, and so devoid of all types of goodness, including existence. This is not to deny that likeness to God can come in degrees, that one thing can be better than another, as they participate in God in a more unmediated manner—for example, angel is better and more alive than man—it is only to deny that anything is bereft of likeness to God, which must include life.

Another objection to this argument might be that some beings are surely not alive—atoms, rocks, and so on. This objection calls for elaboration on the distinction between angel and soul. Angels are unparticipated forms, while souls are participated forms. For example, the Form of Man is an angel, and the Form of each man is his guardian angel, while the participated form of each man is his soul.[7] Soul, participated form, "the first actuality of a body that has life in potentiality" (Aristotle 2016, 412a 20–30), is enmeshed within the potentialities of matter. Therefore, it is the type of thing that can become better or worse, which can be affected and passive; it is a pattern that can disintegrate. For instance,

if I live in a vicious way, or become senile, then as I cease to draw down my Form into potentiality, to that degree, I cease to exist—my soul withers and dies, ceasing to be form for matter. To illustrate, performances of a song can be done better or worse and, after some margin of badness, cease to be performances of that song. By contrast, an angel is in a state of ceaseless, unchanging, and teleologically fulfilled activity: the angel is not altered by a sojourn into potentiality.

I suggest that we should understand "nonliving" things as having life in the sense that they manifest the activity of angels, but without the intermediary of soul that living things have. For example, the activity of an electron is ceaseless, unchanging, and fulfilled—undying, unwearying, and not teleologically oriented toward anything other than its present state. Therefore, while electrons and so on are less alive than living things in that they lack a life of their own—self-directed action, soul—they are nevertheless alive as manifestations of a purely actual life. A few analogies may be helpful. Nonliving things are alive in the way that our hair or fingernails are alive, outgrowths of something living. Nonliving things are alive in the way that an arrangement of furniture, or a tax code, can be rational, resulting from and exhibiting the rationality of rational beings. Nonliving things are alive in the way that the smallest parts of organisms (a sliver of a cell wall, a molecule of chlorophyll) are alive, participating in a life that is not wholly contained or localized within them. Again, whereas a soul is intrinsically indexed to a particular body, an angel can have indefinitely many bodies or no bodies; though an angel can allow a body to participate in its life, the angel ontologically precedes body.

The suggestion that nonliving things have life by virtue of their relationship to angels matches the idea expressed in the Abrahamic traditions that angels exercise providence over *everything* in our world and, in particular, that they are responsible for *all* motion (Augustine 2002, p. 390; Al-Ghazali 2011, p. 172; Aquinas 1947, ST I Q110). As Maimonides says, "natural forces and angels are identical" (Maimonides 2002, p. 161).

3.4. From the Imparting Nature of the Good

Since being a cause of goodness is good (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q103 A4 co.), and since the Good is the best, God imparts as much goodness as he can; "the One . . . overflows, as it were, and its superabundance makes something other than itself" (Plotinus 1984b, 5.2). The limits on the goodness that God imparts are limits on the ability of things to receive goodness, rather than limits on God's ability or willingness to give goodness. For instance, by their nature, ants are not rational creatures. If God created an "ant" with a rational nature—that could write poetry, discuss ethics, and so on—it would be something other than an ant. Therefore, that God has not given rationality to ants is due to the limits of their nature, rather than due to a lack of generosity on God's part.

This raises the question of why God creates beings that by their nature are limited in these ways. The principle of plenitude (Lovejoy 1936, p. 52) states that it is best for there to be a gradation of beings—for example, some rational, some irrational.[8] This is best since God, Being, is more completely manifested by a wide variety of beings than by only one type of being (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q47 A1 co.). Again, through this variety, higher beings can imitate God by exercising providence over lower beings (Aquinas 1947, ST I, Q103, A6) and being imaged in them (Plotinus 1984b, 5.2). It is best that God creates both the better and the worse, rational and irrational beings.

If everything receives as much of God's goodness as its nature allows, the relevant question for us is whether the nature of a Form excludes its being alive. I offer three reasons for thinking that there is no such limitation.

First, to the extent that the first three arguments for identifying Forms with angels are cogent, they support the claim that there is no bar to a Form being alive. Since Forms are self-directed actions, they are alive. Since some bodies are alive, at least their Forms are alive. On pain of being unlike God, Forms are alive.

Second, it seems that the properties of Forms that one might propose as being incompatible with being alive are also properties of God. Since it is part of the concept of God

that he is alive, then those who hold that the concept of God is coherent must admit that having these properties is not a bar to being alive. The most obvious three such properties are: not having a physical body, being nontemporal, being nonspatial (Drange 1998, p. 56). In the same vein, according to some conceptions of God, God is a Form; Augustine terms God the "First Form" (Bradshaw 2004, p. 225), the Form of Forms.

Third, the clear and epistemically easily accessible examples of nonliving things (in the sense of not having a life of its own) are examples of material things: rocks, atoms, and so on. Again, it seems that the characteristics in terms of which we identify nonliving things refer to materiality, bodies that exhibit an absence of metabolism, homeostasis, growth, reproduction, and self-motion.

By contrast, the characteristics in terms of which we identify living things, although also usually understood in terms of materiality, admit of nonmaterial, purely actual, analogues. Metabolic activities—nourishment, excretion—and homeostatic activities—thermoregulation, osmoregulation—aim at maintaining the form of a living thing, but we can conceive of form that maintains itself without these material processes. Growth aims at the full expression of form, but we can conceive of form that is always already in a state of full expression. Reproduction aims at the sustaining of form by way of recreation, but we can conceive of form that sustains itself without succession. A plant or animal reproduces itself so that it "may, insofar as it is able, partake of the everlasting and the divine . . . and remains not itself but such as it is, not one in number but one in form" (Aristotle 2016, 415b 1–5).

This suggests that nonlife is something that emerges in materiality, not prior to materiality, and so that nothing bars a Form from being alive.

4. Human Participation in the Demonic

The claim that the Forms are living beings, angels, takes on practical significance when we turn to the issue of human participation in nonhuman Forms. We speak of our ethical vices as our "demons", and we say of some vicious action "that wasn't really me, that is not who I am". Again, many experience a sense of passivity in bouts of passion, a sense of dissociation from their worst actions. The discussion of this section presents metaphysical claims about ethical vice that broadly mesh with these conceptualizations and experiences. Therefore, it functions as a fifth argument for the claim that the Forms are alive—that we encounter the life of some of these Forms in our everyday experiences.

4.1. That Ethical Vices Do Not Participate in the Form of Man

We have noted that form is pattern, actuality, essence, activity, and goal, and that in bodies, form appears in matter. Therefore, we can determine whether something is human body by determining whether it is an appearance of the Form of Man, whether human form, human soul, is present in it. Let us say that sight is a part of the human form—that seeing is one aspect of its activity and goal. If so, then that through which I see is a part of my body—whether a natural eye or an artificial eye of glass and metal. Likewise, if a body does not express the human form, then it is not a part of the human body. If I swallow a penny, or have a penny surgically implanted in my arm, then, although the penny is physically located within my body, it is not a part of my body because it is not expressing my form; it is not matter for my form.

Ethical vices are not appearances of human form. A virtue is an excellence, and an ethical virtue is an excellence in one's dispositions to action and passion (emotion, desire) (Aristotle 2011, 1104b 15). Each ethical virtue is oriented toward the goods of a certain domain of action, and the ethically virtuous person is oriented toward the goods of every domain in the way that is best, so that they are poised to achieve what is best (Aristotle 2011, 1106b 5–30). For example, the moderate person is disposed to eat and drink in the way that is best, to respond in the way that is best to the good of bodily pleasure. By contrast, ethical vice is a departure from excellence in such dispositions, such as a disposition to pursue bodily pleasure even at the expense of health, to neglect opportunities to help others,

to be insensitive to beauty. Ethical virtues disclose the human form; they are what our dispositions to action and passion are like when those dispositions are ordered toward the human good, when they participate in the human activity, a life lived according to reason (Aristotle 2011, 1098a 12–17). Therefore, as ethical vices are dispositions that depart from this, they do not disclose the human form; they are failures to pattern matter after that form, to manifest its activity, to pursue its goal; they are inhuman. More generally, a being's excellences help constitute its existence by orienting it toward the goal that defines it and as it loses those excellences it tends toward nonexistence. For example, the properties that make some being a knife are those excellences that help it to cut well. As these are lost it becomes a bad knife and, after some margin, no longer a knife at all. Therefore, ethical vices are not a part of the human body.

I note some thoughts supporting this conclusion. For one thing, there is a sense in which a person who has lived very viciously has not just lived badly, but hardly lived at all—for example, the person who squanders themselves on the pursuit of fame. For another thing, it is appropriate to not love the bad. Therefore, if ethical vice is a part of the human being, then, to that extent, it is appropriate to not love the human being. However, the human being is worthy of the greatest love—so it must not be that ethical vice is a part of the human soul or body. Lastly, if my ethical vices are a part of me, then by destroying them, I destroy some part of myself. However, the opposite seems true—that by destroying my ethical vices, I become more myself.

To say that ethical vices are not part of the human body is not to say they are not parts of our bodies, or that we are not responsible for them. The rational part of the soul is able to exercise choice concerning action and, through habituation, to shape dispositions to action and passion. When this is done well, it results in human body. When this is done badly, it results in inhuman bodies—in dispositions enformed by goals that are inhuman. Although we can make our bodies inhuman by making our dispositions cease to participate in our form, these inhuman bodies are our own in the sense that they result from, and in turn have an ongoing influence on, exercises of our own rationality. As an image of this process within the soul Plato gives us a:

> "multicolored beast with a ring of many heads that it can grow and change at will—some from gentle, some from savage animals . . . .he should take care of the many-headed beast as a farmer does his animals, feeding and domesticating the gentle heads and preventing the savage ones from growing". (Plato 1997e, 588c, 589b)

4.2. That Ethical Vices Participate in Demonic Forms

To avoid the conclusion that our ethical vices are body for some Form other than the human, we might wish to say that they are only failed attempts to give body to human Form, that they are distorted versions, approximations, of that pattern. After all, a body always remains in a state of potentiality with respect to its Form: the Form is the purely actual taken as a goal by the impurely actual. Therefore, a body can disclose its Form in matter imperfectly while remaining a body of that Form, just as a bad portrait of Margaret still presents her. An analogy with deformity or illness might be made. *Qua* eye, *qua* matter oriented to the goal of sight, a deformed eye is body for the human Form. *Qua* deformed, such an eye is not body for some other Form, but the failure to fully express the human Form.

In one sense, it is right to say that ethical vices are distortions, found in body, of human Form. Our vices, as our dispositions, continue to stand in a relationship of potentiality to the human Form; they are a locus in which the human Form could be given body, if they are reformed, for example, if my disposition toward the needy turns from being hard-hearted to being compassionate. Again, the deformed eye is a locus in which human Form could be given body, if it is healed.

However, in another sense, it remains necessary to say that our ethical vices participate in and give body to Forms other than the human. Like every Form, the human Form is

purely actual. Therefore, while given human forms can be more or less like it, the Form of Man is always perfectly itself—it cannot depart from its own activity or goal in any respect. Therefore, if there is some activity or goal that is inhuman—humanlike, or almost human, a distorted approximation—it cannot be the activity or goal of the human Form, but must be that of some other Form. Therefore, for every departure from Form that we find in form, that exhibits an activity and goal that is not perfectly human, we must posit a Form corresponding to these, as the purely actual states toward which they tend.

Ethical vices are dispositions toward activities and goals that are inhuman. For instance, my ethically vicious disposition to be hard-hearted toward strangers is inhuman—it is not merely an absence of compassion, but the presence of dispositions that are different from compassion: for example, to respond to the suffering of strangers with a pained irritation, to imagine various reasons why they might be unworthy of help. Again, the goal toward which this disposition tends, my own disunity from these strangers, their own nonexistence, is opposed to the goal of compassion. Therefore, corresponding to this, we must posit a Form of Hard-Heartedness to Strangers—a living being that is perfectly hard-hearted to strangers. The analogy with the deformed eye is misleading. The deformed eye does not do its activity, or does not do its activity very well. Nevertheless, the deformed eye has no activity or goal other than sight. By contrast, in ethical vice, we adopt goals that differ from the goals of virtue; we treat as goods things that are not really goods and vice versa, we order goods in the wrong ways—for example, in *schadenfreude* we take pleasure in the sufferings of others, in envy we are pained by the well-being of others, and in gluttony we take too much pleasure in food—and likewise we engage in activities that differ from those of virtue.

I take this account to be consistent with the claim that evil is a negation. Change involves something ceasing to be (Aristotle 1991c, 191a 35; Plato 1997f, 248a–249c). However, in change, space and time prevent us from entirely ceasing to be. Sequentially and extensionally, our changed state is preserved. This is like an object falling through a series of nets, each of which momentarily breaks its fall. For instance, my body ceases to be in one pose, but the space around it, and the next moment of time, receives its changed shape. By contrast, the Forms cannot change. Therefore, supposing that evil is a negation—an absence, a privation, a passing away, a falling away—then for every negation of Form, there is a distinct Form. Whereas a given human being may become worse but remain identical with themselves over space and time, any ceasing to be among Forms would be, would result in, a distinct Form. Each "fallen angel" would be the failure to be of an angel (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 725A, 733C). The claim that evil is a negation is shared widely within both the Platonic (Plotinus 1984d, 1.8.1) and the Christian traditions. From this claim, many Platonists conclude that there are no evil divinities or angels—the ontological superior must also be the ethical superior (Martin 2004, p. 189; Plato 1997e, 378a–380c). By contrast, traditional Christianity teaches the existence of demons. Therefore, the two traditions must understand this claim differently. In my view, the demonic is not just an absence of the angelic, but the presence of something that falls short of the angelic; a living being distinct from the angel.

As noted, Forms are goals. When we take these Demonic Forms as goals, when we engage in their activities, when we shape our dispositions toward them, our dispositions become bodies for them, we make our dispositions into their images, and they appear within and through us. This view does not imply that demons interact with our minds in some causal-efficient sense. Rather, as goals, they order our mental lives in the way that any goal does. For example, the goal of eating is apprehended mentally in the guise of the desire to eat, or imagining various delicacies, or remembering or inferring where food might be found. Likewise, the goal of greed—prioritizing wealth over other goods in a way that drags us away from human flourishing—appears to us as a desire to get money from someone even when this would involve lying, in daydreaming about how happy we will be when more money has been acquired, in attending too frequently to our stock portfolio, and so on. When we find that our disposition toward wealth is patterned after the Form

of Greed, that disposition is inhuman and demonic. Such a disposition is the body of a life and an agency distinct from oneself. "The wicked person is not one person but many" (Aristotle 1991a, 1240b 18).

I will not embark on the theodical question of how and why Demonic Forms arise. I briefly note two traditional answers to this question. One answer is that these Forms arise because they can be, in various ways, a means to goodness; the existence of greed allows for the good of transformation, repentance, as when dispositions turn from greed to generosity; for the good of goodness triumphing over evil; for the good of choice between good and evil; and that from greedy dispositions, good empirical consequences can follow. This type of answer is reflected in stories of God using unwitting demons to advance his purposes (Tobit 3:8, 6:11–18). Another answer is that these Forms arise from the fecundity of the Good. The Good's creativity gives rise to the ontologically least good as well as the best (hadrons to henads), and gives rise to the ethically best and least good, to the edge of absolute nonexistence. This answer is reflected in Kabbalah as the qliphoth, the evil spirits who are the "shells" or "husks" surrounding goodness (Matt 2004, 19b), or in the Hermetic teaching that "it is his essence to be pregnant with all things and to make them" (Trismegistus 1992, bk. 5, sct. 9).

5. Vice and the Demonic: A Survey

The association of ethical vices with the demonic is widely shared across cultures. I cannot say that this tendency is entirely universal, as I cannot find relevant sources about the indigenous religions of Africa, Australasia, or the Americas (though they involve divine personifications of different aspects of nature, of different human activities, etc.) I outline some of the different ways in which religious traditions have construed the relationship between vice and the demonic. Arguably, that so many cultures make some association between them is what we would expect to observe if there is such an association and something we would not expect to observe otherwise. I press this argument from common consent no further. I presume that readers of this article will find this survey interesting, and it supports my claim that vice is demonic.

5.1. Judaism

Jewish tradition contains many diverse accounts of the relation between vice and the demonic. In Genesis 6:1–8 we meet the Nephilim, the offspring of human women and the Sons of God. The idea of the Nephilim derives from the ritual sexual practices of Israel's neighbors, in which a monarch would mate with a god, in the person of a temple prostitute (De Young 2021). Nephilim are the offspring of these unions. Understood spiritually, we become Nephilim by being vicious, mating with the demonic, and giving it birth in ourselves. In early modern Judaism, dybbuk are the souls of the evil departed, who can possess the living (Dennis 2016). The *Mishnah* offers the idea of demons as "partly formed souls, unfinished beings left over from God's creative process" (Dennis 2016)—created at twilight on the sixth day (Kulp 2022, 5:6). This conveys the idea of demons as human beings who are imperfect, unfulfilled—which the vicious surely are.

Kabbalah contains further associations between vice and the demonic. One is that demons are our creations, the "spiritual byproducts of human criminal and immoral sexual activity" (Dennis 2016). As the *Zohar* puts it, "the delights of the sons of men, in which they indulge asleep at night, generate demon after demon" (Matt 2004, 19b). Similarly, the *Treatise on the Left Emanation* teaches that the demons Samael and Lilith were "born in a spiritual birth . . . in the image of" Adam and Eve, due to the latter's sin (Ha-Kohen 1986, pp. 173, 179). Here, Samael and Lilith are presented as entire antihuman personalities, "shadows" of Adam and Eve, rather than personifications of specific vices. Another idea in the *Zohar* is that the sinner "draws upon himself all sorts of impure spirits, clinging to him relentlessly . . . clinging only to those who cling to them" (Matt 2004, 55a) Here, our vices do not create demons, but do attract them to us. In Hasidic writings, angels and demons are presented as in some sense internal to us; "Man stands upon the earth and his

head reaches to the heavens, and the angels of the Eternal ascend and descend within him" (Dennis 2016).

5.2. Islam

In the *Quran*, the primary role of shayatin (satans) is to incite vice in human beings; whispering evil suggestions to them (23:97); teaching magic (2:102); and inspiring disputes between friends (6:121) and rebellion (58:10). Islamic tradition contains the idea that shayatin can, in some sense, be within us. As one hadith has it, "the Shaitan [the Satan] flows through the children of Adam like blood" (Al-Bukhari 2022, 7171). According to al-Ghazali, ethical life is "a struggle between the forces of the angels and the forces of the devils" (Al-Ghazali 2011, p. 31). According to Ibn 'Arabi, "the soul acquired the evil and blamable qualities it possesses from the touch of Iblis' trampling . . . Satan's living in it and his authority over it is because his footprints are in it" (Ibn 'Arabi 1980, p. 64). Alongside shayatin, Islam teaches the existence of jinn. Man is made from clay, jinn from fire, and angels from light (Sahih Muslim, 2996). If angels are creatures of rational intellect, then jinn are creatures of imagination and emotion, *thymos* (El-Zein 2009, p. 33). Jinn are morally ambivalent and so can act as tempters or as helpers. In Islam, jinn are responsible for possession phenomena (Al-Shimmari 2021, pp. 67, 72).

5.3. Christianity

The New Testament expresses the notion that we participate in a higher order of reality, and make it present in us, by engaging in its characteristic action. For instance:

> "'If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You are doing the works [*erga*] your father did.' . . . 'You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.'" (John 8:39–44, ESV)

Here, Jesus is not making the (absurd) claim that all of Abraham's biological descendants do his works and inferring that his interlocutors are not Abraham's biological descendants since they do not do his works. Rather, the claim is that Abraham's children just are those who do his works, that the devil's children are just those who do his works (Aquinas 2010, pp. 130–32; cf. 1 Peter 3:6). This metaphysics of participation is repeated elsewhere:

> "Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning [*arches*]. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works [*erga*] of the devil . . . By this it is evident [*phanera*] who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil". (1 John 3:8–10, ESV)

> "Before we believed in God, the dwelling place of our heart was corrupt and feeble, since it really was a temple built by hand; for it was full of idolatry and was a house of demons, because we did everything that was opposed to God". (Barnabas 2003, 16:7)

Those who practice sin participate in the demonic *arche* and *erga*, disclosing the demonic into this world, making demons present in and through themselves. Vice and the demonic receive a great deal of attention from the Church Fathers. I draw from the *Philokalia*.

According to Evagrius the Solitary, there is a demon "entrusted with" or "set over" (Palmer et al. 1979a, pp. 39, 52) each passion.[9] The goal of the demon is to distract and impair the intellect so that it will not know God (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 52). The demon pursues this goal by inflaming the passions by presenting thoughts, images, memories, or possible courses of action, to the intellect. For instance, "the demon of anger . . . suggests images of our parents, friends or kinsmen being gratuitously insulted . . . making us say or do something vicious . . . The demon of avarice . . . suggests that we should attach ourselves to wealthy women" (Palmer et al. 1979a, pp. 47, 51).

Evagrius distinguishes between thoughts that we cause and those caused by the demons, with *everything* vicious falling to the latter; "all thoughts producing anger or desire in a way that is contrary to nature are caused by demons" (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 39). St Hesychios the Priest stresses that demons are always involved in vice; "it is impossible for sin to enter the heart without first knocking at its door in the form of a fantasy provoked by the devil". "If no demonic form enters the heart, it will be empty of evil thoughts". St John of Karpathos has it that "when no demon dwells within us, our soul and body are not troubled by the passions" (Palmer et al. 1979a, pp. 170, 193, 320).

However, the Church Fathers emphasize that the vicious cooperate with the works of demons, rather than only being passively affected by them. St Mark the Ascetic says that the vicious "assented to this demonic activity and shared in it" (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 151). Hesychios remarks that "the provocation comes first, then our coupling with it, or the mingling of our thoughts with those of the wicked demons" (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 170).

The Church Fathers also indicate that demons are in some sense within us: "the demon of anger . . . he dwells in our hearts". Demons are "barbarian cave-dwellers living within you". Demons "move like dark clouds through the different parts of the heart, taking the form of sinful passions". "Just as someone in the midst of a crowd, holding a mirror and looking at it, sees not only his own face but also the faces of those looking in the mirror with him, so someone who looks into his own heart sees in it not only his own state, but also the black faces of the demons". Nevertheless, demons are ultimately external to our essence; "the wicked spirits cluster round only the outside of the heart" (Palmer et al. 1979a, pp. 82, 318, 282, 166, 263).

The consequence of cooperating with demons is described with images of slavery, ensnarement, devourment, and madness (Palmer et al. 1979a, e.g., pp. 46, 90, 286, 299, 344), but also adultery (Palmer et al. 1979a, pp. 39, 263) and giving "birth to evil passions" (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 343). To refuse cooperation with demons is to "destroy and banish" (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 314) them; "the demons are weakened when the passions in us decrease" (Palmer et al. 1979b, p. 68).

We do not experience demons directly, but infer their presence from the thoughts that they present; "by recognizing the object presented to it, the intellect knows which demon is approaching. For example, if the face of a person who has done me harm or insulted me appears in my mind, I recognize the demon of rancour approaching" (Palmer et al. 1979a, pp. 38–89).

Many Church Fathers allow that demons have bodies, but bodies of some fine matter such as fire or air, or spiritual bodies. Some, such as Minucius Felix, say that "when the evil angels fell, they lost their simplicity of substance and took on a substance half-way between mortal and immortal" (Russell 1981, p. 104). I am not sure how to understand these claims. Plausibly, as with idea that demons are aerial spirits (e.g., Ephesians 2:2), these ideas indicate the liminality of angels and demons between ourselves and God. I think that my account also offers a plausible interpretation: the fiery/airy/spiritual bodies of the demons are our ethical vices. This is how *Picatrix*, a highly influential grimoire, understands the association of demons with fire:

> "When a wrathful intent it set alight in humankind, it is immoderately inflamed, and they become furious and enraged in the utmost. At that moment, a devil is produced in every action. We can say through a certain analogy that devils exist in fire—that is, in the ignition of the fire of human wrath from which devils bring about their effects". (Attrell and Porreca 2019, p. 145)

The teaching that came to be authoritative in Western Christianity (Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States 1997, sct. 330) is that angels and demons are immaterial, do not have "bodies naturally united to them" (Aquinas 1947, ST I Q51 A1). This view fits well with the idea that, as Hesychios says, "the demons work through evil thoughts alone by forming in the intellect what fanciful pictures they wish . . . Lacking the density

of physical bodies, the demons through deceitfulness and guile are purveyors of torment, both to themselves and to us, by means of evil thoughts alone" (Palmer et al. 1979a, p. 193).

The Church Fathers also speak of cooperation with angels (Palmer et al. 1979b, pp. 18, 71, 77, 88, 98), angelic blessing, and angelic assistance in ethical life. If my research is any guide, the association of angels with specific virtues is a much less prominent theme, if present at all (Enoch 40:9, Hermas 1:5:1, 2:6:2). My account makes sense of this asymmetry in that virtues are our own in a way that vices are not.

Gnostic theologians also identify vices as demonic. Valentinus writes that

> "The many spirits dwelling in the heart do not permit it to become pure: rather, each of them performs its own acts, violating it in various ways with improper desires . . . . the habitation of many demons". (Valentinus 2021, p. 303)

According to Clement of Alexandria:

> "Basilides and his followers used to call the passions adventitious occurrences. They say that they are in essence spirits attached to the rational soul in some primitive disturbance and confusion, and that there are other different, bastard spiritual natures which grow up in attachment to these . . . Basilides' man perpetuates the image of a wooden horse in the poetic myth, enfolding in one body an army of so many different spirits". (Clement of Alexandria 1991, bk. 2, chp. 2, scts. 112–13)

5.4. The Hellenic World

The root of daemon, *daio*, means to divide, to dispense. Daemons are beings that dispense fate. Daemons are intermediate between, and mediate between, human beings and the gods (Plato 1997b, 984e).The views of Apuleius are broadly representative of earlier Platonism (Apuleius 2015). For Apuleius, some daemons are the souls of the dead, who "are punished with certain wandering, as with a certain exile, on account of the evil deeds of their life". Another class of daemons are not deceased humans, but "preside over certain powers. In the number of these are Sleep and Love". These daemons personify various aspects of us. Apuleius does not say whether there are any evil daemons within this second class. However, Apuleius is clear that all daemons are subject to the passions and that they are set over the passions; "according to the ancient theology . . . [daemons] . . . suffer all the mutations of the human soul; and are agitated by the ebullitions of human thought . . . Hence, the passions of the subjects of their government are, in fables, proximately referred to these". Apuleius says that we have individual daemons drawn from this second class; "The upright desire of the soul is a good daemon . . . the blessed are called eudaemones, the daemon of whom is good, i.e., whose mind is perfect in virtue".

Porphyry makes a clearer association between vice and the demonic. He says of the evil daemons that "they inflame people's appetites with lust and longing for wealth and power and pleasure, and also with empty ambition from which arises civil conflicts and wars and kindred events . . . all self-indulgence and hope of riches and fame comes from them, and especially deceit" (Porphyry 2000, bk. 2, scts. 40, 42). We can avoid daemonic attacks by not participating in sacrifices to them and by controlling our passions (Porphyry 2000, bk. 2, sct. 43). Porphyry remarks that "the soul is a dwelling place, as you have learned, either of gods or of evil spirits . . . if it has welcomed in the evil guest, it does all things in wickedness" (Porphyry 1986, sct. 21). Porphyry also holds that daemons (good or evil) "reveal their gift to us in the form of dreams or waking visions . . . revealing images endowed with form" (Porphyry 2014, p. 136). Other Neoplatonists say similar things. Plotinus says that the vicious are "acting under the control of other *daimones*, whom they chose according to the corresponding part of that which is active in them" (Plotinus 1984a, 3.5.7). Proclus holds that the virtuous man "flees from the debasing tribe of spirits" (Proclus 1971, p. 28).

The *Corpus Hermeticum* also associates demons with vices and portrays them as becoming internal to us, seizing us:

> "Energy is the essence of a demon . . . They reshape our souls to their own ends, and they rouse them, lying in ambush in our muscle and marrow, in veins and arteries . . . the rational part of the soul stands unmastered by the demons, suitable as a receptacle for god . . . All others the demons carry off as spoils, both souls and bodies, since they are fond of the demons' energies and acquiesce in them". (Trismegistus 1992, bk. 16, scts. 13–16)

In Hellenic religion, we find many gods personifying negative ethical qualities—who suffer from them rather than controlling them. For instance, in Hesiod's *Theogony*, among the parthenogenetic daughters of the goddess Eris ("strife"), are Neikea ("quarrels"), Pseudea ("lies"), and Androktasiai ("manslaughters") (Hesiod 2006, sct. 226).

5.5. Other Religious Traditions

Hinduism's *Bhagavad Gita* teaches that "There are two classes of created beings in this world, The divine and the demoniacal" (Sargeant and Chapple 2009, bk. 16, sct. 6). Vice is demonic; "Demoniacal men do not understand when to act and when to refrain from acting . . . .Attached to insatiable desire, full of hypocrisy, arrogance and pride . . . Devoted to desire and anger" (Sargeant and Chapple 2009, bk. 16, sct. 7, 10, 12). The fate of the vicious is to be hurled "Into the wombs of demons, In the cycles of rebirth" (Sargeant and Chapple 2009, bk. 16, sct.19).

The Surangama Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism teaches that the ethically vicious are reincarnated as various kinds of "ghosts" (*egui*, *preta*)—for example, the hateful become "Noxious Ghosts", the arrogant "Starved Ghosts", the lustful "Drought Ghosts" (Luk 2001, p. 259). Vice causes us to become demonic, or is its appropriate karmic reward. Additionally, in this life, we are externally assailed by various demons, of self-satisfaction, of conceit, of anxiety (Luk 2001, pp. 286–89). These ghosts are important in Chinese folk religion, but are known throughout East Asia.

The Zoroastrian *Bundahishn* teaches that "new demons arise from the various new sins the creatures may commit" and identifies particular demons with particular vices; for example, "Bushap is she who causes slothfulness" (West 1897, chp. 28). In the Manichean religion, "demons are so closely identified with the ethical aspects of evil that many of them appear as personified evil qualities" (Sundermann 2018).

6. Conclusions

This paper has argued that Platonic Forms are alive, and so that they are angels. Since Forms are self-directed actions, they are alive. Since some bodies are alive, at least their Forms are alive. On pain of being unlike God, Forms are alive. Given that God shares as much goodness as he can, the Forms are alive. This paper has also argued that our ethical vices do not participate in the Form of Man, since ethical vices depart from human excellence, but in Demonic Forms, since a given Form cannot depart from itself. In the modern world, "demon" is understood as a way of personifying and externalizing an aspect of ourselves. The truth is just the reverse: that we have depersonified and internalized hostile spiritual beings.

When I first became acquainted with Plato, my mental image of the Forms was dreary. A Form is an object with a hazy gray sheen, set in eternal aspic, locked in a faraway attic—like the official meter bar, a technicality of the metaphysical bureaucracy. In the view I have presented, Forms, angels, are transcendent and immanent, the branches on which everything flowers, the effusive children of a biotic divinity, at play with marbles in the fields of potentiality.

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Notes

1 My assumptions will not be acceptable to all Platonists or Aristotelians as these traditions are internally diverse. The paper's title is borrowed from a Nag Hammadi Library tractate (Robinson 1990), also translated as "The Reality of the Rulers". This paper is not a defense of that tractate's theology.

2 While Aristotle rejects the existence of the Forms, form existing without matter, he shares with Plato these claims about the relation of form and matter: form is pattern, actuality, essence, activity, goal (respectively; Aristotle 1991b, 1013a 26, 1037a 28, 1032a 30, 1050a 15–22, 1023a 32). Curiously, the Platonic Forms reappear in Aristotle's hylomorphism in the guise of the stars—"all movements must be for the sake of the stars" (Aristotle 1991b, 1074a 36).

3 The idea that form is present in matter is not uncontroversial within the Platonic tradition (Fine 1986). On my conception, there is a hierarchy of being—the Forms are the greater reality and our world the lesser reality, as opposed to the idea that our world is an illusion. No negative stance toward our world is implied by this conception. On the contrary, a subject is nobler than a citizen in virtue of their participation in a hierarchy.

4 Another point on which many Platonists would demur. In my view, the guardian angel or daimon is a being liminal to the self; it is the Form in which one most immediately inheres, one's innermost being, but which also, as a pure actuality, surpasses oneself in being.

5 I stop short of claiming that all angels are Forms only because some angels may be participated forms. In various religious traditions, we find spirits of particular cities and localities. If these are angels, they might be better identified with entities of social ontology that admit of potentiality.

6 By the types of goodness I mean those that are most general and most noble—roughly, the "transcendentals" (Goris and Aertsen 2019)—unity, being, truth, beauty, life, and love.

7 This is not to say that an angel is a man (or a dog), or that a man (or a dog) is an angel. I understand the difference between the angels and ourselves in terms of the difference between unparticipated and participated form, rather than saying that angels and humans are different forms on the same ontological level. As Proclus puts it, "prior to soul there is . . . an unparticipated Life" (Proclus 1963, sct. 190).

8 For Platonist philosophers, such as Aquinas, the main argument for the existence of angels, and for linking angels with Forms, is from the principle of plenitude, that the perfection of the universe requires there to be immaterial rational beings between God and man (Lovejoy 1936, pp. 62–80; Aquinas 1947, ST I Q50 A1 co.). Although the principle of plenitude does imply that some things are more rational than others, some more alive than others, it does not imply that there is anything wholly devoid of rationality, life, and so on.

9 St Maximus the Confessor says that "each demon promotes the attack of this or that particular temptation according to his innate propensity" (Palmer et al. 1979b, p. 183). "Angel" (*aggelos*, messenger) is generally held to describe the office, not nature, of a spiritual being (Isidore of Seville 2006, bk. 7, sct. 5), but here, Maximus seems to say that "demon of X" describes the demon's nature.

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Religious Belief through Drum-Sound Experience: Bengal's Devotional Dialectic of the Classical Goddess and Indigenous God

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Abstract: The epistemic question about what constitutes religious belief in non-Western contexts is addressed here through the ontology of sonic experience. I demonstrate that religious beliefs are habitually ingrained as long-sustaining visceral memories, when afforded by sensory—for instance, aural—affects. Bengal's peculiar devotional milieu constructs a prototype of oppositions. On one end is the urban, classical, martial goddess, Durga, with elite histories of acquiring a high Brahmanical form, and whose autumnal rituals are based on scriptural rules, caste hierarchies, and distance among the devotees and deity. On the other end is the rural, indigenous, non-classical, peasant god, Shiva, whose spring-time worship celebrating primordial death and regeneration is based on intensely embodied and communitarian principles of identity among the caste-equal bodies of devotee men, and even their god. Based on immersive ethnographic analyses, the paper argues that these dual psychological ends of the regional sacred cosmos are made vividly real through differential perceptive experiences of percussion sounds (ubiquitous in these festivities), their varied tempos, textures, volumes, and rhythm modulations. Through phenomenological deep listening, I describe stark styles of making and playing the sacred membranophone drum, *dhak*, which embodies distinct rhythm styles, relationships with rituals, and psychophysical effects on the devotional ensembles. I show how the bodies of devotees, *dhak* players (*dhakis*), deities, and even the *dhak*, become tied to the tonalities of the drum, which is taught through generations of deft learning among *dhakis*, to sound distinctly when echoed for Durga and Shiva. The paper's main argument is that these *dhak* sounds, which have remained a conceptual oversight in literature, not only aid in, but indeed, *enable* the experience of and belief in Bengal's divergent deities. It is through such empowering sensory sedimentations of the different sounds of the same percussion, that people recognize, remember, and maintain the region's devotional dialectic and complex religious lifeworld. In essence, the body's powerful experiences of drum sounds make religious belief palpable and possible.

Keywords: religious experience; Bengal; ritual; body; sound; affect; drum; dhak; Durga; Shiva

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1. Introduction

I grew up in Calcutta, the capital city of the religiously rich state of West Bengal. Rumbling sounds of the sacred percussion, *dhak*, remained for me, like all city Bengalis, the quintessential marker of Durga puja, the five continuous days and nights of worshipping the classical, Sanskritic, martial goddess. Durga famously slayed the most powerful demons in heaven, and in popular Bengali tradition, has also been familiarized as both devotees' strong mother-figure and the sacred daughter-figure. While married to the god Shiva, she annually visits her paternal home in Bengal during these five days of autumn. The first sight of the blue autumn skies unfailingly throbs with the heralding booms of the *dhak* in Bengali hearts. Early in the first morning of Durga's *puja*, the *dhak* plays in soft and happy rhythms, and we know while still in our beds that the goddess is arriving (being invoked), and that her celebratory worship shall now be rejoiced throughout the city. This warm sound is ubiquitously cherished as the goddess's *bodhan* (welcome).

However, we have also heard a very different-sounding *dhak* in the wee hours of the spring month with which the Bengali year ends: a loud roaring thunder-like growling sound, overtop which male voices, almost angrily, shout the names of Shiva. This reverberating sound has long held associations with the unknown, fearful, and even exotic indigenous 'other', for urban Bengalis. Like the remnants of an unsettling dream, we have mostly passed over these thunderous echoes, in deep slumber. Thus, while Durga puja's *dhak* wakes us up to the time of celebrations and invites us to the *pandal*s in which the goddess idols are stationed for the duration of her worship, the other *dhak* sounds emerge from and disappear into rustic interiors. Accompanying these latter *dhak* sounds are rural menfolk who come to beg for alms from city people. These folks include both ordinary devotees and drummers playing on their *dhak*s. These rural devotees loudly invoke god, and sound their booming drums through the city roads, and then return for their five-day worship of Shiva in their villages to mark the end of an agrarian year and the beginning of another.

I made a fascinating discovery later during my fieldwork with *dhak* drummers (*dhakis*), who live in rural districts and play both for the village spring-time Shiva worship, and in cities during Durga puja. *Dhakis* often possess two different kinds of drums for the two Bengali pujas, and learn distinct styles of constructing them and sounding their rhythms. The same percussion, *dhak*, holds diverse meanings and generates stark sound-worlds and epistemic worldviews for the people sounding and listening to them.

Popular forms of embodiment of religious sounds constitute the analytical crux in this paper, to help us think about what makes religious belief in (divergent) deities immediate, evident, and tangible for people. In response to the basic epistemological question about why people hold religious beliefs towards—or what sustains the belief in—classical and non-classical gods, I turn to an ontological exploration, and argue strongly that it is through deeply cultivated devotional sensory (aural) experiences that contrary and simultaneous ideas have survived through several centuries in Bengal. These ideas include both classical divine perfection and indigenous humanization of the divine, abstraction and domestication, and ritual hierarchy and communal unity. Further, sacred sounds have been deftly analyzed as critical to constructions of and corporeal experiences in Hinduism (Beck 1993), and there are specific contextual dimensions to the role of sacred sounds in the varied articulations of religious belief. In this paper, through thick descriptions of sacred drum sounds and their sympathetic relationships with rituals, during the worship of a Sanskritized goddess and an indigenous deity, I specifically argue that ritual and performative soundscapes felt by the devotees' visceral substrata not only sustain but indeed *enable* the imaginations of both classical and non-classical forms of religiosity. Simply, varied modes of sonic affects make both high classical and local indigenous deities real. Further, based on intensive participatory immersion in Bengal's rich sacred lifeworld and its acoustic atmospheres, this paper argues that while religious belief in Hindu classical deities is often based on imaginations of divine perfection and hierarchical relations of devotees with the deity and among devotees themselves, devotional relationships with non-classical, personalized, indigenous deities are sustained through principles of shared, embodied, and communitarian identity among the devotees and even between the devotees and deity.

The paper's ethnographic focus is on the consecrated percussion, namely the *dhak*, the membranophone drum which is hung from the drummer's neck and played on its right-side with two sticks, while the left-side provides necessary booming feedback. The drum is ubiquitous in two most popular religious festivals of Bengal: the mostly urban autumnal worship of the classical deity Durga, and the essentially rural springtime worship of the localized male god, Shiva. Herein, Durga is imagined as the royal prototype of a warrior-goddess embodying divine perfection in Brahmanical scriptures. Shiva, by contrast, is constructed as both an indigenous peasant god with vulnerabilities, and the somber deity to be appeased for immediate agrarian community welfare. This paper is based centrally on my fieldwork among *dhak* makers and drummers (*dhakis*). The people I conversed with belong to lowest Bengali castes, spread over several rural districts. The fieldwork involved

learning about their methods of *dhak* construction, playing, and the drum's origin myths. It also involved learning about the *dhakis'* understandings of the instrument's religious cosmology, and, most importantly, experiencing the *dhaks'* varied soundscapes to realize the distinct religious worlds they affect. The same percussion instrument has stark materialities, rhythms, textures, and acoustic relationships with the drummer and devotee-collectives, in the festivals attributed to the classical and indigenous deities. The paper highlights how these sacralities depend, in equal intensities, on the embodiment of sound (and their strategic silences), and also how such sonic operations are simultaneously divergent. These acoustic divergences precisely generate moods and dispositions towards on the one hand, an all-powerful orthodox goddess with whom the devotees have a subordinate relation, and in whose worship devotees also have hierarchical relations among themselves; and on the other hand, a non-classical peasant god, with whom all devotees share a relation of communal identity.

Dhak drummers (*dhakis*), who also make the drums they play, stretch the edges of the mango-wood percussion bodies with leather. Since they are associated with leather-work, considered essentially impure in the Hindu caste order, *dhakis* belong to the lowest, untouchable castes. And thus paradoxically, while *dhak* is the most critical ritual accompaniment in both the Bengali sacred festivals, *dhakis* are placed low in the hierarchized and classicized mother goddess worship. Yet at the same time, *dhakis* and their instrument sounds are organically enmeshed in the non-hierarchical, communitarian rural form of Shiva worship. Sound, caste, and ritual embodiment thus come together in the making of a regional tradition with alternate sacralities centering around prototypes of a classical and an indigenous deity.

My thoughts have resonance with Richard Wolf's (2014) work, which shows that South Asian percussion vocality, 'The Voice in the Drum', affects distinct sacred orders, sometimes carrying classical textual messages, irrespective of being literally understood by the drummer or listener, but which are ingrained as part of a regional tradition. While this is true for Durga's worship, which depends on high Sanskritic texts and rituals executed by the Brahmin priest, and in relation to whom the drummer and devotees are subordinate and distant, the case differs for Shiva. The Shiva puja *dhak* does not represent any authoritarian speech-form, but rather, a corporeally woven sonority consisting of men's caste-equal bodies and the *dhak* sounds, where roaring masculine shouts and drum rumblings together signify primal human sacrificial cries towards Shiva, their peasant god, praying to him to 'cool' down and heal personal agonies, climatic aridness, soil heat, and social sufferings.

Thus, the question about what constitutes religious belief in deities in non-Western contexts is being addressed here from the perspective of the embodied materiality of sensory experience. I argue that the cognitive sustenance of deity figurations (of both classical perfection and indigenous familiarity) depends intrinsically on bodies' sedimentation of visceral memories, in this case, aural ones, associated with different worship traditions. Shiva worship signifies a deep communitarian psychology with a primeval aspect, and Durga worship, of goddess classicism and caste hierarchy. Thus, Bengal's regional sacred cosmos represents a dual psychological axis constituted by a classical goddess and non-classical god, both vividly embedded in popular memory, through sheer physical and perceptive experiences of percussion acoustics, which *enable* their worship. Thus, the cognitive psychological basis of belief is precisely understood as affected by corporeal experiences of sound.

The ubiquitous sacrality of percussion and its particular effects in generating altered states of consciousness have been documented from over the world in anthropology (Harner 1982; Hart 1990). Rouget (1985) specifically contributed to these studies through a significant debate about the neurophysiological universality of percussion sounds vis-à-vis their contextual particularities in evoking possessed states in participant listeners. He argued that universal scientific laws cannot explain relations between music and trance, and that these relations are wholly structured through cultural understandings. I agree with Rouget's culturalist thrust, and show that essentially socially learned ways

of drum sounding and listening, in case of Durga puja and Gajan festival, create varied sacralities. However, I also suggest that these sacred affects are further strengthened by and phenomenologically entrenched in the devotional bodies through the exact materialities of the *dhak's* distinct acoustics.

2. Dhak Sounds and Religious Belief in Popular Bengal

I had not analytically noted the dialectic of the celebratory and somber *dhak* sounds of Durga puja and Shiva worship, even though it has been a part of my cultural lifeworld since childhood, until I began fieldwork, about five years ago, with *dhakis* throughout rural West Bengal. The *dhak*, to an average urban Bengali, is the Durga puja's critical accompaniment, and thus my initial inquiries were only directed at the drum's relation with goddess worship. Over time, I had a most fascinating serendipitous discovery, however, when in many rural drummer households, especially in Bankura, Murshidabad, and Birbhum districts, I found two kinds of *dhaks*. First, a smaller-sized one whose leather bands on the leather surfaces are stretched more—and especially after the monsoon moisture dampens it—to produce a sharper and tuned rhythmic sound to be used in autumn's Durga puja. Second, there is a much bigger, hollower drum to be used in the springtime Shiva worship. This drum is not stretched, and with its textural sloppiness, it produces a very grave, flappy sound. Gradually, I came to understand that these *dhaks* have distinctly different textural acoustics and rhythms, aligning with the differing moods of urban Durga puja and the embodied, communitarian rural ritual-worship festival known as Gajan. In the former context, generally cognitively distracted audiences require fast-paced, striking rhythms and loud and high-pitched, imposing sounds to attract them to the *pandal*s, as this suits their busy schedules in which a five-day celebratory break is welcome. In the latter ritual context, conducted by men who take stern vows of penance and austerity to worship the quintessential male god Shiva, a more slow-paced, rumbling, bold, entrancing drum roar best enables the possession of their bodies.

Further, village drummers emphasized that the *Gajan dhak* is the older, more authentic, non-classical, and local indigenous worship vessel, whose rumbling sounds are Shiva's favorite. They awaken Shiva from his yogic trance (Nicholas 2008, p. 60), enabling him to hear his peasant devotees' prayers for fertile lands, homes, and bodies after the scorching rural summers dry up their villages. The *dhak's* sounds are imagined to mirror Shiva's small drum, *dambaru*, always held in his hand, which he sounds during his destructive cosmic dance, and which also brings fecund rains. Drummers also told me that they learn particular thunder-resembling rhythmic tones from gurus, which also have sensory sympathy with Shiva's serious ascetic mood and his meditative heartbeats. Indeed, the term *Gajan* may have been derived from the word, *garjan*, meaning a roaring, rumbling sound (ibid., p. 21), and thus there are constant synchronous imaginations connecting the drum, divinity, and community ritual. The *dhakis* playing the drum during *Gajan* are peasants, and the Bengali Shiva, is imagined as taking the form of a peasant god. Thus Shiva, his devotees, and drummers, constitute one non-hierarchical identitarian whole during *Gajan* festival. The hollow and grave drum sounds mark the immediacy of the felt religion, when devotees are said to 'become Shiva', the rumbles affecting their bodies in a series of possessed acts, painful rituals, and transformative ecstatic practices such as body piercings, hook swinging, dancing with corpses, etc. All of these elements are said to inculcate Shiva-like virtues of strength and tolerance. Contrarily, Durga puja is a classicized worship system with strict hierarchical rituals led by the Brahmin priest executing the defined successions of the goddess's worship, with the devotees being distant witnesses to the acts. The untouchable drummers, meanwhile, act essentially as background subjects, even though the sounds they produce are indispensable for the priest's ritually correct moods and the devotees' subservient affects towards the goddess.

Ethnographic categories invoked by drummers—which set the central analytical tone for the paper's sensory analysis—are the *gambhir* (solemn/intense/deep) sound of the *Gajan* drum, and its contrast with the *uccha/chora* (high-pitched/loud/speed) acoustic of

the Durga puja drum. The former enables a *communitas* (Turner 2002) based on identity with a non-classical god, and the latter, a hierarchical mood towards a triumphant, martial, classical goddess. Further, these terms capture, at a go, the entire organic ensemble of nature, performance, divinity, devotion, and affective experience by making simultaneous allusions to the drums' materiality, aesthetic strategies, and ethics of piety. For instance, the term *gambhir* concurrently implies a grave sound (materiality), its hollow and flappy surface (texture depending on construction techniques), long and difficult rhythms (performance styles learnt from gurus), lower tone (to be heard among participant devotees who have physically clustered together in an open rural space designated for the possession rituals), the intense summer (when the drum is played), the sounds resembling the cloud rumble (to invoke fertile rains, as also the serious mood of the mighty Shiva), and also the steady, unwavering, somber moral dispositions of the devotees (who themselves become like the peasant god), praying for their community welfare. Alternately, the term *chora* has significant implications for the urban worship festival, where devotees associate the drum sounds with furthering the ritual mood that the priest singularly and hierarchically invokes towards the classical goddess. Its rhythms are denser and faster (*ghono*), and arouse nervous excitement (*uttejona*).[1] Thus, a sonic binary is created between longer rhythmic styles and shorter and speedier beats, low versus high tones, playing for a community gathered together in a single place versus attracting people to a *pandal* from afar, a rural embodied practice of a slow trance versus a swift urban ecstasy for a volatile and low-attention audience, and the moods and practices towards an immediate god versus those for a high goddess.

My serendipitous realization about the sonic dialectic resonates effectively with Ralph Nicholas' 'serendipitous discovery' about two contrary observances (*Gajan* and Durga puja) in the Bengali ritual calendar, which together construct a specific form of 'regional culture in Indian civilization' (Nicholas 2008, p. 7; Nicholas 2013, pp. 41–42). This culture precisely mediates an orthodox and non-classical form of divinization through sacred sound production. *Gajan* essentially signifies fertilization and regeneration, ending an old year of dry heat to beckon a new hopeful fertile temporal order. This is embodied by mostly lower-caste peasant men of the soil, who perform intense austerities as prayers and offerings to their peasant god. This Shiva festival was originally associated with the pre-Aryan, non-Brahmanical deity, Dharma,[2] with an essentially lower-caste following. Even though later Brahmanical orders replaced Dharma with a combination of the classical Puranic god Shiva and a Bengali form of the peasant god, *Gajan's* essential composition, rituals, and ontology remain strongly indigenous. In other words, *Gajan* is the quintessential non-classical festival of the popular folk worshipping a localized deity (Nicholas 2013, pp. 60–62). Nicholas contrasts this communitarian, non-hierarchical social order or 'preeminent ritual of the common people' with the classical form of Durga puja representing a 'sacrificial polity of a caste-based order', where ritual hierarchy is enacted (ibid., p. 6). Ostor (1980) also described the same devotional opposition of the festivals as pomp, ceremony, and hierarchy (in Durga puja) vis-à-vis simplicity, unity, and singularity (in *Gajan*).

The history of this condensed duality has not been neat, however, since all Bengali gods and goddesses, even orthodox ones, have been emotionalized, and fierce deities softened, or their worship reframed simply on love, through the 'balm of bhakti' popularized by the medieval devotional current of *Vaishnavism* (McDermott 2001b). Despite this, as I shall demonstrate in the next section, Durga essentially remained a classical goddess, while Shiva remained local. Similarly, despite the anti-hierarchical *Vaishnava* devotional wave, caste practices have survived through certain religious historical negotiations (see also van der Veer 1987). Almost all *dhakis*, like the majority of rural Bengal, are lower-caste *Vaishnavas* by initiation, and have deep communitarian reverence for Shiva's *Gajan*, this *Vaishnava* Shiva devotion embodying a rural continuum. And yet *dhakis* attend Durga puja festivities for the economic benefits that only cities can provide. Many *dhakis* told me that they enjoy playing in *Gajan* much more, as that is where their true devotion lies, and although very reverential towards the goddess too, they attend the urban festivities primarily

for money. Many *dhakis* also confessed that they are not always treated with respect in cities. *Dhakis* are thus clear about the distinctions among their initiation affiliations as *Vaishnavas*, their rural devotional lifeworld of *Gajan*, and the urban classicism of Durga puja.

However, Nicholas makes a further, stronger argument about the Bengali division between the autumn–spring cycle of classical–non classical worship. In Brahmanical imagination, autumn is the 'night of the gods', when deities ideally sleep and do not receive worship. While the ascetic demon Ravana performed Durga puja in the ideal season of spring (Ostor 1980, p. 18), the classical text, The Ramayana, however, describes how Lord Rama worshipped Durga in a fashion described as 'untimely' (*akaal*), to defeat the demon Ravana; and moreover, Sanskritic narratives also describe the goddess's killing of the buffalo demon, Mahisasura, as the triumph of good over evil. These narrative plots have combined in the vernacular regional milieu of Bengal, and served elite Hindu interests in claiming authority over first Mughal and then colonial rule, with their Rama-like autumnal worship of the classical goddess serving as the primary martial symbol (Guha-Thakurta 2015, p. 3). Bengali Durga puja thus became *akal bodhan* (untimely worship), with Durga's overtly classicized representation as killing the demon, Mahisasura (ibid., p. 15). Nicholas powerfully suggests that the elite Brahmanical construction, although always uncomfortable with the alternative, popular, non-hierarchical, low-caste, communitarian *Gajan* worship, remained unsuccessful in displacing this strongest rural current, and labeled Durga's worship time as *untimely*, suggesting thus that it is rightfully reserved for spring, the season that has been taken over by the non-classical Shiva (Nicholas 2013, pp. 41–42).

Hatcher similarly argues that the elite project of religious 'reform' was never complete, and thus our lens of studying folk culture must not be clouded by Sanskritic hegemonic efforts (2020, p. 8 cited in (De 2021, p. 49)). Bengal's community consciousness, popular psyche, and religious 'common sense' thus holds together the contradictory unity of an autonomous sacrality which predates the arrival of Aryan culture and which engages peasant labor with nature through direct sense experience and a more ideological submission to classicized religiosity. This devotional dialectic has formed a resilient sacred 'mentality' over centuries (see Banerjee 2002, pp. 2–5; Chatterjee 1989, pp. 169–70).

However, both Ostor's and Nicholas's works have intricate details about the ritual processes in these two festivals, while my analytical focus is slightly different, centered on the basic enabling characteristic of both modes of sacrality, and which remains marginal in literature—the *dhak's* sounds literally bringing to life the classical and non-classical deities, Durga and Shiva, and their devotional ensembles. While the drum's sounds are mentioned as enhancing all ritual effects, their affects have only been considered as sacred backgrounds, and not sensory foregrounds.[3] The sounds, paradoxically, due to their essential ubiquity and centrality, have been analytically overlooked, and I seek to foreground them, to argue that they precisely make these polar religious deities and experiences simultaneously real for the Bengali populace. Through phenomenological descriptions of sounds, rituals, and psychophysical effects, I show how bodies, their synesthesia and kinesthesis, are tied to the drum's tempos, patterns, textures and tonalities, as well as the personalities of the deities being propitiated through them (see Das n.d.; Jankowsky 2006). Using sound as the method to hear histories, I describe both kinds of enabling percussion acoustics: constituting complete synchrony among rhythms, bodies, and divinity in *Gajan*, where the *dhaki* is the most essential ritual collaborator; and on the other hand, a ritual aid in an orthodox process, where the *dhaki* is rendered subordinate, while the rhythms mark out a martial goddess and her submissive devotees. Along with the *dhak's* sounds, its lower-caste producers, the *dhakis*, have also been taken for granted in literature. The touch of the untouchables, when converted to sacred sound, enables the precise meanings of these ritual festivals, and I thus attempt a serendipitous history of Bengali classical and non-classical religious lives through *dhak* sounds.

Drum sonic textures and beats thus make certain deity figures palpable and believable for devotees, and a part of their everyday social world. Visceral sounds of the drum not only enhance ritual meaning, but indeed form the enabling bedrock upon which both

classical and non-classical deity forms attain epistemic meaning. The same percussion instrument, through varied styles of making, playing, and being, thus has the efficacious power of engendering contrary devotional modes. While Bengal's religious history has been amply studied, I am adopting a new methodology of phenomenological deep listening (Becker 2004), to demonstrate that this religiopolitical history is always embodied (Wolf 2006), and even, 'ensounded' (Lorea 2022). I argue that when located in bodily sensory materialities, sounds sustain cultures and make 'belief' in deities an attainable experience. Thus, I make sounds the material prism to understand the pre-histories of an embodied religiosity of the indigenous people (Ferrari 2010), as well as a classical, urban, Brahmanical sacrality. This broad-stroke historical retelling is enabled by the drum itself, whose sounds remain and resound to recall and remind us of Bengal's multifaceted religious existence.

3. The Indigenous Shiva and Classical Durga

Bengal's complex religious history can be distilled into a polar axis of an orthodox, Brahmanical, autumnal worship of the mother goddess, Durga, and a localized, rural, non-Brahmanical spring-time worship of the peasant god, Shiva. This polarity has been constituted from within the 'heterodoxy' and 'eclecticism' of subaltern popular religion (Chatterjee 1989, pp. 186–89). Although both these sacred modes were inflected with the strong devotional currents of the medieval period, *bhakti* was classicized for Durga, while it remained communitarian and egalitarian among Shiva devotees. Also, while this duality has been a more-or-less continuous feature of the region's history, it was strengthened in the colonial period. I shall provide here a broad overview of this historical congealment, which shall help us understand through the rest of the paper how drum sounds bring these distinctive religiosities to life.

Durga's worship is essentially classical, since it is based on scriptural injunctions, textual (especially orthodox tantra) notions of an abstract philosophical goddess, and highly specific and caste-hierarchized rituals performed by priests (see McDaniel 2004, p. 9). Her invocations are mainly obtained from the *Devi Mahatmya* (Goddess's Glory) section of the 6th-century traditional text, *Markandeya Purana*, where she is deemed to be the protector goddess (Mahisasurmardini) who slays the demon (Mahisasur) (ibid., p. 210). While Durga is also adored as Bengal's daughter, Uma, it is her martial role which reigns supreme. On the other hand, agrarian rites towards Shiva, praying for health and harvest, have been popular in rural Bengal and performed annually by lower-caste millions for centuries (De 2021). In *Gajan*, the ritual enactments of possession, body piercings, fire play, and several other austerities symbolizing pain and regeneration are not always textually prescribed. Rather, they are learnt from earlier generations of the village's *Gajan sannyasis* (men who temporarily become renouncers for a period of fifteen days, cultivate strict ascetic practices to both embody Shiva-ness and please him through their sacrificial enactments). The Shiva who is propitiated in rural Bengal is understood as both an ideal renouncer and a poor, hapless, vulnerable peasant. Thus, *Gajan's* Shiva is the serious, naked, knowledgeable mendicant, living and meditating in the cremation grounds, with no fixed abode, befriending ghosts and ghouls, begging like the Buddha, and the angry god who is responsible for cosmic destruction. These figurations also conceive him as a most vulnerable, fallible deity: a poor, lazy farmer and an irresponsible alcoholic and hemp smoker. This Shiva cannot provide for his family, begs for food, and is thus requested by his wife to attend carefully to his farming duties, though he eventually becomes an ideal Hindu householder (Ostor 1980, p. 21; Sen 1954, pp. 63–67, 239).

Between 950 CE and 1350 CE, non-Brahmanical tantric Buddhism was popular in Bengal, but from the 6th century, Brahmanism began to gradually recast religious practices (McDaniel 2004, p. 20). This was exemplified by Dharma, an 'unconscious' admixture in popular religion (Dasgupta 1946, p. 308) [of decaying tantric Buddhism, several indigenous practices, and Hindu beliefs, including about Yama, the death god (ibid., pp. 297–98)] who emerged as the 'general godhead' of all deity forms present since the 10th century (ibid., pp. 323–27). He was primarily worshipped by the lower classes, his rituals presided over

by lower-caste priests, and there are also instances of his devotees' persecution by caste Hindus (ibid., p. 305). Even into the 17th century, Brahmin priests would maintain distance from the deity and his festival for the fear of 'losing caste' (Sen 1954, p. 28). Dharma's most organic association was with Shiva, and later, his worship was further connected with the deity couple Shiva–Parvati (Dasgupta 1946, pp. 321–22; Sen 1954, p. 26). The theological values binding Dharma and Shiva are focused on the efficacy of asceticism in bringing about regeneration and rebirth (Nicholas 2008, p. 142). This finds expression in rural devotees' renunciate and sacrificial practices to pray to Dharma/Shiva for the fertile regeneration of their fields and homes. Thus, the present-day *Gajans* I observed, although dedicated to Shiva, are still sometimes called Dharma-*Gajan*. Also, the description I shall analyze below of a contemporary *Gajan* performance has fecund mixing of centuries-old popular indigenous elements of tantric practices, Buddhist-like begging rituals, Shiva–Parvati marriage commemorations, as well as death metaphors of Shiva's cremation ground, or Yama's intense death-mongering.

Both Durga and Shiva were personalized through the medieval Bengal devotional current of Vaishnavism. During the 14th–17th centuries, a literary genre known as *Mangalkavyas* developed (and in the 17th–18th centuries there were *Shibayan* poems[4]), which rendered the deities in humanized, immediate, and accessible forms. The all-powerful Shiva of the classical Puranas was peasantized (McDaniel 2004, p. 21), and the ascetic tantric thus also became economically and morally weak (McDermott 2001a, p. 6). Thus, there are songs describing Shiva and his wife fighting over mundane household matters and the endearing ways in which Shiva ploughed the rice fields (Banerjee 2002, p. 12; Sen 1954, pp. 68–71). Sen argued therefore that there were three distinct elements in rural Shiva's characterizations: the Pauranik serious form, the rustic attributes with distinct tantric features (such as Shiva's fetish for the cremation grounds and association with scary ghosts), and the familial aspects of his patriarchal role in the Hindu household (Sen 1954, p. 72; Bose 2018). The amalgamation of these features served the village peoples' need for a god who was protective yet believable—a god they could relate to immediately (Sen 1954, p. 67). In *Gajan* performances today, we find the embodiment of this multilayered Shiva. Essentially speaking, through his toil and leisure and his intensely nonconformist ways, the peasant Shiva is overarchingly a non-scriptural, autochthonous god (De 2021, p. 19).

However, although Durga/Uma too is dearly personalized,[5] the emotional *bhakti* in her case is innately tied to classical tantra, and the daughter Uma is overshadowed by the protector mother representing the Brahmanical supreme infinite consciousness (McDaniel 2004, p. 12). The loving daughter thus comes home exactly when the ten-armed classical martial goddess is worshipped (McDermott 2001a, p. 3). Tantras have been composed since the 6th century, with further proliferation during the 11th/12th centuries, and later, goddess Puranas were added to the Brahmanical corpus (Bordeaux 2019). These goddess tracts had Sanskritized vocabulary and Aryanized worship prescriptions (Sen 1954, pp. 250–51). Chakrabarti powerfully argues that significant tantras were also composed precisely when the devotional *Mangalkavyas* were being written, and the goddess Puranas (during the 8th–13th centuries) effectively tied tantras with Vedic rites, eventually rendering the goddess as the perfect fit with pan-Indian classical Brahmanical Hinduism (Chakrabarti 2001, pp. 185–88). The texts established a strong Brahmanical social order on local systems to construct the dominant expression of Bengal's regional goddess tradition. This ideological system classicized the original forms of the indigenous goddesses into an abstract philosophical power, and also defined Buddhism as its other (Chakrabarti 2001, pp. 1–35). The transfiguration of the goddess's non-Vedic attributes into an identifiable orthodox Brahmanical form culminated in the *Markandeya Purana's* section on *Devi Mahatmya* (ibid., p. 170). Durga puja rituals, then, essentially worship not the village goddess or Shiva's wife, but the independent, exalted, martial demon slayer (O'Flaherty 1986). The indigenous forms of Buddhism, as I have argued, could not, however, be erased, and remained strong through the figure of Dharma, who was later Hinduized as the *Gajan* Shiva. While Durga's martial aspects were superposed on earlier agrarian harvest rites

(McDermott 2011, p. 6), making her a hierarchical, non-localized, Sanskritic deity, Bengal's peasantized divinity was distilled as the rural, non-classical Shiva.

Drawing from these already existing cultural tendencies, the great divide in the religious modes of Durga puja/*Gajan* (strict binaries of urban/rural, classical/non-classical, hierarchical/communitarian sacralities), took place during the early modern and colonial periods. Against *Vaishnavism's* essentially anti-caste, egalitarian, and lenient devotional principles rampant in Bengal since the medieval period, figures such as the zamindar Krishnachandra Ray, in the 18th century, acting as the leader of the Hindu society, reinvigorated a classical taste in the goddess, and introduced rigid ritual hierarchical repertoires in her worship (Sen 1954, p. 621). From her earlier esoteric worship in homes, the goddess Kali, for instance, made a claim on the public ritual space, with the help of upper-caste elite aristocrats, who consolidated her theologically conservative rituals as an assertion of a Hindu orthodoxy representing mainstream Brahmanism against non-hierarchical popular religion (Bordeaux 2019). Similarly, Durga puja started being celebrated in the homes of upper-caste landowning zamindars during the 17th–18th centuries, first as a Hindu assertion in times of Islamic rule, and later in the 19th–20th centuries against colonial rule, with Durga emerging as their 'heroic' symbol of economic wealth, political power, and social status.[6] Up until the mid-19th century, Durga was reserved for the highest castes. Later, however, Durga puja became *sarbajanin*, that is, for *all* sections of society, with her public autumnal worship becoming the greatest expression of urban social splendor and popular commercialized ritual but always essentially retaining the classical hierarchical tenor acquired over centuries (McDermott 2011, pp. 6–10, 93; Nicholas 2013, pp. 11–15). Durga's classicism thus combines an elite upper-caste urbanity with ritual Brahmanism.

On the other hand, in the colonial imagination, *Gajan* had been characterized as the quintessential lowly, popular, local, rural, primitive form of popular worship. Like other infamous practices such as *sati* and human sacrifice, ritual elements of *Gajan*, such as hook swinging and body piercings, came under severe colonial criticism and policing, and were essentially dismissed as mindless lower-caste activities (Banerjee 2002, p. 8; De 2021, p. 16; Oddie 1995). For the missionaries, *Gajan* was the Orient's 'barbarious devil worship' practiced by the 'most dissipated characters' of the lowest classes (De 2021, p. 47) like cobblers and corpse bearers (ibid., p. 46), and the festival's inebriated loudness, possessed states, and self-flagellations were diametrically opposed to what was considered acceptable behavior in the urban environment. Thus, 'the whole body of Hindus' could not 'be "charged" for the "absurdity" of the festival', according to missionaries (ibid.). Respectability thus gravitated towards Durga puja, while *Gajan* could never be replaced from popular consciousness, and remained at the other end of Bengal's sacred axis as a thriving, throbbing reminder of an embodied communitarian essence.

The devotional mood is thus common to both Durga and Shiva worship, but Durga emerges essentially as a classical Pauranik divinity, while rural, syncretic popular psychology retains a primeval aspect embodied by the Dharma/Shiva cult (see Dasgupta 1946, p. 348). Despite the upper caste, urban silencing or forgetting of *Gajan's* sacrality, it remains the strongest beat of Bengal's subaltern religious pulsation.

The *Vaishnava*-initiated peasants and lower-caste peasant drummers thus organically celebrate the deity Shiva, and their Shiva-*Vaishnava* rural continuum is evident in myths about the *dhak* (see below), while the same *dhakis* flock the city in autumn, to play for Durga puja. Their economic sustenance depends on the city's festival, where even if they are cultural outsiders, they have the assurance of substantive earnings to complement their otherwise meagre peasant wages.

Bengal's devotional dialectic of the classical goddess and indigenous god is brought to life by *dhakis'* detailed techniques of making and playing distinct drums, and I now turn to these embodied religious and sonic lifeworlds.

4. Dhakis and the Dhaks

I carried out fieldwork among *dhakis* in several districts of West Bengal, including Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, Hooghly, Birbhum, Bankura, and Murshidabad. In their own reckoning, there are about 11,000–12,000 *dhakis* in contemporary Bengal. *Dhakis* belong to the lowest Bengali castes. They mostly have the Das surname, and trace their lineage to the caste ancestor Muchiram Das, a leatherworker (*muchi* or *chormokar*), whose sons are remembered in association with leatherwork, canework, and becoming religious gurus. Contemporary *dhakis* continue in the same traditions of work, especially leatherwork, and make and play religious percussions such as the *dhak* and *mridanga* (a *Vaishnava* devotional instrument). In villages, they mostly practice farming as their chief means of sustenance, and in cities, canework and masonry. Das-s, like most lower-caste Bengali groups, are *Vaishnavas* by religious initiation, and though their orally transmitted poetry and myths about the *dhak* are used in the worship of tantric deities, Shiva and Durga, they also have interesting *Vaishnava* genealogical overlaps. Thus, *dhakis* repeated origin myths and poems about how the *Vaishnava* deity, Rama, had blessed a mango tree, with which the first *dhak* was made.[7] Again, Shiva, without the presence of an accompanying drum, is said to have lost his beats during the cosmic dance, when Muchiram, born from the *Vaishnava* godhead (Narayana's sweat) crafted the first drum. Others say that the drum's leather was borrowed from a Shiva-devotee buffalo's skin. The *dhak's* body is itself referred to by *dhakis* as Hari's/Narayana's body, while the two bamboo/cane sticks (the left hand's thick one called *sheed*, and right hand's thin one, *kacha*) used to strike it are deemed as Shiva and Durga. Still others say that the *dhak* received its very aesthetics (*rasa*) from the sexual union of the *Vaishnava* deity consort, Radha-Krishna. Also, *dhakis* memorize beats through syllabic constructions which have metric congruences with the rhythms, and these mnemonic linguistic combinations, known as *bols*, are sometimes composed as couplets with both *Vaishnava* and *Shaivite* orientations, bringing to mind Krishna, *Vaishnava* saints, as well as Shiva.[8] The rural *dhak* worldview is thus an effective syncretic synthesis of a *Vaishnava-Shaivite* devotional spectrum.

The leatherworker *dhakis*, who also skin (*chhula*) dead animals, remember having met with severe caste-based disgust and untouchability (*asprishyata*), till the recent past. Up until about forty years ago, young village *dhakis* told me, their fathers would not be allowed to enter the temples they played for. Their own pujas during birth, death, and other ceremonies would be conducted by lower strata of Brahmins. Furthermore, they would be served separate food and water in people's homes or at temple entrances, given places to eat which were even separated from servants, asked to clean their own leftovers, and other castes would not even participate in their funerals. Ghosh (2001) also cites extreme cases of *dhakis* being served upper-caste food leftovers on soiled plates, like scavengers, during ceremonial feasts. Thus, while *dhak* sounds are indispensable enablers of sacred rituals, these acoustics are derived from the touch of *dhakis*, themselves considered untouchables. While their difficult labor (in constructing the drum through meticulous stages, bearing the heavy weight of the big vessels on shoulders, and playing them with sticks for several hours and days together) is used in the execution of strict sacramental procedures, they are themselves treated as the lowly leftovers of the ritual process (see also Sarbadhikary 2019). Similarly, the *dhaks* too are paradoxical entities: their sounds are derived as sacred, and yet they cannot be kept within temple altars of Durga puja.

However, the instrument's and instrumentalists' caste status are different during the Durga puja and *Gajan* celebrations. The former's classicism requires a strict hierarchy, while in the latter, the *dhaki* and *dhak* are central and organic parts of the ceremonial process. Spatially too, there are differences. In Durga puja, the priest is on a stage/altar, with the goddess set higher up from the audience/devotees and the *dhakis* in the background. By contrast, during *Gajan*, the *dhak*/*dhakis* are co-present in the same coeval space in the open rural fields, as the *Gajan* ritualists, all together cohabiting the village's Shiva-temple premises and surrounding turfs. Further, during Durga puja, as drummers repeatedly emphasized, they simply follow manual cues of the high priest to play strictly defined

beats befitting each stage of ritual proceeding, while *Gajan dhakis*, although also playing sequential beats to bring the peasant god to life, have many more spontaneous rhythming experiences too. Moreover, while the hierarchical Brahmin priest is the most important ritual agent in Durga puja, untouchable drummers, as the next sections shall show, can even *control* the *Gajan* enactments.

My fieldwork thus gravitated towards two particular *dhaki* clusters, renowned for their associations with Durga puja and *Gajan*, respectively. All *dhakis* have received their highly detailed and specialized instrument-crafting techniques and rhythm knowledge classified and meticulously sequenced according to worship stages, as oral knowledge, from their fathers and grandfathers, over several generations. Since they are not written down, these rhythms have many regional differences, and their ritual appropriateness, in both Durga puja and *Gajan*, is considered more important than strict aesthetic classicism. Therefore, rather than standardized musical rhythms, *dhaks* are known for generationally transmitted percussion styles, with 'heterometric temporal organisations' (Wolf 2019, pp. 314–15). These are used in both Durga puja and *Gajan*, but with distinct textures, frequencies, speeds, etc., according to the worship moods of the goddess Durga, and deity Shiva.

The significant difference recognized by contemporary *dhakis* is between slow and somber rhythm styles of drummers who are originally from West Bengal, and faster and high-pitched manners of those who migrated from Bangladesh. These styles have been subsequently associated with drummer clusters in the interior West Bengal districts, and Kolkata and North 24 Parganas (see Figure 1), respectively.

Figure 1. Cluster of shops selling *dhaks* in North 24 Parganas.

For the former, grave rhythm style, I was mostly referred to Murshidabad's villages, in neighborhoods (*para*) known by drummers' caste names, such as Muchipara, Daspara, Dhakipara, etc (see Figure 2). Drummers are categorically clear about the stark natures of these rhythming patterns: between the *chora bhava* (high tone/speedy beats) of the smaller-sized drums meant for urban Durga pujas (which those who migrated from Bangladesh specialize in), versus the *gombhir shobdo* (grave sound) of the bigger, rural, *Gajan* drums, learnt and played in interior villages. Drummers of both types, some having played the *dhak* for even over sixty years, have clear pride in their distinct practices. Thus, those in North 24 Parganas told me how district drummers playing in *Gajan* would not either be able to make or play the more toned Durga puja drums; while *Gajan* drummers routinely look down upon the quick-paced, unsteady, and ostentatious rhythm-structures meant for

inattentive urban devotees. The latter call their sounds *dheeme* (slow) and *shanto* (peaceful), meant for the sincere and steadfast rural devotion towards their local godhead, Shiva. However, the main difference that arises from the *dhaks'* narrative lifeworlds is between sounds as ritual aids in the hierarchical worship of a classical goddess, versus acoustics that form an embodied community with a general devotional populace of Shiva.

Figure 2. A *dhaki* and his grandson with *dhaks* in their home in Murshidabad.

Village drummers say that since the 1990s, with a huge commercial rise in the Durga puja market in Kolkata, they have started flocking to the city in autumn to earn extra money. Groups of about eight to ten *dhakis* play in each of the hundreds of temporary *pandal*s. They then follow rhythm styles set by city drummers, while in villages they continue to play the *gambhir Gajan dhak*. *Gajan* thus preserves the sounds of the embodied rural pasts of an indigenous deity and his non-hierarchized devotees, while the aurality of Durga puja reinforces the psychology of the classical martial goddess. This dialectic is operationalized by *dhak* sounds in distinct ways. While *Gajan* celebrates an immersive and full-bodied involvement by devotees and drummers equally possessed by Shiva devotion and the ecstatic beats, Durga puja's classicism is engendered in particular ways. These include the sounds creating the exact mixed affects of the goddess's martial ascendance, and the devotees' sensoria of awe and affection towards her, a classical Brahmanical caste-hierarchy of drummers subordinately following the Brahmin priest's hand gestures to play particular beats which aid in the sustenance of the devotional mood among the priest and devotional collective, and their meticulous concentration on very specific ritual stages of playing the *dhak*,[9] rather than immersing in devotion. All these components ensure that the Sanskritic, orthodox ritual mood of Durga's dominance shines through.

It is particularly telling though, that the same percussion instrument enables the creation of these dual sensibilities. These acoustic memories and devotional differences created through them have been sedimented intensively, through centuries and generations, in drummers' and listeners' bodies. Material processes of constructing the *dhak* are also intrinsically connected with these divergent devotional soundscapes.

The *dhak* surface, about twenty-four inches in length, six-and-half feet in diameter, and as heavy as fifteen kilos, is made from the wood of mango trees, as its sound is considered 'sweet'. Wood, compared to earthen percussions, also ensures a more *gambhir* and louder sound. The cut wood, scraped and hollowed, and dried leather to be tied on the surfaces, are sent to the *dhak* maker by suppliers, while sometimes *dhakis* themselves process raw

leather, and make it fit for tying. The right mouth is narrower (about fifteen inches), and stretched with goat or calf skin, which is soft and gives greater resonance with low sound frequency. The left mouth is wider (about seventeen inches), stretched with flappier cow skin, and has a grave sound. There are about eighteen to twenty holes made on each leather surface, through which leather straps are pulled with equalized tension to tune the instrument, while ensuring a looser pull on the left side and tighter stretch on the right. A hole is punched on the left side to allow air passage, to ensure that the drum does not burst and that there is good feedback to the struck sounds on the right side. The hole and air passage also affect the grave tone, *dhakis* explained.

These basic principles of *dhak* making are further specified for Durga puja and *Gajan* drums. Thus, *Gajan dhaks* are bigger, almost twenty-six inches long, and lighter and hollower.[10] Durga puja *dhaks* are stretched much more on the right side. Sometimes the *Gajan dhaks'* left side is made further soft and grave-sounding by applying water. While Durga puja *dhaks* are necessarily stretched before being played in autumn, *Gajan dhaks* are deliberately left unstretched before spring. Indeed, if it stretches during the dry winters, water is used to pull down the left side's tone. These many processes are intended to ensure that the *Gajan dhak* is somber and heavy-sounding, to enable ritualists to become and stay possessed in passionately demanding Shiva devotion, or what they call Shiva-*jvor* (fever/heat). *Dhakis* added that the *phalgun* season's (spring) air also particularly aids in the *gambhir* tone. Village *dhakis* generally used several onomatopoeic phrases such as 'dhopdhope', 'gomgome' etc., to emphasize that the indigenous *Gajan dhak* and Shiva rituals, limited to their own village territories, are favored by them, compared to the 'tangtange', 'kyankyane', and 'korkosh' (shrill) sounds of the city people.

The textural and sonic materiality of the drums are thus in perfect rhythmic sync with the embodied sustenance of the two Bengali religious forms: of a classical divinity and a local, indigenous god. Also, it is by enabling sensory sedimentation of these distinct sounds of the very same percussion that people recognize, have knowledge about, remember, and maintain the region's devotional dialectic. The drums 'talk' (Wolf 2014, pp. 21–22) differently, and tell us of long and deep religious historical pasts echoing through their skins. Religious belief in a classical goddess and an indigenous god are thus simultaneously made possible through the intense experience of sacred percussion sounds.

5. The Classical Durga Puja and Dhak: Religious Belief through Hierarchy

The goddess Durga represents Bengal's classical sophisticated divinity, in distinctive ways. First, despite her intimate role as a homely daughter in the region's imagination, she ultimately emerges as the martial protectress, and her puja embodies an erudite blending of these aspects. Second, she serves Brahmanical elite histories, and her rituals demarcate the hierarchical roles of the superordinate priest and his Brahmanical voice, the subordinate devotees, and the marginal *dhakis*. These hierarchical relations are pulled together in an intense sonic triad. Thus, even amidst the general commercial extravaganza of fun and revelry during the Durga puja festivities, the goddess's religious supremacy and Brahmanical rituals together constitute her classical stature in Bengal's devotional milieu. The *dhak's* sounds (and silences) not only aid in the making of the goddess's classicism however, but indeed, enable it, I argue.

The Durga puja festival began as autumn rites among rural upper castes and later migrated to cities. It represents a perfected hierarchical caste order through its ritual universe (Nicholas 2013, pp. viii, 2–5). The goddess form worshipped is a combination of the Bengali indigenous Candi ('The Wrathful') of the medieval *Candi Mangalkavya*, and the Sanskritic goddess of the 5th–6th century text, Markandeya Purana (Nicholas 2008, p. 8; Nicholas 2013, p. 21). This *Purana*'s chapters 81–93, collectively known as the 'Devi Mahatmya' (and popularly referred to in Bengal as 'Durgasaptasati' or 'Candi'), are the orthodox liturgical basis of the puja (Coburn 1986). Devi Mahatmya describes three episodes of Durga's martial encounter with different demons, and these correspond to the three major days of the festival. In the text, Durga emerges as the ultimate universal reality

and an independent goddess who draws upon the cosmic energies of all male gods, rather than being just a female divine consort. Her resultant martial form represents the classical Indian model of the king, the 'victorious ruler' (Coburn 1986, pp. 157–59; Ostor 1980, p. 19). Through her slaying of enemies, Durga's protective benevolence appears as her essential classical characteristic, and the mythical episode of her killing the buffalo demon, Mahisasura, is the most famous among them. The martial form thus becomes a sustaining classical symbol, with Durga promising to return to save her devotees, whenever they are in distress (Ostor 1980, p. 20). Thus, despite Durga's familial, domesticated form—as the daughter who is welcomed home for five days, and who is most sadly bid farewell to every year—her royal element is what receives ultimate cultural sanction (ibid., p. 21). McDaniel thus says that most goddess-idol faces appear detached and victorious, while Mahisasura depicts lust and aggression, and eventual fear of and submission to the transcendental, classical, female power (McDaniel 2004, p. 224).

Durga puja is celebrated on the Navaratra (nine nights) of the bright half of the autumn month (September/October), and its rituals follow strict Brahmanical texts. Durga's statue is installed on the sixth day, the puja continues for five days, and peaks at the cusp of the eighth and ninth days (*sandhi*, literally meaning the liminal point). She is believed to have killed Mahisasura at this ritual moment, and she is said to appear before her sincere devotees then (like she did before Rama) as a most horrific yet protective goddess. She is then propitiated through an intensive worship regimen with sixteen items, and her farewell takes place on the tenth day (Guha-Thakurta 2015, p. 25; McDaniel 2004, pp. 223–28; McDermott 2011, p. 5; Nicholas 2013, p. 24; Ostor 1980, p. 83). In all, Durga puja rituals celebrate cosmic reconstruction and the triumph of virtue over vice, and depend heavily on Brahmanical Vedic tantric dogmas. These textual doctrines are given life through words (mantras), actions (ritual purifications), and hand gestures (*mudras*), known only by the male Brahmin priest (Ostor 1980, p. 57; Rodrigues 2003, pp. 11–18).

However, devotees believe that the complete reading of the *Candi* or *Devi Mahatmya* itself can bring religious merit equivalent to performing the entire Durga puja rituals (Nicholas 2008, p. 8). Thus, since the 1950s, the most popular Bengali radio program has been the pre-dawn two-hour-long recitation of Candi's verses, on the new moon night of the month (*mahalaya*), by a renowned male vocalist stooped in devotion towards the classical goddess (Guha-Thakurta 2015, p. 12; McDermott 2011, p. 4). It is most remarkable, however, that *dhak* sounds appear in the entire audition for the first time at only the 55th minute, and for less than five seconds at that, after the narrative including Sanskrit mantras has fully described how the goddess has been adorned and worshipped, and after a demonstration of how her deeds and glory have been achieved. In other words, the *dhak* enters only when the mood has been otherwise set for her ritual worship. Thus, the *dhak* is given legitimacy only after the male Brahmanical voice (of the priest/narrator) has opened up the worship stage.

This elite tendency of privileging the Brahmanical voice and worship and subordinating the sounds produced by the untouchable castes is more organically woven into the ritual corpus, since *dhakis*, although absolutely essential to the Durga puja, have to simply follow the priest's hand gestures in playing the drum. They are not aware of the rituals' semantic meanings or techniques, and concentrate simply on their instrumental perfection, by playing for meticulously defined stages. Their concentration is focused on their percussion, while the sounds they produce both maintain the priest's tenacious ritual attention, as well as enable a constancy in the religious atmosphere of the priest-devotee-god's ecstatic exchange, sustained especially by the urgent yet regular acoustic patterns. The sonic paradox is absolutely ingrained in popular consciousness, which associates every ritual stage with *dhak* sounds, yet also knows that these acoustics are subordinate to the Brahmin voice and hands. That said, I argue that the *dhak* precisely enables Durga puja's Brahmanical classicism by sounding appropriately during the ritual processes, and also remaining starkly silent when the priest utters the mantras. Sound and caste thus have complex relationships in the making of the classicized ritual. The *dhaki's* constitutive role is

however implicitly acknowledged, since as per textual prescription itself, he is gifted the goddess's precious sari on the last day, while the priest receives everything else belonging to her (Rodrigues 2003). Thus, I foreground the *dhak* as an *enabler* of a classical ritual. While Bengal's religious history has been amply studied as a textual domain, its sensory dimensions are still in need of analytical exploration.

Dhakis have purely embodied received memories of what beats need to be played for what ritual, and they execute these with detached perfection. They often told me that these beats have now 'mixed with their blood'. These habituated repetitions of hyper-differentiated stages especially constitute the community elders' pride, and embody their subservient devotion to the Brahmin priest and the stringently defined beat rules, in contrast to *Gajan dhakis'* immersive and more spontaneous communitarian participation. The priest follows texts, and *dhakis* follow the priest's hands, they explained. The drum sounds mark the exact chronological sequence of ritual acts, and temporal precision is an important component of Brahmanical Vedic-tantric methods.

Dhakis ubiquitously told me that with no comprehension of mantras or how Durga puja rituals are performed, they simply observe his gestural-movements while standing below the dais on which the priest worships the goddess. When he rings the bell at the end of a ritual cycle, they immediately know that they need to switch to the next beat pattern. There are also other critical cues. One such example is when the priest, who sits during all other stages, stands during the significant lamp-offering (*arati*). Another such example is when he touches a hibiscus flower on the goddess's chest, letting *dhakis* know that the goddess's life-imparting ceremony (*pran-pratishtha*) is taking place. Similarly, there are particular beats for when the priest picks up a five-mouthed lamp (*pancha-pradip*), the camphor vessel (*karpurdani*), incense (*dhup*), conch (*shankh*), flowers (*phul*), sari (*kapor*), hand fan (*pakha*), conch which holds water (*jol-shankha*), and a particular ritual brush (*chamor*). The ritual cycle for each item is marked by a drum beat, which ends with a rounded calculation (*tehaai*). Apart from the *arati* and sight-imparting (*chokkhu daan*) ceremonies, *dhakis* play in a style of *aarai kathir bajna* ($2\frac{1}{2}$ metrics, which some memorize through the syllables, *jhyang jhyang ta*), for instance, when the goddess is bathed. Also, while their beats aid in the priest maintaining his particularized moods for every ritual, during *arati* (which lasts for approximately an hour every morning and evening), the drum beats also attain a relative spontaneous ecstasy. At first, the *arati* rhythms are slow, so that *dhakis* can sustain the hourlong energy, and then speed up and intensify with the peak reached when the *chamor* is shown to Durga.[11] The priest then oftentimes succumbs to the rhythmic trance, dances along with the beats, and attains a distinct meditative transportation along with the listener-spectators.

Although *dhakis* simply follow inherited traditions and rhythm rules without immediately connecting to the liturgical corpus, the phenomenology of their beats (and strategic silences) has deep impact on the priest and devotees in the making of the orthodox ritual, and so I shall describe the exact affects generated during significant puja stages. The entire frame of reference for understanding religious belief in this context is thus sensory. The *dhakis'* and priests' visceral explanations (see Figure 3), and my own very close observations over several decades and empathetic bodily analyses, together narrativize the sonic affects in the construction of the classical goddess.[12]

Figure 3. A *dhaki* at his home in North 24 Parganas demonstrating Durga Puja's typical beats.

The *dhaki* starts playing from the wee hours in slow and soft rhythms, waking people gently from their sleep, who then know that the morning puja has started in the *pandal*. The *agomoni* (welcome) beats then become fast, arranged in quick temporal successions, and have an urgent impact of *ghoshona* or announcement about the goddess's invocation. The happy welcoming rhythms manage to be essentially serious in temper, nonetheless, by being followed for a substantial amount of time by a slow, serene, tempo. Thus, the audience is not allowed to forget that Durga is at war. Then the beats pick up again, and the priest gets busy setting Durga up for the coming days of sacred battle between good and evil.

The eighth day, when Durga shall kill Mahisasura, is marked by a special *pushpanjali* (flower offering) by regular devotees. They gather in the *pandal*, when the priest famously reads out *slokas* and mantras from the *Devi Mahatmya*/*Candi* in the microphone, and the devotees repeat after him. Like the radio *mahalaya* program, this ritual is starkly marked by the absence of any *dhak* sound, and even *dhakis* for that matter. Thus, the Brahmanical voice takes over, and the *dhak's* strategic silence vis-à-vis his erudite locution ensures that devotees concentrate exclusively on listening to Durga's exploits and feats. This also ensures their mantric submission to her, all under the mediation of the Brahmin priest.

This textual initiation comes of use during the forty-eight minute ritual enactment of *sandhi puja*, when Durga is believed to slay the demon. The precise warring intensity is then represented overwhelmingly by the very passionate *dhak* beats, while *dhakis* however play from behind the audience, who stand before the dais to witness the priest's concerted puja. The *dhak* almost 'talks' at that moment, to represent Durga's bloody triumph, and the sounds generate in devotees a beautiful mix of fearful awe, hopeful anxiety about the impending battle between the goddess and demon, and submissive devotion to her violent demeanor. The instrument beats gradually unfold the various items with which the *arati* is performed, and the momentum intensifies in such a way that the devotees automatically get caught in a meditative gaze (*darshan*) fixed at the goddess's third eye, representing transcendental intuition. A characteristic rhythmic aspect during this time is the concentration-inducing and trance-sustaining middle tempo (*madhya-laya*), which is

very difficult to play continuously (as *dhakis* explained). This has the distinctive listening effect of a spontaneous ecstasy, held together, however, by the apparently contrary cognitive state of rapt attention.[13] Thus, the priest and audience both have a pleasurable sprightly feeling at this point, even though they are not dancing to the beats as they would with secular rhythms. The repetitive, quick, and intensive beats, accompanied by the nervous energy of a metallic beat-keeper (*knasha*), sustain the meditation. This is when devotees believe that the goddess comes especially to life, and I have seen many devotees cry or have goosebumps at this point, and while staring into the eyes of the triumphant goddess. Sometimes there is a break in the rhythm, when the *dhaki* observes what the priest is offering, changes the beats accordingly, and then swiftly adjusts the rhythms for the appropriate mood, which escalate again. *Sandhi puja's* underlying mood is of submission to the perfect ascendance of good over evil, and devotees are reminded that the classical goddess returns to protect them whenever there is moral danger.

Sandhi puja's particularly sacred mood was summarized by a famous elderly priest in Kolkata, who said,

> 'The goddess possesses me at this point. My mantra and the *dhaki's jantra* (instrument) enable this, although my concentration is on the goddess, and his on the *dhak*. *Dhak* sounds generate simultaneous meditation (*dhyanmognota*) and addiction (*madokota*), and all my corporeal tantric energy-centers (*cakras*) feel ecstatically pierced. My body then vibrates, an infatuation (*ghor*) takes over, and I can see the text and its descriptions of the mother before me'.

The priest's narrative thus describes the experience of a most classicized ritual, in which there is a hierarchy of Brahmanical meditation and the ability to be possessed by the classical goddess, vis-à-vis the sensory agent (*dhaki*) of that process, albeit recognized as absolutely integral.

Throughout the puja, the *dhak's* sounds thus generate and maintain the opportune devotional meaning. The other very significant use of the *dhak* is during the *bisarjan* (farewell ceremony), on the tenth day. This is a paradoxical ritual moment, since while in the rest of Hindu India, the day is celebrated as Rama's victory over Ravana, in Bengal, it also marks the goddess's return to her husband's home. Thus, the event is marked as both hopeful and sad, and the drum beats accordingly. Its fast beats remind the devotees to prepare for an optimistic farewell, and they dance to the very peppy rhythms, typically shouting along: '*ashche bochor aabar hobe* (we shall celebrate again next year)'.[14] The speedy beats, reassuring that rightful victory always supersedes evil, are punctuated, however, by very slow, staggering ones, which have a lingering, resistant inertia, as if they do not want to progress, generating the incisive lament over the daughter leaving home. The slow beats also enable the devotees to go up to the tall idol on a ladder—the only opportunity to do so in the five days—and touch her, feed her the last sweets, etc. All the *dhak's* specialized rhythms, whether generating moods of sadness, awe, wonder, happiness, triumph, submission, or tension, however, are notably always played in *chora sur* (high tones), to attract and sustain urban attention, constantly for five days.[15]

Thus, *dhak's* sacred sounds and silences together generate Durga puja's Brahmanical ritualism. All the while, the *dhaki* remains in the background, through his untouchable subordination to the priest, his embodiment in relation to the priest's semantics, and his silence with respect to the Brahmin's locution. The only time that the *dhaki* comes to the forefront or center stage is when asked to play for sheer non-ritual entertainment. Thus, paradoxically, it is through the *dhakis'* categorical backgrounding and the *dhak* sounds' phenomenological supremacy that the Bengali classical goddess, the Brahmanical Durga and her orthodox worship, attain epistemic meaning.

6. The Indigenous Gajan and Dhak: Religious Belief through Organic Identity

Dhak sounds also evoke a distinctly rural devotion towards the local, indigenous, non-classical deity, Shiva. *Gajan* is said to have been performed, for the first time, by

Shiva's companions, the ghosts and ghouls of cremation grounds, who worshipped him in the most violent, loud ways, with rituals full of symbols of both death and regenerative fertility.[16] Shiva then joined the *Gajan*, and later described it to his consort, Parvati, who also wanted to be present in subsequent festivals (Ostor 1980, p. 30). Farmers also told me that since spring is a relatively fallow period—the end of the agrarian year cycle awaiting new crops in the next month—*Gajan* is performed both to pray for crop-enabling moisture, as well as for leisure (*abashar*).[17] In puranic myths again, the Shiva-devotee, King Ban, lost his limbs in a battle to Krishna, and in that pain-anguished state, loudly called out to Shiva, who placated his sufferings for a year in lieu of Ban's promise to perform self-flagellating penances during annual *Gajan* ceremonies from the next (ibid., p. 31). Ban was also commanded by Shiva to worship him in the form of a wooden plank, and it is not a coincidence that the *dhak* is also carved out of wood, signifying the seamless relations between divinity, sound, and community ritual.

In fact, *Gajan* has remained a symbol of community worship, with rituals signifying rhythmic cycles of natural destruction and social renewal, where men of all castes undertake severe austerities, including painful bodily practices, mimicking the self-sacrificial rites of a literary prototype of the ideal Shiva devotee. *Gajan* is about singularity of community identity that arises when devotees attain Shiva-hood, or become 'divinelike creatures' (Ostor 1980, p. 28). That is, austere, serious mendicants who, like Shiva, can bear immense physical pains and then regain strength, reminding all folksmen about the inevitability of both death and revival. Song narratives about Shiva–Parvati marriage, symbolizing divine fertility, are also performed during *Gajan*. The primeval aspect of the rurality accentuated at the festival is thus marked by both the stark and simple bodily severities, and rustic familial associations. Taken together, *Gajan* now essentially stands for collective, communitarian, embodied worship performed by rural peasants, towards a god, also imagined to be the first peasant and praying to him for fertile earthly yields and progeny (Nicholas 2013, p. 2). The very significant symbol in the festival remains 'heat', which is in need of divine cooling or control. This includes the heat of *Chaitra* soil (the last month of the Bengali calendar), when the thirst is unbearable (Ostor 1980, p. 136), the severe heated *tapasya* of Shiva and his *sannyasis* (*tapasya*: asceticism, *tap* literally meaning the bodily heat of penance), king Ban's afflictions (also called *jvor*, hot fever), soothed by Shiva, and, finally, the ritualists' passionate excitement, to be controlled, pacified, and tempered by *dhak* sounds.

There are regional variations in *Gajan* rituals. Typically, the peasants who vow to pray to Shiva that year prepare their ascetic selves for about fifteen days or so before the last five *Gajan* days in the last Bengali month.[18] The vows are simply called *khatni* (labor). They shave their heads, eat a meal of boiled food, raw fruits, and milk, only once a day; bathe, eat, and sleep separately from non-ritualists, and practice sexual abstinence. During the festival, they stay in the village Shiva temple, and go begging to village homes. Irrespective of their usual lowest castes, they don the sacred thread during those five days, since they are akin to god then (Ostor 1980).[19] Since these are usually practices of renunciates (*sannyasis*), the ritualists are known as *Gajan sannyasis*.[20]

Dhakis, who are also peasants, prepare similarly in some Murshidabad villages I have worked in, and the sounds they produce are considered indistinguishable from the bodies of intense penance and prayer. *Gajan* is essentially a public, community worship par excellence, and does not recognize caste hierarchies (Ostor 1980, p. 99). Shiva too is imagined to be a peasant, and roaming in the cremation grounds, where the lowest Dom castes (to which *dhakis* belong) perform their funeral services (ibid.: 34, 106). Thus, when the *sannyasis* go door-to-door begging, they are accompanied by *dhakis* (Nicholas 2013, p. 84), and the temple food is also shared by all devotees and *dhakis* (Ostor 1980, p. 131). Further, upper-caste people touch the feet of lower-caste *Gajan sannyasis* as a mark of reverence (Maity 1989, p. 43). *Sannyasis* wear red loincloths and carry cane sticks (symbolizing Shiva), and it is further noteworthy that the *dhaki* castes are also engaged in cane work.

Devotees spoke of the general grim deathlike silence that overtakes the temple during those days. This is because devotees then singly meditate on the yogic ascetic mendicant,

Shiva, and when the only fitting sound acceptable and pleasing to Shiva is of the rumbling, roaring, praying *dhak*. Indeed, unlike in Durga puja, the *dhak* is also allowed inside the temples, and all *Gajan* rituals, unfailingly, are not only accompanied, but critically enabled by the percussion sounds. *Gajan*, stems from the root word, *garjan*, meaning loudness—shouting to awake Shiva from his yogic trance—and this volume is generated by the vociferous drum and the crying male voices, imagined to be the exact counterpart of the angry roar of the mythical god, Shiva, during cosmic destruction (Ostor 1980, p. 113). The god, devotee, *dhaki*, and his *dhak* are thus perfect substitutes in the celebration of primeval life and death, in this ancient civilizational form of festivity of the enmeshed peasantry.

Typical austere *Gajan* rituals include prostrating (see Figure 4) or dancing to the temple on one leg, cleaning the temple with one's hair, walking on a sharp knife, jumping on sharp knives from a height, rolling over the ground, falling into trances and dancing to the drum, firewalking, water rituals, piercing the body in various places like the ears, eyelids, forehead, back, and tongue with iron rods, carrying burning coal, falling on thorns, hook swinging, and getting possessed by the thoughts of Shiva–Parvati union. In addition, village women also pray for general fertility (Maity 1989, p. 43; Ostor 1980, pp. 8–9, 30, 98–148; Sen 1914, pp. 156–61). Devotees believe that these atonements make a mark on Shiva's body too, and Shiva then empathetically responds to his earnest devotees. This again embodies the extreme corporeal sense of community that the peasants have with their god, rather than the hierarchical distance signaled between devotees and the goddess during Durga puja. The *dhak* sounds make a perfect fit to these intense practices to 'call' Shiva's attention with insistence.

Literature on *Gajan* habitually but unmindfully describes the drum sounds as integral to the performances and even mentions the very distinct rhythms played during the different rituals (see Maity 1989, p. 44; Ostor 1980, p. 106). Thus, for the entire period of the five intense days and nights, the *dhakis* live with the devotees in the temple, and devotees are 'called to' their various timely duties by the drummer (Ostor 1980, p. 106). Processions are led by drummers (ibid., p. 121). Devotees rock and sway to the beats, respond slowly, then fast, become violently spasmodic, and even lose consciousness while listening to the resonant, escalating, and ebbing *dhak* beats during their possession ceremonies (Nicholas 2013, p. 80; Ostor 1980, pp. 108, 129). Devotees also derive strength from the solid, confident drum beats when performing strenuous tasks such as pulling large trees (Nicholas 2013, p. 96). The *dhak* rhythms match up to and indeed foretell the theatrics of devotees' slow, steady, then wavering, dancing steps of trance, ecstasy, and surrender (ibid., p. 112), and the drum sounds 'victorious' when a particular ritual ends (ibid., p. 108).

Indeed, it may be strongly argued that the belief in Shiva's powers of asceticism, fertile boons, and community regeneration are innately embodied by, ingrained in, and enabled sympathetically in devotees' bodies, by the *dhak* itself. This is phenomenologically nurtured by the nature of *dhak* sounds, including its volume, texture, and rhythms. Thus, its loudness and somber texture are imagined to 'wake' Shiva and turn his yogic gaze upon the peasant devotees. Its peculiar middle tempo (*madhyalay*) is particularly favorable for the devotees' controlled but spontaneous possession exhibited in head and leg swinging. Its distinct muffled drone, which suppresses all other ambient sounds, induces the sharp concentration that is required to withstand various painful inflictions. Meanwhile, its general graveness, volume, and constancy announces to the entire village that particular rituals are ongoing, while maintaining the insistent ascetic sternness and severity of the devotees throughout. Simultaneously, the combination of graveness, volume, and constancy help the *dhaki* to attain the difficult balance between being immersed in the ontology of the ritual, while continuing to strike the right beats and rhythm crescendos, all the while carrying the very heavy instrument of about fifteen kilos on a single shoulder.

(**a**)

(**b**)

Figure 4. (**a**,**b**): Murshidabad villagers prostrating to the sound of *dhak* beats.

While *Gajan* rituals have been amply explored, these deep phenomenological aspects of *dhak* sounds in the generation of religious belief have not been foregrounded. I shall now describe certain *Gajan* events, as I have observed them closely, with a goal of emphasizing the absolutely fundamental and even *controlling* role the drum plays in the constitution of Shiva devotion. Unlike in other medieval literary genres, the *Dharmamangalkavya*, whose descriptions come close to *Gajan* rituals, depict devotees' death-like or self-immolatory practices, although eventually they regain their lives. Thus, *Gajan* is deeply associated with symbols of primordial death (and life), and its loud cries, inflictions, minimalism, and possessed dances wearing masks of the terrific deities, such as Kali and Shiva in the cremation ground, mostly evoke fear, despite the lighter moments of song and theatre about Shiva–Parvati marriage, etc.[21] Fabrizio M. Ferrari offers a very different interpretation about *Gajan's* primevalism. He understands the rituals as ancestral worship of the feminine earth and its regenerative life cycle, where peasant men, unconsciously acknowledging both their debt to and guilt of consistent inflictions upon her through ploughing, etc., ritually embody her femininity and express their sense of ritual crises through possession (Ferrari 2010, pp. 1–9). I only borrow from Ferrari's analyses the dimension of primevalism of the earth, unconscious, and culture, and I argue that while *Gajan's* primitivity has been repressed in urban memory and history (which predominantly understands devotion as the hierarchical Durga puja), *Gajan's* original nature continues to retain its bold life in the

villages. However, my main emphasis is on the distinct primal embodiments invoked by *dhak's* sounds in the ritual bodies that it affects and controls. As Becker (2004) argues using both neuroscientific and biological explanations, the deep emotions one experiences while listening to music are similar to the trancing episodes within religious contexts, while in case of *Gajan*, the sensory epistemology of religion and rhythm are co-constitutive.

Ferrari describes how many *Gajans* end with *mara khela*, 'dance of the dead', when the *sannyasis* play with human corpses and skulls, finally being reintegrated into society the next day through purificatory rituals following this most transgressive ritual height (Ferrari 2010, p. 19). These dances have not been written about extensively. In a particular village, Majlishpur, in Murshidabad district, I saw the festivities during what they call *shakun naach* (vulture dance), where the primal tropes of death, cannibalism, and mastery of fear are brought to potent life by the throbbing and stringent *dhak* acoustic rhythms. I shall now describe the *shakun naach* and fire rituals of Majlishpur (see Figure 5), highlighting the *dhak's* constitutive and animate role therein, and its synchronous identity with the devotees and the most indigenous Shiva.

Figure 5. Fire rituals being performed to *dhak* sounds.

About fifty to a hundred devotees can become *Gajan sannyasis* in a particular temple annually, although in April 2022, around ten men were assembled in Majlishpur Shiva temple. Before *Gajan* every year, *dhakis* play a smaller leather-drum made by them, known as *dheri*, throughout the village, inviting willing devotees to become *sannyasis*. Village elders then choose from among them based on their physical strength and mental steadfastness to be able to perform the stern rituals. Villagers literally call *Gajan* a *smasanbhumi* (cremation ground) and the rituals, accordingly, *smasani-puja*, signaling the metaphors of deathlike heat eventually transformed to cool regenerative life. In all ritual instances, the faith and performance of devotees becoming god are enabled by the primitive *dhak* sounds bearing immediate relations with their highly sensitive bodies. This is quite unlike in Durga puja, where the sounds mediate devotion through essential hierarchical distances between the goddess, priest, devotees, and *dhaki*.

On the fourth day of the *Gajan* festival, Majlishpur celebrates *ban-phora* (piercing with iron rods) and *hom* or fire rituals, directly signifying *Gajan* heat. I saw how *sannyasis* rowed up, and a village elder, whose hands have been trained generationally, pierced their foreheads with a burning iron rod. He desensitized the skin by rubbing strategically on it, folded it in places, and then sliced it with extreme deftness. Not a single facial muscle of the devotees moved, and villagers told me that is because their fasting and austere bodies were blessed by Shiva precisely not to feel any pain. They said that this is also thus a test of

whether they have become Shiva-like—that is, detached and tolerant. After the piercing was over, fire lamps were placed on those rods (see Figure 6), and devotees danced around the temple to *dhak* beats, holding up those lights.[22] All the while, young boys and men stood around and watched the ritual, expressing constant amazement and the desire to become *sannyasis* next year.

Figure 6. Skin piercing with iron rods and fire lamps placed on them.

The rituals are controlled and sustained singularly by the constant *dhak* sounds. Devotees added that ritually disciplined bodies respond better to the drum, and then they automatically realize Shiva-ness. In Majlishpur, the *dhakis* have been playing for several generations in *Gajan*. The *dhak's* rhythmic urgency and regulated constancy generate a series of phenomenological responses. These include intense concentration in the person piercing and not letting him relax during the critical challenging practice. These also include helping the *sannyasi* ward off fear, by rather keeping him focused in one place and singularly attentive to the task-at-hand, while also being propelled to action through listening to the equally distributed and progressive beats, and further, enabling the intense and seamless immersion in the sounds and rituals of everyone present at that time.

During Gajan dances, in addition to the general angry and grave Shiva-like tone, the resonant drum also makes very bold and abrupt strikes, which helps ritualists take long jumps ending with sudden landings. Indeed, the very slow, difficult, elongated, and distinctly stark endings (*gambhir bajna*) make the *dhak's* beats arhythmic at times, giving it a matter-of-fact, dry feel, which has sensory resemblance with the hemp-induced head, leg, and hand movements of tranced *sannyasis*. In fact, Gajan specialists call the weed addiction *shukno nesha* (dry trance), and the dry *dhak* beats, with a fine balance between steady controlled movement and a slow, light drowsy swirl, are similar to the devotees' possessed states then. These dry beats play especially when *sannyasis* perform a ritual of picking weed leaves, dedicating them to Shiva, and then consuming them.

The *Gajan dhak* does not always induce usual emotions of happiness, sadness, or even the entertaining ecstasy of Durga puja, but rather instigates a steady affective drone, beating with the ritual bodies soaked in an addicted, unmoving, possessed devotion. Again, the *dhak* plays in much more confident, strong, and repetitive beats, when *sannyasis* bang their feet and shout Shiva's names, calling out to him in agony, remorse, and hope. The *dhak* plays in fast rhythms during hook swinging and long, dragging beats when a

ritual is enacted about Parvati leaving Shiva, and later returning to him. And on the last day of *Gajan*, when devotees bathe and go to eat, *dhakis* strike on the hollower left side, and the drum plays in a notably heavy *gurgurgurgur* . . . (or *dhupdhupdhupdhup* . . .) tone, resembling the sounds of rumbling monsoon clouds and Shiva's *dambaru* drum. This is said to invite the rains, and devotees later spread seeds in the village fields. Thus, unlike Durga puja's *dhak*, which abides by strict scriptural rules by literally following the priest's knowledgeable hand and the mantric voice of hierarchy, the *Gajan dhak* is completely immersive, engendering a unified consciousness tying intense devotional bodies, divinity, sound, nature, and community. Devotees thus routinely refer to the *Gajan's shuddho* (pure) *dhak*, this 'purity' implying its sonic organic immersion (Helmreich 2007).

This rhetoric of *shuddhota* (purity) is most fully embodied when a trained tantric fetches a human skull, and *sannyasis* dance around and with it to *dhak* sounds. In Majlishpur, this characteristically happens on the third night. Villagers have significant orally transmitted myths, proverbs, and poems, explaining and sacralizing this event. Thus, they narrated to me how the epical warrior, Arjuna, once beheaded an enemy prince, and the cut head miraculously continued to chant the names of the *Vaishnava* god, Rama. Shiva was most taken by this devotion, and since then, severed heads have been used in *Gajan* rituals.[23]

This death-mongering ritual evokes great fear in onlookers and recounters. I once joined about five or six drummers, in an intense conversation in the house of an elderly *dhaki* of seventy-five years. *The dhaki* lives in Jojan, a Murshidabad village, in a neighborhood alternately called Bayenpara (percussionists' hamlet), Muchipara (leatherworkers' hamlet), and Daspara (Das: *dhakis'* surname). Using a most telling phrase, they were telling me how *Gajan sannyasis* go 'spring mad' (*choit paagol*) for a month before *Gajan*, looking for fresh dead bodies to perform rituals with. The '*smasan* (cremation ground) then gets to their heads', they said, and *sannyasis* cannot be cooled till they find a body. Even closely known villagers cannot be recognized then, they explained with fear, due to their unplacatable death-heat and passion. They snatch bodies from funeral processions, and more usually collect them from river banks, where dead bodies which are considered unfit to be burnt by the Hindu order (such as that of children, derelict bodies), are found. They keep the body fresh with turmeric and oil, among other substances, and on *Gajan* night, assume horrific inebriated forms. They then do a *bhoutik naach* (ghostly dance) around the dead bodies, accompanied by slow, gradually ascending, and fearfully grave *dhak* sounds. One of them recollected how about a decade ago he had witnessed a ten-year-old boy's dead body being used for the purpose. Everyone agreed that they feel petrified to go before these ritualists who take on most embodied forms of Shiva's terrifying cremation ground companions. Sometimes the entire dead body is ritually used, and at other times, cut heads are brought. Over the last four or five years, the practice has changed, they said, and eight to ten old skulls are now kept in the Rudradeva (angry form of Shiva) temple in the area, to be reused during *Gajan*.

Everyone unequivocally agreed, however, that not only are *dhak* sounds indispensable during these practices, but in fact they enable them. The *dhaki* has to equally understand and corporeally empathize with very stark practices such as, biting on the skull with teeth while dancing to the beats. One *Gajan sannyasi*, who has been performing *mara khela*, or dancing with the dead body/skull for thirty-five years and who singly takes on the responsibility to lead two hundred or more *sannyasis* during *Gajan* performances, said the following in reference to his preferred *dhaki* in that room,

> 'If he (*dhaki*) does not realize what I am doing, he will not be able to play. And it is deeply reciprocal, our bodily energies exchange. If he is unable to play the beats with passion and correctness, I shall not get the right mood. And if that happens, none can save him: I am Shiva-like then, you see, very angry, and I shall beat him. But he is the only one who also has control over me. Sometimes, he continues to beat the drum intensely and constantly, and I get tremendous, almost unhuman energy, say, to jump in a squatting position, for five rounds of a huge field! If he (*dhaki*) beats rightly, our mutual ecstasy (*unmadona*) is unmatched'.

A popular poem narrated by *Gajan* devotees thus goes, '*Dhak bajao re bhai, ar bajao knashi*, *Binoy kore bajao re bhai, amod kore nachi*!' ('Play the *dhak* and *knashi* [metallic beat-keeper which accompanies the *dhak*], play with humility, and let me dance in ecstasy!').

A particular narrative retelling brings the *dhak's* supremacy in ritual practice most vividly to life. Jojan's elderly *dhaki* recollected a *bibhotso* (frightful) incident that took place in a nearby village, Mohogram. He had been invited to play for a *Gajan* song performance. He suddenly saw that about twenty ritualists had brought a dead body of a middle-aged woman, which Das described as 'most dreadful' (*bhoyaboho*); she had long hair flowing to her knees, the body had decomposed, and it was smelling atrocious. The men had fallen all over the corpse, and lay upon it, biting at parts. The understanding among villagers is that these ritualists embody cremation ground vultures (*shokun*), and the *dhak* then needs to take complete control, and play the *bishel bajna* (poisonous beats) or *udun bajna* (beats for flying). The ritualists then respond to the jumpy rhythms with their bodies and eventually 'fly off' from the dead body. However, the two *dhakis* who were present there were inexperienced, and thus their beats were not causing the right physical reactions. The men were tired of this sonic ritual misdemeanor, and started hitting the *dhakis*, when villagers present there spotted Jojan's veteran drummer and urged him to intervene and save the situation with his drum. In his own words, he was finally able to 'give a jolt (*dhakka*) to these men' with his strong, bold, and confident *udun bajna*, like 'hitting stones at birds', and they 'flew off' (jumped with a stride) to a nearby spot, still possessed, but in quieter trance. In fact, despite his distinct fear, he explained that the *Gajan dhaki* also embodies similar moods of somber graveness and a daring embracing of death befitting Shiva himself, who wanders about among dead bodies in the cremation ground. The drummer and devotees get embroiled in the rumbling sounds of both fear and its eventual mastery, and the experienced drummer admitted that even *dhakis* (and indeed all 'non-Aryans'), desperately wait for spring to arrive.[24] He added that it is the *dhaki's* 'responsibility' to finally bring the death-maddened devotees back to their senses. He further declared with confidence that a knowledgeable *dhaki* can make each ritualist dance like a vulture for as long as he beats the drum, tiring him out while also enhancing his trance.

In the *mara khela* episode of April 2022, I witnessed the ritualists enact the *shokun-naach* or *gidni-naach*, that is, the vultures' preying fights. This occurred over a skull wrapped in a red cloth placed in the center on the ground, around which they sat in vulture-like postures. Their faces were grim, and they slyly looked at each other and the skull, sometimes sticking out their tongues like snakes do upon spotting their prey, while the *dhak* kept beating very slowly and heavily all the while. Then one by one they stood up, spread their arms like wings, and danced around the skull, sluggishly, till the *dhak* kept rumbling. Then to a cue of a two-and-a-half *dhak* beat, the ending of which sounded like a fast and urgent *gurgurgurgur*, the particular dancer fell flat on the ground, like an injured bird. Then as all the vultures completed their rounds of performance, they huddled together, vying for the skull, and as one danced holding the skull in his mouth while in a squatting posture, another quickly came and snatched it away with his teeth. Locals refer to this as the *chinimini khela* (snatching game). All the while, the *dhak* beats held the very difficult and tense performance together, and viscerally controlled the ritualists' sheer physical dexterity and religious affect.

The *dhak* aurality thus has complete control over *Gajan's* embodied rituals, and its sounds constitute a seamless beating synchrony with ritual bodies and the indigenous divinity they collectively and equally personify. As a *Gajan* devotee aptly and summarily said, '*Dhak-tai shob*' ('The *dhak* is everything').

7. Conclusions

Religious belief in non-Western contexts may be both firmly scriptural (towards classical deities) and more immediate and spontaneous (towards non-classical gods). In both instances, these beliefs are constituted and sustained through long-term habit formations concerning the precise nature of devotions towards these deities. Further, these devotional

habits become more ingrained, or sediment more effectively in cultures and bodies, when they are intensely sensory in nature. In this process, aurality and the body's responses to sonic affect play a most significant role.

I have argued in this paper that the sacred Bengali drum, *dhak*, through very discrete construction and performance techniques, embodies distinct materialities, sonic textures, and rhythms learnt through several hereditary generations, so as to affect divergent religious beliefs and practices, aimed towards the classical goddess, Durga, worshipped mostly in the cities, and the indigenous god, Shiva, divinized in Bengal's villages. The precisely defined grammatical stages of Durga's worship are based on Brahmanical scriptures and strict rules of ritual and caste hierarchy, which the lower caste *dhaki* brings to life by remaining strategically silent in relation to the Brahmin priest's voice during important ritual stages. He also does this by sounding appropriately through the most nuanced gradations of ritual phases, following the priest's coordinated Brahmanical manual cues. Further, throughout Durga puja, the *dhak* plays in fast rhythms and high tones to attract the urban devotees. Alternately, the worship of the indigenous male god is essentially communitarian, with devotees, *dhakis*, and their even their god, hailing from peasant-castes. Here, Gajan's intensely embodied rituals of pain, placation, death, life, renunciation, and fertility are brought to life by much graver, slower, difficult, and thoughtful *dhak* rhythms, myths, and affective sonic experiences. In both cases, I argue that these rumbling acoustics not only aid in, but indeed enable the sensory motivations and establish a corporeal bedrock upon which religious beliefs in two distinct deities, classical and non-classical, Sanskritic and local, Brahmanical and indigenous, are constructed and sustained over centuries. The aural phenomenologies of the same percussion, through different techniques, are thus able to foster two contrary religiosities, which form the devotional polar axis of Bengal's popular religion.

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Notes

1 A *dhaki* gave instances of typical village and city *bols* (syllabic representations of numerical metric arrangements of *dhak* beats) to demonstrate the difference between slow/somber and fast-paced rhythms. A structure of the former, he said, is: *Jhyang chananachan tanak tan chanachan ja jhyang ja jhyang*, *nak chanachan nak chananachan*, and of the city: *tra jhyang tra jhyang tra jhyang tra jhyang tak jhanajhana tak gurgurgurgurrrrr*, *tra jhyang tra jhyang ta chanachan ta chan ta chan chanachan tak*.

2 Dharma or Dharmathakur is propitiated as a village god of death, with mixed Hindu/Buddhist origins.

3 Even detailed works on Durga puja mostly understand the *dhak* through its enhancing role, or as a performative addition to the festival (see Guha-Thakurta 2015, pp. 71–73, 140, 339, 347; Rodrigues 2003, p. 295). Ostor's (1980) work on Durga puja and *Gajan* rituals hardly mentions the *dhak*. However, there are instances of literary mentions, for instance, of how Durga's mother hears the farewell tone of drum sounds, and is intensely saddened to realize that her daughter would be leaving the next day (McDaniel 2004, p. 169; McDermott 2011, p. 82). There are mythical narratives about how the 18th century Hindu zamindar, Krishnachandra Ray, while returning home on a boat after being released from the prison of the Islamic ruler, hears the farewell *dhak* and laments how he missed Durga's puja that year (McDaniel 2004, p. 220), etc. Some scholars have, however, mentioned the *dhak's* centrality in *Gajan* (Dasgupta 1946, p. 324). Yet, despite its intrinsic role in devotional affectivity, the drum sounds themselves have remained a conceptual oversight.

4 These poems mostly narrate stories of Shiva's rural life (De 2021, pp. 16, 19–20).

5 For instance, there are songs about her plights on marrying the poor and indolent Shiva (McDermott 2011, pp. 78–84; Sen 1954, pp. 251–54), and 18th century compositions about her annual homecoming and desperately sad farewell. (McDermott 2011, p. 78).

6 See also Sarkar (2017) for a discussion of how Durga carries 'heroic' symbolisms.

7 The *dhak* is also said to have been played for Shiva, in Ravana's court.

8 For instance: *Shiva Shiva Bholanath* (Shiva's names), *Agradviper Gopinath* (form of Krishna), *Bolo bhai Nitaai Nitaai* (*Vaishnava* saint), *bolo bhai Chaitanya* (*Vaishnava* saint); or, *Dhak-e koy Krishna katha*, *Dhak-e koy Krishna katha* (The *dhak* speaks of Krishna).

[9] Drummers learn distinct beats to welcome Durga (*ahoban*), appoint her (*boron*), and to aid in various worship procedures of inauguration (*bodhan*), infusing life (*pran pratishtha*), invoking the goddess's sight (*chokkhu daan*), offering of lamps and other worship items (*arati*), bathing (*snan*), offering food (*bhog*), generic sacrifice (*yagna*), animal sacrifice (*bali*), and farewell (*bisarjan*). While devotees mostly do not hear or understand the Brahmanical mantras uttered by the priest, the precise rhythm beats are often associated by them, through received aural memory, with the rituals then being enacted by the priest.

[10] Some *dhakis* remember how their grandfathers' drums were even bigger, since they did not travel to cities, and played only in their own villages.

[11] Some *dhakis* explained that in villages, Durga's *arati* (and its beats) is marked into four further stages: *arati*, *sarati*, *bharati*, *amabati*.

[12] *Dhakis* also shared the exact *bols* of ritual stages with me. Thus, a Murshidabad *dhaki* explained that when the goddess first arrives, they play: *dhyan dhyanak dhyan dhyan dhyan dhyanak dhyan nakdhyanage nakdhyanage dhyan*; when she is invoked: *dhyan dhyanak dhyan dhyaaaaaarr, tyanak tyan tyaaaarrr tyan tyan tyan tyanak tyan*; when the priest begins puja: *jhin jhin jhin dhinak jhin jhin dhinak jhin tinak tin tin tinak tin tyn*; during animal sacrifice: *dhyang dhyan dhyang dhyang nak dhyanga dhyang dhyang*; during *arati: ja ja ja ja jhing ja ja ja ja jhing, jhinak jhing jhing*; and during farewell: *dhyanak dhyan ting nakey nakey tinak ting*; etc. These *bols* have regional variations, however. A North 24 Parganas *dhaki* narrated the welcoming beats as: *ta dhin ta dhin ta dhin ta dhin, tak dhinadhin dhin, tak te na dhidhin natin natin nak ta natin nak ta natin nak natin, ta kete ta kete*; the *arati* beats as: *dhik dhinata nak tey dhidhin, dhik dhinata nak tey dhidhin, ta kete tak dhinadhin ta krrrrrrrr, dhik dhinata dhinata dhinata taketey dhidhin*; and the farewell beats as: *dhi dhi nadhi dhina tak, dhi dhi nadhi dhina tak, dhi dhi nadhi dhina tete tak, dhina dhina dhin tak, tina tete nak tina, tete nak tina dha gurrrr gurrrrrrrr, dhin ta dhin ta dhina* . . .

[13] This is reminiscent of Shiva's cosmic dance to *dhak* sounds, at once spontaneous and controlled.

[14] A popular contemporary Bengali film song also says: *Dhak-er tale komor dole khushi te nache mon, aj baja knashor joma ashor, thakbe ma ar kotokkhon* ('As all waists sway to the beats of the *dhak*, play the accompanying *knasha* and warm up the festivities, since the mother won't stay for long').

[15] Over the last decade or more, Durga puja's decorations, music (especially songs and instrumental tunes blasting from microphones), and *dhak* rhythms, have also started adapting to contemporary aesthetic influences, for instance, of regional and Bollywood films. Sometimes these tunes and rhythms are also evidently western. Such adaptations simply intend to entertain the urban public for the five days of the city's celebrations.

[16] The *Gajan* god is interchangeably Shiva, Dharma, as well as Shani, the death god.

[17] In other myths recollected by peasants, Shiva once left home angry, after fighting with his wife, Parvati. She then asked his companions to sing and dance, since Shiva is most fond of aesthetic entertainment, and would surely thus return to join the celebrations. This incident is believed to have given birth to *Gajan*.

[18] Sometimes devotees take vows to perform *Gajan* for several years together, and I know a few men who have been ritualists for decades.

[19] *Sannyasis* said that they call the thread *babar prasad*, Shiva's gift.

[20] During Gajan, women also pray to Shiva for fertility. However, the main participants, especially those who observe temporary vows of celibacy and become *sannyasis* (renouncers) and Gajan specialists, are overarchingly men. Again, while men of all castes are allowed to become Gajan *sannyasis*, mostly lower-caste men undertake the austerities. In any case, villagers repeatedly told me that despite possible caste differences, Shiva devotees' bodies are considered equal during Gajan, and given Brahmanical sacred threads for the five days of worship.

[21] In Murshidabad, for instance, these songs are locally known as *shaajle gaan* (see also Nicholas 2013, p. 11). The Shiva-song tradition based on familial thematics has been popular since the eighteenth century (Sen 1914, pp. 137–55).

[22] The typical slow ascending beats during *sannyasi* dances were narrated to me as: *jhing na jhing na jha jha, jhing na jhing na jha jha*. With more speed, the *dhak* loudly says: *jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jhijhung jhijhung jhing jhing, jhing jhing kana, jhing jhing kana, jha jha je jhe, ja jha jha jha dhei dhei dhei dhei, terekete jhing*.

[23] A poem describing the skull-based ritual says: *Ki chhol gaibo goshai, chhole ache sthan, enechi Vaishnava-er matha, ache bartaman*' ('What song shall I sing for you to explain the ritual, I have brought a *Vaishnava's* head, and it is present right here'). Villagers also narrated and explained the meaning of a very long *Gajan* poem-song describing how fresh heads (referred to as *phul*, or flowers dedicated to Shiva's worship) are collected from the cremation ground or banks of the river Ganga (referred to as branches), and how, after the heads are blessed by goddess Kali, the devotees play with them in great joy.

[24] The term *anarya* (non-Aryans) is thus an interesting emic usage among villagers.

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Article

Hinduism, Belief and the Colonial Invention of Religion: A before and after Comparison

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Abstract: As known from the academic literature on Hinduism, the foreign, Persian word, "Hindu" (meaning "Indian"), was used by the British to name everything indigenously South Asian, which was not Islam, as a religion. If we adopt explication as our research methodology, which consists in the application of the criterion of logical validity to organize various propositions of perspectives we encounter in research in terms of a disagreement, we discover: (a) what the British identified as "Hinduism" was not characterizable by a shared set of beliefs or shared outlook, but a disagreement or debate about basic topics of philosophy with a discourse on tenets of moral philosophy anchoring the debate; and (b), the *W*estern tradition's historical commitment to language as the vehicle of thought not only leads to the conflation of propositions with beliefs, but to interpreting (explaining by way of belief) on the basis of the Eurocentric tradition rooted exclusively in ancient Greek philosophy. Interpretation on the basis of the *W*estern tradition leads to the *W*estern tradition vindicating itself as the non-traditional, non-religious, rational platform—the secular—for explaining everything—the residua are what get called religions on a global scale. This serves the political function of insulating Western colonialism from indigenous moral and political criticism. Given that *W*estern colonialism is the pivotal event, before which South Asians just had philosophy, and after which they had religion (the explanatory residua of Eurocentric interpretation), we can ask about Hindu religious belief. This only pertains to the period after colonialism, when Hindus adopted a *W*estcentric frame for understanding their tradition as religious because of colonization. Prior to this, the tradition the British identified as "Hindu" had a wide variety of philosophical approaches to justification, which often criticized propositional attitudes, like belief, as irrational.

Keywords: colonialism; ethics; South Asia; interpretation; explication; logic; belief; the *W*est; Yoga; dharma

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1. Introduction[1]

It is common to claim that there are such things as religions, that religions are comprised of religious beliefs, and that such beliefs are different from other kinds of beliefs, like those based on science. Given that *Hinduism* is a religious identity like any other religious identity, and religions are commonly held to cluster around defining beliefs, we would expect that there is something like a definitive Hindu response to questions such as:

- *What reasons do people report to accept belief in spiritual entities in Hinduism?*
- *How do people defend belief in devas or deities in Hinduism?*
- *Do Hindu religious beliefs chime well with contemporary science?*
- *Is there a moral imperative to view nature as ensouled or animistic?*

The problem with answering these questions is that the very idea of religion (and spirituality) is foreign to the pre-colonial South Asian tradition, and propositional attitudes, such as belief (the attitude that a thought, also called a proposition, p, is true), were typically the subject of intense philosophical criticism. Religious belief is hence doubly foreign to ancient South Asia.

I will argue that not only is Hinduism as a religion a creation of *W*estern colonialism, so too is religious belief. This is because religion in general is a creation of *W*estern colonialism. I use the term "*W*est" to identify an intellectual tradition with roots in ancient Greek thought, to distinguish it from the west as a geographical area, which includes Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) traditions. As the *W*est expands, it uses the term "religion" for traditions it cannot explain by its (the *W*est's) beliefs. Hinduism gains its identity as a religion like other noteworthy examples, but it is unique in being (precolonially) a debate and disagreement on basic topics of philosophy, with a discourse on the tenets of moral philosophy rooting the debate. In other words, the creation of "Hinduism" as a religion was a colonial rebranding of open-ended philosophical dissent and investigation (which could criticize *W*estern colonialism) into a religion, characterized primarily by religious beliefs.

This creation of religion is brought about by the prioritization of belief in explanation—*interpretation*—in the *W*estern tradition, and this prioritization is the mechanism and product of colonialism. Both elements are foreign to indigenous South Asian traditions. Ancient South Asian traditions did not have religious identities. Rather these traditions took positions on various topics in philosophy, and the dominant debate was about DHARMA: THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. Hence, the dominant concern of this tradition was moral philosophy, as moral philosophy concerns THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. South Asians were interested in many basic questions of philosophy, including metaphysics and ontology, and epistemology, not to mention many others, such as logic and aesthetics. However, the fault lines of the schools and the debates were most foundationally delineated around questions of dharma.

Moreover, belief was itself a topic of criticism in the South Asian tradition, as were propositional attitudes on the whole. This contrasts sharply with the priority given to belief in the *W*estern tradition. The importance of this argument is not that it conforms to what we (Hindus or non-Hindus) believe. Rather, it is what we can arrive at by adopting a logic-based approach to understanding both the South Asian and the *W*estern traditions—call this approach *explication*. The focus of explication is (thoughts) propositions and their deductive entailments. It is an approach to explanation that puts aside beliefs and other propositional attitudes and relies closely on logical validity (the standard of good deductive arguments) to generate explanations of various conclusions.

At this point, we might imagine the desire to defend beliefs: surely beliefs can play a role in logic—perhaps there is a logic of beliefs. However, research in logic since at least Boole, Frege and Russel, has moved away from connecting psychology (which properly studies attitudes towards propositions, such as belief) with logic, which studies propositions and their inferential connections. J.S. Mill was the last major philosopher to defend the connection between logic and psychology in his *Logic* (1882). There he defended Psychologism, the idea that basic logical laws are psychological laws.

The problem with this view is that psychology is descriptive of *how* we think, and logic concerns how we *ought* to think. The lesson from this is while surely there is a psychology of belief, and an anthropological ethnography of belief or a sociology of belief, the idea of a logic of belief is highly problematic (for a classic exploration and refutation of psychologism, see Husserl 2001). Hence, when we learn logic these days we focus on propositions, not propositional attitudes. Perhaps the hardest concept for students of logic to learn is that good inference has nothing to do with beliefs. There may be ways to justify beliefs, but that takes us to a discussion outside of logic (cf. Oliveira and Silva 2022). Acknowledging this distinction between psychology and logic is important for it highlights (as we shall see) the ways in which Hindu philosophers were prescient about these distinctions now made in western academic philosophy. To this extent, recent western tradition bends towards Hindu philosophical thinking.

As T.N. Madan notes, the geographic region of the "Sindu" in Northern South Asia becomes "Hindu" for the Persians, and "Indos" for the Greek (Madan 2003, p. xii). Our word "India" comes from the Greek. At some point under British colonial rule, "Hindu"

became used to classify Indians (Lorenzen 1999). Hinduism is Indianism. Originally, the term was employed by the British to distinguish an indigenous Indian religion from Islam (Gottschalk 2012). In other words, South Asians did not think of themselves as Hindu prior to British colonialism, and any "indigenous" religious identity in South Asia is an invention of and device of *W*estern colonialism. This observation can be generalized: all we need to do is measure the historical colonial expansion of the *W*est to observe that this coincides with the minting of religious identity in newly colonized regions. South Asia, as one of the newer arenas of *W*estern expansion, is a great source of data about this colonial phenomenon. What is peculiar about Hinduism is that the original referent of "Hinduism" fixed by its colonial baptism (for an account of how such naming occasions fix reference, see Kripke 1980) is not defined by a common view, but a receptivity to philosophical debate and disagreement (for an exploration of this full range, see Ranganathan 2018b). Given that the idea of Hinduism is so open ended, anything that is indigenously South Asian can be Hindu and does not require some common founder, origin or text. This contributes to peculiar logical properties of the category of Hinduism if we treat it as a category of religion. It is merely a collection of disparate positions and knowing that some position is Hindu tells one nothing about its content. One only knows about its origins. Anything indigenously South Asian can be Hindu given the baptism of the term.

Given the act of colonialism and the pressure for colonized South Asians to be depicted by these power structures, religious beliefs about being Hindu and associated with Hinduism were fabricated. At this time, a host of other religious identities were created within the South Asian colonial context of people having to represent themselves according to colonial expectations. In contrast to Hinduism, these religious identities (such as Buddhism, or Jainism) traced their origins to definitive founders or texts. Precolonially, these were all dissenting positions on dharma.

There are important racial dimensions to the label of Hinduism. As noted by Michael James in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on "Race", racial categories differ from ethnic categories in important ways. First while ethnic categories are often a matter of voluntary affiliation, racial categories are imposed from the outside. HINDUISM as a category of religious identity was imposed from the outside by a hostile power: the colonizer. Secondly, James notes that race and ethnicity differ with respect to the "level of agency that individuals exercise in choosing their identity" (James 2016). As racial categories are imposed from the outside, racialized people cannot easily opt out. In the case of "Hinduism", as the term describes a South Asian geography, it is hard to opt out if one is ancestrally South Asian. Perhaps one might think that one could opt out of being Hindu by rejecting some core tenet of Hinduism. Yet, as what the British named "Hinduism" was a free and open debate on various topics of philosophy, it is not clear what opting out would look like: for any position a Hindu wanted to take would be a contribution to the debate within Hinduism, not an exception. Here, we could imagine the interpreter simply telling the Hindu to renounce Hinduism by becoming an atheist and denying the existence of *devas*. But the denial of the existence of *devas* and atheism was an orthodox position in what the British called Hinduism (which we shall review).

Naomi Zack in her *Philosophy of Race: An Introduction* (Zack 2018) also notes that there is a strong connection between racial categories and geographic categories. This connection helps us understand proto racial ideas in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, but also track the idea of race that defines people in terms of their geography. This culminates most fully in what Zack calls Hegel's "geographic racism" according to which African geography accounts for the epistemic deficiencies of Africans (Zack 2018, p. 17). Similarly, the identification of Hinduism as a geographic category to identify a religion serves to define South Asians as disinterested in moral and political philosophy, and concerned instead with a shared religion and spirituality. This is a remarkably convenient story for *W*estern colonialism that thereby can depict itself as filling the moral and political void left by Hindu's geographic (racial) noninterest in moral and political philosophy.

(Indeed, J.S. Mill does just this, as we shall see, while appropriating Hindu moral and political philosophy).

What is lost in the minting of "Hinduism" that turns a geographic identity into a religion is a regard for Hindus (South Asians) as individuals free to engage in moral philosophy and to choose controversial options for themselves. Using what I call "explication", to understand Hinduism allows us to avoid geographic racism and reclaim the space for Hindus to be individuals and to not be intellectually and practically determined by a geographic identity.

In the second section, I explore the distinction between *interpretation* (explanation by way of belief) and its opposite, *explication* (explanation by way of logical validity). This is a modern retelling of an ancient distinction between anti-yoga and Yoga, as explicated in the *Yoga Sūtra* (circa 200 CE). With this distinction, we can either explicate South Asian moral (dharma) philosophy, or we can interpret South Asia as a tradition of religions—but not at once. This allows us to see that there is nothing characteristic about religious positions in terms of explicated content and that the distinction between the religious and the secular is racial, and depends rather on interpretation from a *W*estern vantage. Whereas Yoga, or explication, is how we ought to live to fortify our autonomy, interpretation is a departure from logic and a violation of personal autonomy. In South Asia, interpretation was typically viewed as an error theory (cf. Ranganathan 2021), or an account of what goes wrong, and understanding South Asia by way of interpretation (to promulgate the idea of Hinduism) is an imposition. Explicated, we find that the South Asian tradition's exploration of moral theory exceeds what is typical in the *W*est, provides resources for appreciating the wrong and harm of colonialism, and constitutes the foundation for what is often regarded as radically inclusive, progressive, secular (non-religious) philosophy today. Interpreted, Yoga seems like mystical Theism.

In the third section, the two methods of interpretation and explication are directed toward the *W*estern tradition itself. Interpreted, we can recreate the usual conclusions about the natural religiosity of BIPOC traditions and the natural secularism of the *W*estern tradition. Explicated, we see that the *W*estern tradition is a tradition of interpretation as a function of a basic model of thought captured in the founding idea of *logos*: the Linguistic Model of Thought. Colonialism, explicated, operates on the same model, or rather, the mechanism of colonialism is interpretation. Religion is the byproduct of the colonial expansion of the *W*est that consists in transmitting *W*estern interpretations of colonized people to colonized people via the process of colonization. Then, colonized people understand themselves not according to precolonial philosophical theories and methods, but colonially as a doxastic deviation (called "religion", or "spirituality") from the *W*est, which is treated as a universal standard. In so far as there are options (one can explicate or interpret) the choice is not merely political. Explication is logical, anti-colonial, and in keeping with Ockham's Razor (it is parsimonious)—the idea that we should not multiply entities beyond their necessity. Interpretation is a failure in these three respects. Hence, explication makes better sense of all traditions, including the South Asian.

In the fourth section I consider objections to this analysis. Here too the objections are themselves interpretive dissatisfactions with the argument and the response is explicatory. Chief among such complaints is that the Hindu tradition and Hindu practice present many examples of religious beliefs about spiritual entities. The response notes that how this tradition appears to us today will depend upon which methodology of interpretation or explication we adopt. In the fifth section, I conclude.

2. Interpretation vs. Explication

In this section I will further discuss two contrasting methodologies and follow the impact of their application. The first is acclaimed in the Continental and Analytic literature with deep roots in the *W*estern tradition: *interpretation*. The second is an important part of philosophical methodology but not discussed with any prominence (of the sort accorded to interpretation) in the *W*estern tradition: *explication*.

To make the distinction clear, consider an example of two approaches to processing data in recent politics, which exemplify the differences between interpretation and explication. The example is of the 2020 US presidential election. Donald Trump claims he won that election. The US Electoral College (consisting of duly appointed electors from each state), and voting citizens, determined that Joe Biden won. What is the difference?

Let us consider a significant subset (though not all) of Trump supporters who believe what Trump says. *They believe that Trump was the rightful winner of the 2020 US presidential election*—as Trump said. But more than merely believing this, they used this belief to explain what happened. In other words, they are interpreters, interpreting the election on the basis of the belief that Trump is the rightful winner. Call these interpreters Trumpies. In the states that Trump won, as the outcome is in accordance with Trumpy beliefs, they see nothing to object to here. But what of states where Biden won the popular vote? In these cases, Trumpies find grounds for objecting to the outcome. Why? On their view, Trump actually won, and so the finding to the contrary by state officials is proof of electoral corruption. As reported in the January 6 Hearings before the US Congress, ordinary vote counting procedures in Georgia (a state that Biden won) were interpreted by Trumpies as proof of corruption (January 6th Committee 2022). In contrast, in states that Trump won, there were no Trumpy complaints about these normal procedures.

On the other side, we have people who endorse an *explicatory* method, which consists in making *explicit* the considerations that logically entail a conclusion about who should be president of the United States. In this case, each ballot cast via procedurally legal avenues, whether by mail, or at polling stations, in the election for president of the US, represents the voter's perspective, and expresses a theory about who should occupy various offices, including who should be president. Explicatory poll workers process the ballots to record these theoretical conclusions so that they may be tallied. In most US states, the simple preponderance of votes in favor of Trump or Biden determines who the state's Electoral College votes go to. In the US Congress on 6 January 2021 (despite a violent insurrection led by Trumpies that day), these electoral college votes were also explicated, and a conclusion about who won the election was deduced from the tally.

The two methods of interpretation and explication are different in a number of ways. The most important difference is that for the interpreter (including the Trumpy) there is no way to assess the evidence *independently* of their beliefs about what the totality of the evidence supports. Here, for the Trumpy, the evidence of whether a vote is legitimate or whether it is corrupt hinges on whether it is in keeping with Trumpy beliefs. Trumpies value votes in favor of Trump, and disvalue votes in favor of Biden. In the case of the explicatory poll worker, each ballot that expresses a theory about who should win various races is assessed *independently* of the truth of who should be president, which is determined by a final tally of the votes. The explicatory poll worker hence values the votes for the losing candidate as much as for the winning candidate—and as they begin counting them on election day, they do not know who is the winning candidate. Each ballot contributes to the final decision of who should be the president. For the explicatory poll worker, there is no way to determine the truth of who should be the president (or who should win various races) independently of tallying the varying and mutually exclusive conclusions about which candidates should occupy offices in each ballot.

A very important difference between the interpreter Trumpy and the explicatory poll worker is that the Trumpy as an *interpreter does not tolerate a disagreement* about who should be president whereas the poll worker as an *explicator values the actual disagreement* about who should be president as necessary to determine the question of who should be president. Indeed, the interpreter displays many of the features of narcissistic personality disorder (Caligor et al. 2015). The interpreter determines everything according to their beliefs, and hence what this rules out is an appreciation of dissent, which consists also of what they do not believe. They are happy to have discussions about the election, just so long as we keep out the prospect that Biden won. The explicator gives up on assessing each datum (each ballot) in light of the question of whether it represents the final outcome. For them, a vote

for Trump in Georgia didn't represent the final vote tally, but it was part of the collection of propositions that entailed the outcome. Interpreting is about taking the small view of one's outlook. Explication leads to the big picture, beyond one's outlook.

Another important difference is that for the Trumpy interpreter, the election is at best a rubber stamp of a foregone conclusion (what they believe), and at worse an exercise in corruption. For the explicatory poll worker, the election is a data gathering exercise that elucidates important questions that are themselves controversial—questions about who should occupy offices on the ballot. Finally, this shows us that the Trumpy interpreter is not responding to the data; they are responding to their psychology. The explicatory poll worker is responsibly ordering the data into an explicit presentation that will allow for the deduction of a final conclusion. Interpretation is a passive, emotional relationship to the possibilities. Explication is a dispassionate logical activity that requires sorting and ordering data about a controversy and deducing conclusions from the ordered data set.

Interpretation is an explanation by way of belief. Belief is one of many propositional attitudes. To believe the proposition *p* is to adopt an attitude of endorsing *p*, or taking *p* to be true. Interpretation is widely acclaimed in the twentieth-century Analytic and Continental literature. Authors as diverse as W.V.O. Quine (1960, p. 59), early Donald Davidson (1986, p. 316; 2001, p. 101), Martin Heidegger (2010) and Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990, 1996) stress the importance of interpretation—often employing the term itself (Davidson) or an analogue such as "hermeneutics" (Gadamer) or "Auslegung" (Heidegger) that is readily paraphrased or translated as 'interpretation.' It continues in the widely influential idea that reflection is about arriving at an equilibrium of considered judgments (Rawls 1971, p. 18).

Specifically, to interpret some phenomenon *P* is for the interpreting subject *S* to:

- Use *S*'s beliefs b in the explanation of *P*.

So in this case, the Trumpy uses their beliefs about Trump being the winner of the election to explain the phenomenon *P*, which is the election and its votes. In philosophy, if we interpret, we explain the topic in terms of what we believe. If we believe for instance that the range of ethical theories is foreclosed by the important options in the *W*estern tradition, we decide Indian philosophers talked about ethics when they articulate beliefs of *W*estern moral philosophers, and we deny that they did moral philosophy when they don't. Alternatively, if one tries to assess the distinction between interpretation and explication in terms of what one takes to be true, one is interpreting and the distinction will make little sense.

Explication is the application of logical validity to the task of deriving explanations. Logical validity is the property of good deductive arguments such that if the premises of the argument are true, the conclusion has to be true. A logically valid argument can be comprised entirely of false premises that one does not believe, and an argument comprised entirely of true propositions or propositions one believes can be invalid. To explicate is to employ logical validity to derive from a perspective *P* a theory that entails its controversial claims about *t*. The concept *T* is what theories of *t* are disagreeing about. The importance of explication is that it renders *explicit* propositions that do logical work that are otherwise implicit in a perspective.

To explicate a perspective *P*—augustly called a "philosophy"—about topic *t*, is to:

- Discern the reasons of *P* that constitute *P*, which entail *P*'s use of "*t*", and to arrive at a systematization of *P*'s reasons that entails the uses of "*t*". The systematization of *P*'s reasons that entails *P*'s *t*-claims is *P*'s theory of *t*. The reasons of *P* may be what *P* explicitly says, or what is entailed by *P*.

This is a formulation of explication geared specifically to philosophical theory. But it also applies to the poll worker. When the poll worker does their job, they treat each ballot as representing a perspective *P* that expresses a theory about who should win the races identified on the ballot, and they derive this theory from markings (*t*) present in the ballot that indicate these theoretical conclusions. In the case of Indian philosophy, for instance, if we explicate it, we treat each perspective *P* as entailing a theory about a term *t* used

variously across perspectives—say, "dharma". So if we explicate Indian philosophy we try to identify a perspective's theory of dharma.

Then there is the second step:

- Compare theories of *t*: what they converge on while they disagree is the concept *T*.

This second step here corresponds to the tally of such theories about who should win the various races. Unless we can get to this point, we don't really understand what the election was about, and who won. In philosophy, getting to this point is essential to appreciate what the theories of *T* are actually about. In the case of Indian philosophy, by getting to this step, we understand what the concept of DHARMA is about; and that is just what competing theories of dharma disagree about: THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. Once we thus understand the concept of DHARMA, we then know what was at stake in philosophical cases for a theory of dharma and we are able to more fully understand each theory of dharma as a contribution to that debate. But this also helps us sort out the controversy about dharma, for we then appreciate what the disagreement is about.

Our experience with the process of explication will depend upon the logical sufficiency of the positions we are explicating. If they are together illogical (invalid), an explication will reveal ad hoc reasoning that is (for example) a result of psychological processes as opposed to logical processes. In the voting case, such errors would correspond to problems with the ballot.

While explanation by way of belief (interpretation) is popular in the Western tradition, it is methodologically incompatible with explication, which is the backbone of philosophical research; these are mutually exclusive methodologies. The reason they are mutually exclusive is that explanation by way of what one believes (what one takes to be true) is a criterion that does not respect logical validity; an explanation by way of what one takes to be true may constitute an invalid argument. For instance, the argument,

PR1. Biden was POTUS in 2021.

PR2. Modi was PM of India in 2021.

(Therefore) This paper is on Hinduism and belief.

is comprised of true propositions and would constitute an explanation in terms of what we take to be true in so far as we believe these propositions. Yet the argument is invalid. In contrast, Modus Ponens—

PR1. If P then Q.

PR2. P.

(Therefore) Q.

is always valid, even if we substitute propositions we disbelieve or are false for P and Q. There are thereby an unlimited number of valid arguments that depart from what one takes to be true (or are true). In general, however, reason concerns inferential support (whether deduction, induction or even abduction) and the truth of the data, reasons and candidate conclusions of various forms of reasoning is secondary to this essential trait. Yet, belief makes truth the primary concern. This highlights the divergence of belief, which is a propositional attitude, from propositions, which has been noticed in the literature where belief is occasionally discussed as an example of an 'intentional context' (Quine 1956; Kaplan 1968; Kripke 1988). The trouble with intentional contexts is that they do not allow a direct inferential interaction with the propositions they contain. Rather, any possible inference has to be mediated by the attitude or psychology of the person overseeing such an intentional context.

To illustrate the problem, consider the proposition *it is raining outside.* If it is true that *it is raining outside*, then we can derive via logical validity that *water is falling from the sky*. But if it is true that *x believes that it is raining outside,* we cannot draw from this that *water is falling from the sky*. The addition of the attitude changes the topic, from the proposition, to the psychology of the person holding the attitude. And then, whatever inferences can be drawn from the intentional context will depend upon the psychology of the relevant person. This addition of the attitude constitutes an impediment to drawing inferences, which goes unchecked largely because the articulation of beliefs does not necessarily involve articulating the attitude. If *we believe* that *it is raining outside* (that is, if we take it to be true), we usually just say: *it is raining outside.* This is captured by the insight derived from Alfred Tarski's work (cf. Tarski 1944, Tarski [1935] 1983) that saying "*p* is true" is pragmatically equivalent to the first order assertion, *p.* (Deflationists about truth claim that this is all there is to say about truth. For more, see Armour-Garb et al. 2022, Edition).

The problems with interpretation hide in part because of an audible indistinction between the articulation of thoughts and beliefs. This allows us to confuse the two as though they are interchangeable, and this allows us to treat all explanation by way of thought as an explanation by way of belief. This will become *extremely* important later when we consider the *W*estern tradition's predilection to interpret. As the *W*est relies on a Linguistic Model of Thought, which equates what we can think with what we say with language, it models thought as audibly indistinguishable from beliefs. But explanation by way of thought (explication) and explanation by way of belief (interpretation) are distinct, and the problems of interpretation are real.

While we began this section with a political example to distinguish interpretation and explication, our interest in this paper is to track the political outcomes of these contrasting methodologies in the study of human intellectual history. Whether we adopt interpretation or explication we can talk about philosophy, for instance, as a conversation. But the character of this conversation, as we see it, will depend upon which method we adopt. If we interpret, we will find dissent upsetting. We will rather focus on agreement, hide and deny disagreement. If we explicate, we value disagreement as the means of understanding the conversation. But we cannot understand the issue at stake in the contrast between interpretation and explication if we do not allow for disagreement. What pursuing this disagreement shows is that what is at stake is between understanding as something exhausted by your beliefs (interpretation), or understanding as something that has to take into account logically dissenting positions (explication). Interpreters will of course want no part of this discussion, and will sooner we not engage in it. However, explication, aside from being rationally superior, wins the debate for a simple reason: there is no way to appreciate the disagreement between interpretation and explication without explicating. Understanding this disagreement is an example of explication. Just like the 2020 US Presidential election, when we allow for the full pursuit of a disagreement, we find that not all options are equal, and some are the clear winners.

2.1. Interpretation and Race

Let us now turn to the application of interpretation to the Indian tradition and BIPOC thought. If we were to interpret the Indian tradition, and BIPOC philosophy, from a conventional *W*estcentric starting point, we would explain the uses of "dharma" in terms of what we believe in our *W*estcentric context. And hence, every use of "dharma" would be equated to what we are inclined to endorse in those contexts. Owing to the doxastic divergence between us and the ancient South Asians, we would have to conclude that "DHARMA is a concept difficult to define because it disowns or transcends distinctions that seem essential to us" (Lingat 1973, p. 3), that it is used in a "bewildering variety of ways" (Larson 1972, p. 146) and that "It stands for nature, intrinsic [ontological] quality, civil and moral law, justice, virtue, merit, duty and morality" to name a few (Rangaswami Aiyangar 1952, p. 63). In the Indian Constitution, it is also the term that has been conscripted to stand for religion in its self-description as a secular state: *dharmanirapekṣa rājya*—"it is a

state with no dharma" (Government of India 1950). Interpretive accounts of "dharma" are not the exception in the *W*esternized literature, but the rule. Such interpretive approaches correlate with a skepticism about the existence of any traditional moral philosophy in the South Asian tradition, and the affirmation of the tradition as predominantly religious (for a survey of such claims, see Ranganathan 2017c, pp. 52–55).

This generalizes to the treatment of BIPOC traditions by *W*esternized contexts where BIPOC positions are invariably talked about as religious. This has everything to do with methodology. To get belief in the category of religion off the ground, one can either: (a) postulate a criterion one takes to be true of religion, and then explain religions in terms of that criterion (which would be an interpretation);[2] (b) simply accept that what are labeled as religions are religions and then use this belief to account for what the category is about (which would also be an interpretation) (for a still useful discussion about both strategies, see Harrison 2006); or (c), interpret on the basis of the *W*estern tradition, which treats the *W*estern tradition as the non-religious and hence secular, and then anything that has extra *W*estern doxastic roots as religion. This latter strategy is dispositive as it helps reconstruct the unlikely coincidence that anything that is a clear example of a religion has an extra-*W*estern origin: such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism, Shintoism. *W*estern interpretation would also explain how indigenous European traditions (like Norse mythology, the worldview of the Sami, or ancient Celtic practices) are also religious (as they fall outside of the *W*estern tradition), and yet ancient Greek mythology (in Homer) is converted into literature and studied in classics. It is also dispositive as it would explain how whether something is a religion or is religious has nothing to do with the content of the religious matter but everything to do with racial origins. It would also explain how this glaring racial disparity on what gets counted as religion is not usually acknowledged: *W*estern interpretation based on beliefs produced by this tradition would make it seem as though this divergence is just the way things are.

Consider for instance the position that you should not worry about your individuality (or questions such as whether God exists), but rather pay careful attention to your choices, for they have consequences. Some lead to beneficial results for all concerned, and others to suffering. In so far as beings can suffer, we ought to choose carefully so as to minimize suffering. If you believe this because you read Bentham (1781), your views would be called ethical. But if you adopted this because you read the writings of Buddhists (Goodman 2009) your views would be religious.

Or, consider the position that reality begins with the evolution of matter from a primal indistinct state of nature: a root state of nature. Through this evolution of matter, primitive undifferentiated states evolve into increasing states of complexity, and display emergent properties, such as the mind and computational capacities (intellect). People might believe themselves to be making choices and committing actions, but in reality everything that happens is a play of natural processes, and the sense of agency is itself an epiphenomenon produced by the causal interaction of natural processes. If you came to believe this by accepting reasons from European scholarly work, you would be called a rationalist–materialist. This is 'secular.' If you came to adopt this because you adopt Īśvarakṛṣṇa's second-century *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, you would be a Hindu, as Sāṅkhya is a paradigm philosophical school within Hinduism. This is 'religious'.

Consider the claim that the Vedas are a corpus of normative claims, that promise good outcomes, and the various citations of *deva*s in this text are purely grammatical and literary devices to shore up rhetorical support for those claims—one doesn't need to buy their existence to understand the purpose of the text. If you believe this on the basis of a contemporary *W*estern literary criticism, that would be secular. If you adopted this deflationary approach to *deva*s and the Vedas because you adopted the Orthodox Brahminical school, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā (cf. Bilimoria 1989), you would be an Orthodox Hindu.

Similarly, when Plato muses about life after death, reincarnation (*Phaedo*) and a divine creator (*Timaeus*), these are just the speculations of a philosopher. When the Cārvākā deny

that anything but matter exists, the only good is pleasure, and our liberation from suffering is death (Chattopadhyaya and Gangopadhyaya 1990), that is also Hindu as it falls within the wide catchall of indigenous South Asian positions with no common founder. Given interpretation on the basis of the *W*estern tradition, racialized philosophers, no matter what they argue on the basis of their racialized traditions, are categorized as religious. Similarly, if it is purely *W*estern, it is treated as nonreligious and hence secular.

2.2. Explication and Hindu Moral Philosophy as Decolonial Moral Philosophy

If we explicate, we would treat each perspective that employs "dharma" as entailing via logical validity a theory of dharma that entails its various "dharma" claims. The concept DHARMA would simply be what the competing theories of dharma disagree about—what we can also derive logically as their joint entailment. If we did this, we would discover that what theories of dharma are disagreeing about is THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. The right has to do with choice, procedure and action and the exercise of agency. The good concerns states (possible or real) that are worthy of approval. If we explicate theories of ethics or morality in the *W*estern tradition, and theories of the *Tao* in the Chinese tradition, we would find the same disagreement playing out. Disagreements about dharma are, explicated, disagreements of moral theory. As set out in the recent *Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Indian Ethics* (Ranganathan 2017b), we find, explicated, four basic ethical theories—a list that adds to the familiar three theories in the *W*estern tradition. At no point would we come to acknowledge religions, as every perspective that could be so explicated would be understood in terms of its contribution to philosophical disagreement.

At this point it is worth addressing the relationship between various topics in philosophy and the Indic concern for dharma, or moral philosophy. First, unlike what has become the norm in *W*estern philosophy, indigenous South Asian philosophers were systematic philosophers. So, while they did certainly pursue philosophy in areas such as metaphysics or epistemology, they typically did it within a package that had views on dharma, and it was in many cases *identified* simply as a view on dharma (such as we find with Jainism, Buddhism, Vaiśeṣika and Pūrva Mīmāṃsā). Secondly, it is true that indigenous South Asian philosophers used the word "dharma" for various ontological, metaphysical and epistemic matters. Buddhists call constituents of reality and the teachings of the Buddha, "dharma". Jains call the principle of motion, that liberated individuals traverse, and the teachings of Jainism, "dharma". The *Vaiśeṣika Sūtra* begins in the first *sūtra* with: Now, therefore, we will explain dharma. What follows are *sūtras* about ontology and metaphysics. Rāmānuja, a bhakti philosopher, in discussing cognition of external matters, describes it as the *dharma-bhūtta-jñāna*: dharma, thing, knowledge (Rāmānuja *Gītā Bhāṣya* 5.16, Śrī Bhāṣya I.i.1). This is very similar to the *Yoga Sūtra* employment of "dharma" to discuss epistemic matters (YS III.13).

Interpreters opportunistically interpret each such use of "dharma" according to their own beliefs. If we explicate, we will have to identify each perspective's theory of dharma that (also) entails its ontological, metaphysical, or epistemic uses of "dharma", and then compare the theories: what we find (via the second step of explication) is that the theories all contribute to a debate about THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD, and hence this is the concept of DHARMA (as per explication). This is a very important implication of explication: it is only once we understand the big picture theoretical disagreement about dharma that we understand what the concept DHARMA is and what is at stake in these various uses of "dharma". So, in many cases, it is quite impossible to extricate metaphysical and epistemic discussions from moral philosophical discussions if we explicate.

Interpreters, as we saw, identify these matters as ontological or epistemic, as their beliefs dictate, but at the big-picture expense of understanding theoretical disagreements about dharma. Interpreters relying upon the *W*estern tradition are likely to reduce ethics to discussions of the values and norms of human society as we find in Plato, and Aristotle, and which continue in the *W*estern tradition. The Indian conversations about dharma,

explicated, take on cosmological significance as they apply not merely to human society, but to philosophical topics in general (for more on this, see Ranganathan 2017c).

Explicated, we find that theories of dharma as theories of moral theory exceed what we are accustomed to in the *W*estern tradition. In the South Asian tradition, we find four basic theories. And while the South Asian tradition has four notable moral theories that are widely discussed, all four are internal to what the British called "Hinduism". The first three theories of dharma are familiar in the *W*estern tradition. To fill out the details of the theories, consider the question of how we should respond to climate crisis. Each theory would take us in a different direction.

- Virtue Ethics: The Good (character, constitution) conditions or produces the Right (choice, action). (Vaiśeṣika, Madhva's Dvaita Vedānta, *Jainism*)

The Virtue Ethicist would have to determine what the virtuous agent would do in response to climate crisis and then act accordingly. (The theories identified here as examples of Virtue Ethics provide different accounts of the model virtuous agent.) Depending on what model of virtue a Virtue Ethicist elects, their response to climate crisis will differ.

- Consequentialism: The Good (end) justifies the Right (choice, action). (Nyāya, Kāśmīra Śaivism, Cārvākā, *Buddhism*)

Consequentialists would have to determine what the good was (is it happiness, or perhaps environmental health), and then on the basis of this determination, they would have to choose courses of action that maximize these ends. If the consequentialist chooses happiness as their good, given climate crisis, they will have a variety of options to choose from with respect to how they could maximize happiness, and some of these measures might involve mitigating climate crisis. If there was no way to maximize happiness without mitigating climate crisis, all roads for the consequentialist would lead to dealing with this problem as a means to happiness.

- Deontology: The Right (procedure) justifies the Good (actions, called duties, or omissions, called rights). (Bhagavad Gītā 's Karma Yoga, Pūrva Mīmāṃsā)

Deontologists have two challenges: first they must identify candidate actions or omissions that are good, and then critical reasons or procedures that select some of these good things to do or avoid as duties or rights. With respect to climate crisis, how Deontologists respond will depend upon the two steps.

Interpreters are likely to define these theoretical options differently, deferring to their beliefs about these options. And many of these beliefs may center around figures who promote hybrid theories, such as teleological theories that combine the first two options. However, explication reveals the ways in which basic ethical theories are themselves different positions one can take on THE RIGHT *or* THE GOOD. While there are too many examples of the above ethical theories to name in the South Asian tradition, and as that explicatory work is beyond the scope of this essay (for a closer overveiw of these traditions, see Ranganathan 2017a), the above nonitalicized parenthetical examples are within what is conventionally thought of as Hinduism (for a closer look, see Ranganathan 2019a). If we define Hinduism in terms of its colonial baptism, it includes the examples in italics. Importantly, disagreements about dharma reveal an historically significant fourth option:

- *Bhakti/Yoga: The Right (devotion to the procedural ideal, Īśvara) conditions or produces the Good.*

An exploration of this basic Hindu theory is in order as it provides the historical source not only for decolonizing our study of philosophy, but it has also been politically influential in anti-oppression political movements. With this we can compare what it would contribute to the challenge of climate crisis.

This theory is classically set out in the second-century *Yoga Sūtra* by Patañjali, though it is also defended in sources such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* as "bhakti yoga", and has earlier antecedents in the *Upaniṣad*- s (1000–500 BCE). "Bhakti" is often translated as 'devotion.' Given the prominence of Theism relative to the *W*estern tradition, this theory is often

interpreted as a version of Theism, as it involves devotion to Īśvara, the Lord, Sovereignty. Theism, the view that there is an all good, all powerful, all knowing agent, who is God, and what God wants is what we should do, is a version of Virtue Ethics: God for the theist is the supremely virtuous agent. As a version of Virtue Ethics, Theism starts with the goodness of the moral agent (God) and this leads to right choice (either as God's action, or guidance).

Īśvara, in contrast, is not Good, but the procedural ideal of the Right. Recall, the right has to do with choice, agency, procedure, and hence Īśvara is the ideal of these matters. According to Yoga/Bhakti, in opposition to Virtue Ethics (and Theism), we begin with the devotion to the Right, and as we figure out what this means for us in practice, we bring about the good, which is the perfection of the devotional practice. So, Bhakti/Yoga is the opposite of Theism in so far as it is the opposite of Virtue Ethics.

Metaethically, the *Yoga Sūtra* begins with a distinction between two approaches to mental content. On the one hand, we can engage in Yoga, which consists in the constraint and ordering of mental content in a manner that respects our autonomy as epistemic agents, or we identify with mental content as our explanation. The distinction between explication and interpretation are modern retellings of this contrast. This distinction is of first metaethical importance, for whether we are able to understand the options of moral theory depends upon which method we choose. When we explicate, we are ordering thoughts into logical explanations that protect our autonomy as we do not have to believe or buy any of the explanations so explicated (YS I.2-3). This is because logical validity does not require that we believe the thoughts that we appreciate as forming a valid argument. When we interpret, we treat the facts as we see them as our explanation, and this is encoded as our beliefs—in this case, the epistemic boundaries between ourselves and what we are aware of collapse as we reside in intentional contexts (YS I.4). In undermining our epistemic autonomy from what we contemplate, and by employing propositional attitudes as the explanation, interpretation changes the subject from our thoughts to our attitudes and psychology. This is further discussed as *avidya*, or ignorance (YS II.3). We can spell this metaethical argument out, in standard form, in a disjunctive syllogism implicit in the opening aphorisms of the *Yoga Sūtra*:

> PR 1. Either we should organize mental content to understand the options and preserve our autonomy (Yoga), or we simply identify with the facts as we see it (anti-yoga).
>
> PR 2. As we understand that PR 1 is a disjunction of two mutually exclusive methodologies, and not a fact, in understanding PR 1 it is not the case that we can simply identify with the facts as we see it (anti-yoga).
>
> Therefore, we must organize mental content to understand the options and preserve our autonomy (Yoga).

Notably, this is an argument against using propositional attitudes (including beliefs) as an explanation, and one that gets off the ground by pressing the mutually exclusive disjunction of Yoga and anti-yoga, which is a logical distinction that we are aware of when we contemplate the options. It is an argument that does not appeal to what we believe, but rather what we can disagree about, namely Yoga and anti-yoga.

This metaethics sets up a normative ethics where we inhabit the space of Yoga, so described, as a devotional practice to the ideal of Autonomy and Sovereignty, Īśvara. This ideal of Sovereignty is in turn comprised of two general traits: it is not constrained by past choices (it is unconservative), and it is free to determine itself into the future (it is self determining) (YS I.24). The normative theory is hence spelled out in terms of three procedural ideals that we ought to be devoted to as practitioners of Yoga. First, there is devotion to Īśvara itself (*Īśvara praṇidhānāna*), and in turn the practice of the two essential procedural traits of Īśvara: unconservatism (*tapas*) and self-governance (*svādhyāya*). Essential to the practice of *svādhyāya* is the determination of one's own chosen values or norms (*iṣṭa-devatā*) (YS. II.44).

Persons on this account are things that thrive given their own sovereignty, which includes nonhuman animals, and large-scale bodies like the Earth. Taking these seriously as persons is a matter of moral theory, as is the identification of one's chosen values. The outcome of the process of the practice of Yoga is autonomy (*kaivalya*). However, as it is not a version of Consequentialism, this end does not justify the practice. Rather, devotion to the procedural ideal provides meaning to one's practice and this transforms into a practice of autonomy via a moral cleansing (dharmameghasamādhi) that consists of abandoning interpretation or ego-based understanding in every context (YS IV 29-34). Importantly, our relationship to other people is not founded on shared values, as each one of us as a practitioner has to determine that for ourselves. Rather, it is our shared interest in autonomy. This provides the foundation for political acts of solidarity in the face of violent opposition and for resetting the moral order when it becomes oppressive (for more on Yoga and moral recalibration, see Ranganathan 2019b).

A steady state of *affliction*, what we often call trauma, is explained in the *Yoga Sūtra* as originating with anti-yoga, namely interpretation. Interpretation is ignorance on a Yoga account as it changes the focus away from propositions, which we can reason about, to the psychology that enwraps it in an intentional context. All interpreters, like the Trumpy, claim to be understanding what they are interpreting (such as the election), but are in fact talking about themselves (their attitudes). This collapse of what one is aware of with the power of awareness gives rise to a false self, called *egotisim* (asmitā) (YS II.6). In this state, individuals experience emotional paroxysms because of their inability to reason and problem solve. Like the Trumpy, they are happy when they experience what is in accordance with their beliefs and are upset when they do not. This constitutes being stuck in affliction (YS II.3). This is a state of violence, where the afflicted experience the violence of their affliction and also commit violence aimed at suppressing what is not in keeping with their beliefs. This analysis of trauma explains it as the imposition of a perspective via interpretation on the individual, from which they cannot free themselves. When this imposition of an interpretation comes from outside, especially as it relates to THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD, we call it colonialism (cf. LaMonica 2021; Butt 2013). In this case, the colonized are expected to conform to the imposed interpretation. We too can be the origins of the interpretation we live under. This gives rise to very real non-ideal political arrangements where the colonial interpretation is enforced with violence.

The *Yoga Sūtra* includes a very influential non-ideal ethical theory—a theory of what to do outside of ideal conditions of practice. These are the famous Eight Limbs of Yoga, which begins with the political commitment to activism. The first and most famous of the limbs is described by Patañjali as a universal obligation, called Yama (YS II. 30-36). It consists in nonviolent, direct action (*ahiṃsā*) to allow people to participate in social facts (*satya*) that reveals: people not deprived of their requirements (*asteya*), personal boundaries respected (*bramhacaraya*) and the practitioner as a non-hoarder (*aparigrahaya*). Importantly, a concern for the truth comes second after the disruption of harm, effectively shelving interpretation, which is an explanation by way of what one takes to be true. Truth so understood is something we discover, and it is the truth of a world of autonomous individuals. This activism, which has the effect of getting opponents to renounce their hostility (YS II.36), exemplifies a devotion to Sovereignty, the activity of unconservatism while valuing self-governance. But it is also explicitly social. Having engaged in this activism, one can then proceed on to the Niyama (the second limb) where the practitioner commits to the three basic practices of Yoga, while working on being content and pure in this commitment (YS II.32). The third limb is *āsana,* which is literally described as the comfortable steady state of continuous yogic practice (YS II.46-8). In contemporary yoga talk, "*āsana*" is the word for postural exercise. This exercise bears a resemblance to what is discussed in the *Yoga Sūtra* to the extent that postures are ways to practice the three basic procedural commitments of Yoga. This and all further yogic practice happens within the context of the original activism: Yama.

Patañjali's discussion of Yama sets out a diagnosis of violence and a political strategy for a response. The origin of violence is trauma according to the *Yoga Sūtra*, and the end to that violence is an activism of harm disruption, itself an example of non-harm, which has the effect of getting one's opponent to renounce their hostility (YS II.30-35). What is not widely appreciated is that M.K. Gandhi derived his political philosophy from the *Yoga Sūtra*, and that Patañjali had already set out in the *Yoga Sūtra* the strategy of nonviolent direct action (cf. Puri 2015, who shows Gandhi extensively crediting Patañjali for his politics in his collected works). Gandhi's' uptake of this was influential on Martin Luther King's implementation of nonviolent direct action in the American Civil Rights movement (King 1958). Many contemporary progressive activist movements, whether Black Lives Matter, or Direct Action Everywhere, follow these models. What is often considered progressive politics today, which takes an inclusive approach to personhood, and treats conservativism in general as what is to be abandoned in favor of self-governance and the determination of one's own freedom from the past via the unconservativism of direct action, is Yoga. As reviewed, in many cases there is a direct historical connection to the *Yoga Sūtra* and progressive politics. A hallmark of this progressive approach, already in the *Yoga Sūtra*, is that what relates people are not shared values (as each of us determines what our own values are, at least, ideally), but rather shared interests in being unconservative and self-governing. This interest cuts across natural traits, such as sex, gender, sexual orientation and species.

Returning to the issue of climate crisis, Yoga/Bhakti provides three levels of response. First, the yogi/bhakta would have to engage in the metaethical or metaphilosophical activity of explicating the ethical and scientific options. Such a comparison will help in the determination of the winning option. Normatively this means that the yogi/bhakta is already involved in devotion to the ideal of procedure, Īśvara (Sovereignty), and thereby practicing Sovereignty's two essential traits of unconservatively understanding radically different options while making room for their own self-governance to choose their own values. This then leads to the non-ideal political practice (the Yamas) of having to mitigate against harms, such as climate crisis, that would interfere with the practice of unconservatism and self-governance. This will be political and require taking stands on issues of public policy and our relationship to persons of other species, including the Earth. The yogi/bhakta would be in a position to identify experts (such as scientists) who are knowledgeable about a topic, such as climate crisis, by virtue of their own explicatory (yogic) research focused on pursuing and organizing the data. Their advice would be important, but they would be acknowledged as experts by way of their own explicatory research, not their virtue.

In contrast to the Virtue Ethicist (of which Theism is an example), the yogi/bhakta does not look to the good agent to provide guidance. Indeed, according to the yogi/bhakta, simply looking to the good agent to provide guidance, without going through these three steps, would be a recipe for interpretation. Guidance is rather self-generated by these levels of yogic practice. When the yogi/bhakta acts morally and politically, they do so on their own accord as sovereign individuals, not as followers.

Explicated we see that not only is the South Asian and "Hindu" tradition a remarkably vibrant tradition of moral philosophy, with a diversity of basic options, but also decolonially influential on a global scale. Correlatively, this is ignored in the literature, which prefers to discuss South Asia as being bereft of any moral philosophy while being predominantly religious.

2.3. Methodological Outcomes

In concluding this section, it is noteworthy that whether one finds religion in South Asia, or an extended moral philosophical discussion, depends upon which methodology one adopts. If one interprets with the Western tradition providing the doxastic content, then we treat it as the secular and anything from outside of this tradition appears mysterious, non-logical, beyond the pale of secular explanation, traditional and, in a word,

religious. Call this idea of secularism "Secularism$_2$". In a Westernized world that assumes Secularism$_2$, only the *W*estern tradition is regarded as secular. It is with this approach to BIPOC traditions that the British decided that South Asians had to have a religion they called "Hinduism". If we go back to one of the earliest sources for the use of "secularism", there it was defined as 'free thought' (cf. Holyoake 1896, p. 51). We could reprise this definition of secularism as free and open philosophical exploration. Call this Secularism$_1$. Explicated, we find that the South Asian tradition, which the British called "Hinduism", is Secularism$_1$.

Secularism$_2$ gets off the ground by defining itself in terms of not being religious. Secularism$_1$, in contrast, is not defined in terms of what it is not. Rather, it is secular because of what it is: logical and philosophical. By using the idea of Secularism$_1$ to identify what the British called "Hinduism", we are identifying something that never needed, and never used, the idea of religion to make sense of itself, as it was too busy being philosophical. In other words, for the purposes of colonization, the British decided to rebrand a vibrant tradition of Secular$_1$ philosophical freedom into a religion, which would then have no part to play in the Secular$_2$ administration of South Asia. This move cements the subservience of the indigenous philosophical tradition in South Asia to *W*estern rule and conveniently exempts *W*estern rule from non-*W*estern moral criticism. The political purpose of creating "Hinduism" as a religion was to get rid of South Asian moral philosophy.

Yoga in particular as a unique moral theory from South Asia entails the normative importance of individuals engaging in the determination of their own conception of the good (via *svādhyāya*), with the practical experimentation that comes along with *tapas* (or anti-conservatism). John Stuart Mill, officer of the British East India Company, at once recommends this theory as part of his doctrine of a comprehensive Liberalism in *On Liberty*, and simultaneously implies that South Asians are among the racially immature who would do better with an Akbar (the famous Mogul ruler of India) as a dictator (*On Liberty* I.10). In this case, he was hardly advancing a novel theory—and as a colonizer, he was demonstrably appropriating and taking credit for a theory that predated him (by millennia) in the part of the world he had a hand in colonizing. Explicated, we see that disagreeing on (moral/dharma) philosophy, openly, was how South Asians had dealt with each other historically, and it is also a fundamental element of Yoga. At roughly the time that Socrates (as depicted in the *Apology*) was being put to death by the Athenian court for failing to uphold the values of his community (defined by the court), South Asians valued those willing to leave community and strike out on their own as *śramaṇa*-s—famous ones including Buddha and Mahavira. Explicated, they were the articulators of two respective philosophical theories (a form of Consequentialism and Virtue Ethics, respectively). Interpreted, by way of the *W*est, they are religious leaders of Buddhism and Jainism.

3. The *W*est: Imagination vs. History

In the previous section we reviewed a disjunctive syllogism, implicit in the opening lines of the *Yoga Sūtra*, which makes the case for an explicatory methodology, without appeal to beliefs. We have to acknowledge it as a way to appreciate the possibilities of disagreeing about methodology. But if we pursue an explication of the South Asian tradition, what we find is not religion but philosophy, and lots of moral philosophy. If we want to recreate the usual distinctions between secular *W*estern thought and Hindu religious belief, we need to interpret from the *W*estern perspective. This allows us to recreate the racial disparity between positions that are regarded as secular and those that are regarded as religious. We can summarize this also as a disjunctive syllogism.

> PR 1. Either we can interpret the South Asian tradition on the basis of the *W*est and recreate the familiar distinction between Hindu religion and its beliefs, and secular (*W*estern) thought, or we can explicate it as a tradition of philosophy, including moral philosophy.

> PR 2. Explication will not allow us to recreate the familiar distinction between Hindu religion and its beliefs, and secular (*W*estern) thought; it only reveals philosophical theory and disagreement.
>
> Therefore, we need to interpret the South Asian tradition on the basis of the *W*est to recreate the familiar distinction between Hindu religion and its beliefs, and secular (*W*estern) thought.

In appreciating the argument for *W*estern interpretation, we are not considering an argument to the effect that the *W*estern interpretation of South Asia is the better option. Indeed, when we look at the question of dharma, interpretation renders it inexplicable, irrational, and multiplies meanings of "dharma" beyond their means. Interpretation violates Ockham's Razor. When we explicate, we stick close to the expectations of logic, and reduce various theoretical uses of 'dharma' to a disagreement about the basic concept of DHARMA, THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD. Explication is both reasonable and parsimonious, which is to say, in keeping with Ockham's Razor. When we explicate, we pursue the disagreement across theories of dharma to locate the singular concept of DHARMA (THE RIGHT OR THE GOOD), which theories of dharma disagree about. This is also reflected in the case of the US election. For the explicatory poll worker there is only one thing to keep track of: the election. Ballots and vote counting procedures are all part of this one thing. For the Trumpy, there is the election that Trump was supposed to have won, and then various conspiratorial entities (like ordinary vote counting procedures, and cases of ballots) out to deny Trump's victory. In the paranoia of the interpreter, whose beliefs are challenged by a world of diverse perspectives, entities are multiplied beyond necessity to account for how things do not conform to their beliefs. This is not simply a problem for *W*estern interpretation: this is a problem for interpretation..

Explication makes rational sense of the South Asian tradition as it sticks close to logic. For this reason, it would make rational sense of any tradition. Interpretation is an abject failure in part because it foists its irrationality (of prioritizing belief over logical validity) on to what it tries to understand, such as the South Asian tradition. And yet, if our goal is to reconstruct ordinary beliefs about the religion Hinduism, and the secular *W*est, we need to interpret from a *W*estern vantage. This further entails that this way of understanding what the British called "Hinduism" is foreign to the indigenous tradition. In other words, using belief as an explanation of Hinduism, and understanding it as a religion, are all *W*estern impositions. This imposition happened in history, beginning with *W*estern colonization. In contrast, explication—Secularism$_1$—is the indigenous South Asian option.

3.1. Interpreting (In) the Western Tradition

If we were to interpret the *W*estern tradition in terms of what participants in this tradition believe, we would reify the doxastic commitments that come with this tradition. Our starting point would be that purely *W*estern thought is secular philosophy, and BIPOC traditions are religious. Indeed, the *W*estern tradition is dominated by the idea of *logos*, wherefrom we derive our word 'logic', and so it is presumptively reasonable. We would then use our beliefs about what religions are like, brought to us by the *W*estern tradition, to try to understand all religions. We would assume, as is usually done, that religion is about gods and spiritual matters, which contrasts with scientific investigation—even though, explicated, much of Asian 'religion' is atheistic and naturalistic. We find this atheism in Sāṅkhya, but also any position that rejects theism (a version of Virtue Ethics) would strictly speaking be atheistic. Yoga is hence atheistic. Virtue Ethics was a minority position in South Asia. Moreover, we would not have any reason to believe that what the British named Hinduism was just an ancient secular tradition of philosophical investigation. Just the opposite, our own interpretive understanding of the *W*estern tradition that produces the category of Hinduism as a religion would lead us to try to understand Hinduism like other religions.

Finally, if we interpreted the *W*est using beliefs provided to us by this tradition, colonialism would seem like a footnote because it is not something that happens to the Western tradition. Indeed, using interpretation, we could always select from the *W*est

the batch of beliefs that paint it most favorably, allowing us to perpetually sanitize our account of the *W*est, asserting claims such as, 'yes colonialism is wrong, but it's not an essential part of the *W*estern tradition' (for a different approach, see Mills 1997; Pateman 1988). Correlatively, interpretation itself as a method of explanation founded on belief would seem like the default option, without alternative. The intellectual production of this tradition would hence be treated as the gold standard for evaluating other traditions. Hence, participants in this tradition would not think about the need to treat the *W*estern tradition as based on philosophically contingent ideas, with political implications. The intellectual history of the *W*est is rather treated as the default secular resource of critical inquiry.

3.2. Explicating the Western Tradition

To explicate the *W*est is to do what is uncommon. It is to take stock of the various facts of its historical development and look to reasons and theories, internal to the tradition, that would entail those outcomes. When we are successful, we would find that the political conclusions of this tradition are themselves entailments of theories and premises internal to it. Perhaps the most significant historical series of facts of the *W*estern tradition is that it is a global, colonizing tradition. Every continent on the face of the Earth has been colonized by the *W*estern tradition in some form. The second, and subsidiary, fact of this tradition is that it is where we get the idea of 'religion' from. A suitable explication of this tradition would hence explain how this category was itself an outcome of more basic theories and premises. In explicating these historical trends, we are *not explaining them* by way of our beliefs, which would be an interpretation. Indeed, the reasons that we uncover that entail the political outcomes of this tradition might be reasons that we reject. Rather, the strength of the explanation is that it relies upon historically available reasons that entail the relevant outcomes. And, if we are interested in being more rigorous, we can treat the explication of the South Asian tradition (a tradition of explication itself) as a control group, against which we can compare the development of the *W*est.

If we explicated the *W*est, we would go back to its earliest assertions and note that the ancient Greeks had one word for speech, language, thought and reason: *logos*. Accordingly, thought is what we say, or the meaning of what we say, as is reason. We could call this the Linguistic Account of Thought (LAT). This model of thought connects ancient Greek thought to the contemporary manifestations of the *W*est in Continental and Analytic philosophy in so far as LAT is assumed by both strands of the *W*est (for an account of the ubiquity of the theory and the problems it causes for translation, see Ranganathan 2018a). The problem with this model of thought is that it contributes to a blurring of thought and belief by identifying thought with what we say in language. As noted in Section 2, and in light of insights gained from the work of Tarski, another way to say "*p* is true" is to just say, *p*. But then our articulation of the thought *p*, and our *belief that p*, are indistinguishable. But if we cannot distinguish between the two, then an explanation by way of thought is also an explanation by way of belief. Hence the *W*estern tradition grounded in LAT encourages interpretation as the default approach to understanding as, traditionally, it cannot distinguish between thinking and believing.

The linguistic underpinnings of this particular model of thought also conflate thinking with *human* community membership characterized by shared language—hence the tradition ends up being anthropocentric and communitarian. And so we find in Plato and Aristotle this understanding of the human individual in terms of their place in society, ethical questions as equivalent to questions of how to get on in one's society (both in Plato's *Republic* and in Aristotle's *Ethics*), and the problematization of human outsiders who do not share our views—explicitly discussed in Book X of the *Republic*. The conflation of thinking clearly and human community membership is explicit in Plato, who treats the city state as the soul writ large. Interpretation in this tradition is hence a matter of one's communal traditions. Hence, as it expands via interpretation, it does so by applying its beliefs to alien traditions. However, the problem is that foreigners do not share languages with us, and hence it is difficult to see how they share our beliefs. Interpretively, they seem puzzling.

Aristotle's position on the natural subservience of the slave (Politics 1254b16–21) was a way to reconcile the outsider to one's own culture, as people became slaves by conquest and were often from non-Greek, racially distinct communities (Jiménez 2014; Zack 2018, p. 7).

By the time the Romans inherit these ideas, they have a solution for dealing with outsiders who apparently do not accept their linguistically encoded communal standards: colonization. Colonization is the intentional application of one's outlook (one's beliefs) on the colonized, who must then find a way to live up to these expectations or perish. Colonization is the political application of interpretation, already a pressure generated by the more basic LAT. This political outcome effectively forces others to be part of one's communal standards. And the Romans also develop a term for normalized traditions that are subservient within the imperial fold but that are not necessarily those of the imperial norm: *religio* (religion), which was distinguished from *superstitio* (for more about this history, see Beard et al. 1998; Gordon 2008). With this innovation, the *W*estern tradition has a way to come to terms with what cannot be reduced to its tradition, which it theorizes as universal. T. Masuzawa's wonderfully titled work states this clearly: *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Masuzawa 2005). European universalism is preserved in talk of world religions as the *W*estern tradition gets to decide what counts as a religion. This is a process that repeats itself. Yet, originally, it was paradoxical.

On the one hand, labeling a tradition as having *religio* was a way to insulate the Roman Empire from criticism, as the position was cast as a matter of tradition, not moral and political philosophy. Yet, deciding that a tradition had *religio* (as opposed to *superstitio*) was a political prize within the colonial context. Jews were apparently recognized as having *religio*, but ancient Christians were not, and were instead persecuted. In time that changed. Constantine's conversion to Christianity and its institution as the official religion (Lenski 2014) managed to further appropriate an alien tradition by making it the official position of *W*estern power. With this, various other non-*W*estern, indigenous, but nevertheless European traditions were stamped out and marginalized.

By the time Islam came about many centuries later, it inherited many of these features of the *W*est, including the distinction between philosophy (*W*estern intellectual tradition) and religion. Islamic thinkers continued the conversation with *W*estern philosophy and seemed to also adopt the *W*estern idea of thought as speech.[3] Importantly, the idea of there being an 'official religion' had become commonplace in the *W*estern tradition by this time. And hence when the British showed up in South Asia, it was not a stretch to reach back to the Roman idea of religion to classify South Asians as a way to normalize the subservience of the *religified* other, while also nodding to the *W*estern expectation that communities have official religions. "Spirituality" has a history within Christian thought but has increasingly come to label the same topic of religion in English from the twentieth century on, except with the expectation that spirituality is unorganized whereas religion is official (Oman 2013, pp. 26–28; cf. Solomon 2002).

Alongside of this, we could also explicate a history of *W*estern philosophy that is relatively unconscious of its colonial exploits, because beliefs about being colonized are far from this tradition as its role has been that of the colonizer. But it shows up in very peculiar tensions between a tradition of philosophy that requires explication to proceed, and a tradition that theorizes by way of interpretation—as exampled by recent Continental and Analytic philosophers. In this tradition, when the topic should really be thought, we have discussion of belief, as though they amount to the same thing. Knowledge itself is theorized as a kind of belief in this tradition (cf. Gettier 1963, and the voluminous literature on this), or a propositional attitude (Williamson 2002, p. 34). And while at least one influential *W*estern thinker, due to their interest in logic, notes how anti-rational intentional contexts are (Quine 1956), and that indeed we need to use logic to understand aliens (which would be explication), this same thinker feels the need to clarify this activity as interpreting aliens in terms of what one takes to be true (Quine 1960, pp. 58, 59 fn1). And so we find that Quine, one of the few logicians who had the good sense to call out intentional contexts,

problematically makes the frequent undergraduate error of confusing logical explanation with truth. This is the power of interpretation: it overrides reasoning. The political upshot of this, however, is that Secularism$_2$ *W*estern philosophy is also racialized and turned into something that requires using *W*estern doxastic resources, such as belief and interpretation, even though these undermine logic and philosophy.

3.3. South Asia, the Pre-Colonial Control Group, and the Colonial Experiment

Our control tradition is the South Asian tradition, which *lacked* LAT. Indeed, the idea that language could be the foundation of what is thinkable was criticized in a widely endorsed (though variously theorized) distinction between two truths: absolute truth or *paramārtha satya* (*p*), and conventional, provisional or worldly truth, *saṁvṛti* or *vyāvahārika satya* (*x believes that p*). Linguistic truth is at most conventional truth—it embodies the considered propositional attitudes of a linguistic community. Ultimate truth (which all disagreed about) was something beyond human convention. Owing to this criticism of human convention, South Asians in ancient times did not identify the thinkable with community standards, and they thought far more widely about dharma: it often was cosmological in significance. Correlatively, while there was an ancient tradition in the *W*est of persecuting philosophers (starting with Socrates, then Jesus, Boethius, Hypatia, etc.), in ancient times it is very difficult to find any evidence of this in South Asia. In this respect the contrast is sharp.

Of course, once British colonialism occurs, much changes. First, after the colonial period, when South Asia, and Hindus in general, are understood not in terms of their indigenous tradition of Secularism$_1$, but in terms of being a religion, we find the development of religious belief, but under conditions of duress. One more recent example that highlights this kind of colonial pressure is the creation or definition of Balinese Hinduism. South Asian influences in and around Bali go back millennia. From the 15th century on, Islamic rulers targeted these areas for control. Upon the colonial independence of Indonesia from the Dutch, and after much of Indonesia had been Islamized, the constitution guaranteed religious freedom, but Islamists in power sought to constrain what could count as a religion. They only recognized three as being genuine religions: Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Other local traditions were recognized as merely possessing beliefs but were denied the status of having a religion. Adhering to monotheism was necessary but insufficient to gain recognition as possessing a religion. Groups without official religious status were targeted for conversion (Ramstedt 2005, p. 9). In response, the Balinese decided to organize a Hindu religious identity, but as one commentator notes, the "Balinese had to reinvent themselves as the Hindus that they were already supposed to be" (Picard 2005, p. 57). Eventually they did gain some recognition as proponents of a monotheistic Hinduism that met the concerns of the Indonesian ministry of religion (McDaniel 2013). Far from being an anomalous occurrence, this re-presents what happens to Hindus when they have to meet external expectations of having a religion, beginning with the British.

A second variety of Hindu religious belief generation can be found via the adoption of interpretation by South Asian intellectuals who grew up under colonialism, which then seeks to re-present Hinduism in ways that show it to be competitive with standards and aspirations prominent in the colonizing tradition. Characteristic of this exercise is an explicit endorsement of the *W*estern take on South Asia (a prime example is S. Radhakrishnan's *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, OUP 1940).

A third notable variety of Hindu belief generation is ongoing and part of the project of right-wing Hindu Nationalism. Unlike the Secularism$_1$ past of pre-colonial Hinduism (namely, South Asia), this 'conservative' form of Hinduism denies the room for open-ended philosophical dissent in a Hindu jurisdiction (for more on this development, see Sharma 2007, 2011). Rarely recognized, Hindu Nationalism relies both on the idea of Hinduism, and the idea of India as a nation, which are *W*estern in origin. It is hence not indigenous (contrary to its representations) but (ironically) a continuation of the *W*estern tradition. Nationalism is typically a political identity founded on a linguistic identity that provides

an ethnic criterion for nationality. This mode of *W*esternization based on LAT occurred during British colonization with the creation of a "Hindu" language of "Hindi" written in Devanagari, and a "Muslim" language of "Urdu" written in Arabic script, even though they were the same spoken language: Hindustani (King 1994).

With being Hindu rendered linguistic, a nationalism based on this identity was not far away. Hence, while it claims to be conservative, it is a new development, which consists in the internalization of *W*estern interpretations of Hinduism as something other than Seculairsm$_1$. This variety of Hindu belief generation is particularly confusing for *W*estern critics of Hindu Nationalism, who perceive it as a threat to secularism—which they only understand in terms of Secularism$_2$. Hindu Nationalists, in contrast, tend to view *W*estern academics as themselves neocolonial actors and Secularism$_2$ as a means of further denying what is indigenous and precolonial to South Asia. But instead of affirming the indigenous Secularism$_1$ of the Hindu tradition, Hindu Nationalism—and its usual critics— buy the *W*estern idea that being Hindu involves certain shared beliefs that are Hindu (for an account of the formation of these beliefs, see Chhibber and Verma 2018). Lay Hindus tend to get particularly confused as the right-wing position is often called "Hindutva"—meaning 'being Hindu'—and academic criticisms of Hindutva (cf. Dismantling Global Hindutva: Multidisciplinary Perspectives (Conference) (2021)) appear from afar to be criticisms of being Hindu, which many Hindus find offensive. This quagmire, explicated, is a tragedy of errors that relies upon *W*estern colonialism to define the options for Hindus. Explicated, decolonially, a Hindu state would be Secular$_1$.

In all three cases, the generation of Hindu belief involves the internalization of *W*estern beliefs that Hindus then attempt to live up to. In this process, Hindus will likely be unconscious of the process as they will identify the *W*estern interpretation as their own self-understanding of themselves as Hindus.

3.4. Explicating Western Interpretation

Explicating the *W*est, and then following the changes that occur as a function of *W*estern interpretation, including the colonization of South Asia, provides a historical, non-anachronistic look at the development of Hindu beliefs. Prior to the colonization of South Asia we can see the expansion of the *W*est as a colonizing tradition with the idea of religion as a way to subordinate BIPOC traditions relative to the *W*est. By the time it reaches South Asia, the *W*est has gone through historical changes, such as identification of 'official religions' as a means of maintaining the *W*est's hegemony as the foundation of Secularism$_2$. The colonization of South Asians who then take on *W*estern interpretation continues the project, but this time internalized by South Asians. On a Yoga analysis, we see that this is a *kleśa* (an affliction) brought about by the ignorance of interpretation. But it has real political impact on how Hindus then understand themselves within a *W*esternized world. Instead of adopting a South Asian, decolonial, explicatory approach (Yoga) to their own tradition and the *W*est, it is ordinary to buy the *W*estern interpretation via the project of generating Hindu religious beliefs. The exception to these trends would be the genuinely orthodox Hindus, with traditions that predate British colonialism, who have moral philosophical practices and identities that do not involve the *W*est. These are traditions that predate the minting of Hindu religious identity, and there are numerous such moral philosophical practices in South Asia.

4. Objections

This paper is structured around explication, which allows us to appreciate that: (a) we have a methodological choice in pursuing research (we can choose explication or interpretation, but not both at once), and (b) these choices have different outcomes. The argument for explication does not rest on what the author or anyone believes. Rather, it is an argument that begins by an appeal to reasoning (not belief), and then asks us to account for historical facts in terms of historically available reasons. Interpretation changes the topic from thoughts that we can reason about to the psychology of the interpreter. Any argument

that relies upon thoughts the interpreter does not believe will appear deficient. One cannot exhaustively respond to all such complaints as they will vary according to the psychology of the interpreter. But in general we can recognize them because they do not actually engage with the argument. Interpreters will typically complain that explicatory essays proceed by way of too many fast arguments, and appeal to "facts" that are unsubstantiated.

In response, explicators can note that the difficulty that interpreters are having is a function of their expectation that they have to believe the premises of the arguments that are considered, when this is not required to follow the argument. Secondly, an explicatory argument does substantiate various conclusions by way of rendering their premises clear. So, historical facts, such as the invention of religion by the *W*estern tradition, the creation of "Hinduism" the religion by the British, and the multiplication of meanings of 'dharma' in the literature, are substantiated by rendering explicit the premises that give rise to these innovations. Ironically, in many cases, these premises are themselves a deviation from reasoning: interpretation.

An objection that might seem nonmethodological relies on the belief that Hindus from ancient times believed in deities and other spiritual entities. Call this the *they really are religious* objection.

The *they really are religious* objection is dependent upon interpretation. To take an analogy, consider physics, which we can either interpret or explicate. If we interpret physics, we understand physicists as having beliefs about gravity and other unseen forces. Gravity is hence presented thus:

- Physicists believe in the existence of gravity, an unseen force operating between large bodies.

This is an *intentional context* like *I believe it is raining outside* and will hence have all the logical problems of intentional contexts. The first problem is that logic does not help us understand such states. These contexts are about the psychology of the physicist, not the proposition (*gravity is an unseen force operating between large bodies*) that is trapped in the gaze of the physicist. This is hence an interpretive account of gravity, based on belief. But one could in contrast explicate physical theory, and then we would find that gravity figures in a theory of physics, which contains premises (about gravity), which are propositions (not propositional attitudes, like belief) that logically entail conclusions about empirical observations, which could then be tested. Explicated, we see rather that gravity is useful for physicists because it is not the subject of belief. That is why one can be quite agnostic in science while engaging in the testing of hypotheses: no part of the enterprise requires that you believe what you are entertaining. The same is true for philosophy—explicated!

Similarly, we always have the option to explicate or interpret *prima facie* religious positions. With *deva*s, we could interpret Hindu claims about *deva*s, or we could explicate them. If we interpret them, we cast talk about *deva*s within propositional attitudes, which logic cannot help us understand. This problematizes propositions about *devas* as anti-rational and not simply part of philosophical discourse. This supports the idea that talk of *devas* is not philosophy but religious. Or, we could explicate Hindu discussions on *devas*, and then we find that Hindus entertained theories, which were either about *devas*, or not, and these propositions played a role in moral (dharma) theories that entailed conclusions about what we ought to normatively expect and accept. Just as in the case of physics, once we explicate, we do not have to have beliefs about the entities we invoke in explanation. Explicated, we see that "*deva*" stood for an external, personal norm or value. The named deva was always a norm or value of ethical theory, from the very start in the Vedas.

The earliest source for what the British called Hinduism is the Vedas. They are composed from roughly 1500 BCE to 500 BCE, are comprised of an early part, which consists of the chants (M*antras*) and the ritual manuals (*Brāhmaṇa*s), and a later part comprised of the Forest Books (*Āraṇyaka*), and the Dialogues (*Upaniṣads*), authored in the second part of the Vedic period. In the first part, *deva*s, which were in most cases natural forces or observable features of the climate and environment, were invoked as part of a Consequentialist practice, where these forces were regarded as requiring sacrifice, and properly appeased they would deliver the natural outcomes that aspirants desired, such as relief from sickness, death and material failure. Why is this a version of Consequentialism?

Explicated, Consequentialism is the theory that the means are justified by way of their supposed ends. Here the sacrifice to the natural forces was thought to be justified by way of the supposed ends. In many cases, this Consequentialism was based on empirical observations. An example of this is that the natural forces in one's body, such as fire (metabolism), had to be fed to bring about good ends, otherwise bad things would happen. The early Vedic view was deeply naturalistic.

After some time, we find that the people of the Vedic tradition lost confidence in the Consequentialist outlook because of worries about moral luck, a sense that the paradigm was unjust (as it involved inflicting death on sacrificial animals that one wished to avoid oneself) and because the paradigm was resentful as it defined the goods of life in terms of the bads. Specifically, the goods of life had to do with survival, material security and freedom from harassment by others. The bads had to do with sickness and death, a lack of material security, and war. The tradition then switched to an opposite procedural approach to moral choice, that prioritizes the Right over the Good. In this case, reality was reconceived as radically procedural, as a matter of Growth, Expansion and Development (Brahman), and the self (*ātmā*) existed in this substance. Now, the goods of life were reconceived as a function of personal autonomy, and not as a function of pleasing natural forces (for an elaboration of this history, see Ranganathan 2018c). Hence, the various *deva*s of the naturalistic paradigm were eliminated (cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.9).

In the much later *Yoga Sūtra*, we find the codification of the two alternative modes of explanation—the external explanation of nature characterized by causality, and the internal explanation of the self, characterized by responsibility. Here, the term '*deva*' is used to denote the values or norms that one owns as a matter of self-determination (YS II.48). What is often not noticed, in relationship to Yoga, is that the very famous tableau of Viṣṇu (see Figure 1) and Lakṣmī (see Figure 2) sitting on the cosmic snake Ādi Śeṣa (Figures 1 and 3) floating over an external wavy ocean, is a graphical depiction of Yoga as a normative ethical practice (in Book II) of the *Yoga Sūtra*, floating over Yoga as a metaethical practice (articulated in Book 1), where it is figuratively described as the subsiding of external waves of influence (see Figure 3).

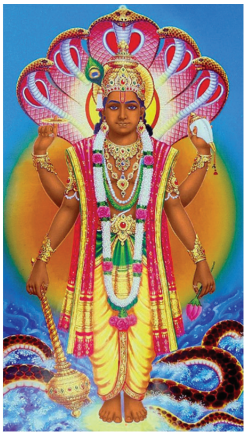

Figure 1. In this image we can see the characteristic depiction of Viṣṇu with his activities that do not constrain him, such as the disk and mace. We also see him holding the conch, the symbol of objectivity (what we can perceive from various vantages and what appears different according to vantage), as well as Lakṣmī, who is also Padma, the Lotus. In being distinct from these activities, Viṣṇu shows himself to be tapas: unconservative, self-challenging, activity, which is at once responsible for, but not constrained by, one's own activity. Ādi Śeṣa, the cosmic snake, also Īśvara Praṇidhāna (devotion to Sovereignty), is seen with him. Reprinted with permission from Bajirao 1007 from Wiki and licensed under the attribution and share alike license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en).

Figure 2. Here Lakṣmī who is also Padma (the Lotus) is sitting on herself. She is hence governing herself, and inspecting herself (as Lotuses she holds up). She is the yogic practice of *svādhyāya*: self-study, self-determination. She also embodies many other ideals of Yoga, including: *svarūpevasthānam*/"abiding in one's form" (YS I.3), *svarūpa-pratiṣṭhā*/"standing on one's form" (YS IV.34), and more literally *sva-svāmī*/"own master" (YS II.22) (picture by author).

Figure 3. This is a picture of Ādi Śeṣa (*Īśvara praṇidhāna*) holding and being devoted to Viṣṇu (*tapas*) and Lakṣmī (*svādhyāya*), described as the essential practice of Yoga (YS II.1) floating on top of waves (YS I. I.2-3). Lakṣmī, *svādhyāya*, is also depicted here as forming a bond with her chosen ideal, as per *Yoga Sūtra* II.44 depiction of *svādhyāya* (image by Denis Vostrikov, *Canva*).

Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī—*tapas* and *svādhyāya*—comprise the traits of Sovereignty (YS I.24). Ādi Śeṣa, ever devoted to these two procedural ideals, is Devotion to Sovereignty (*Īśvara Praṇidhāna*). These deities simply are the procedural ideals of the practice of Bhakti/Yoga. Viewed this way, the very many stories of these three, including the *Rāmāyana*, or the *Mahābhārata*, are thought experiments of how things turn out when these values are valued, or compromised. Viṣṇu's appearance at key junctures in the articulation of the philosophy of Yoga (in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, and the epics) is hence also not accidental but part of

the explication of the theory. In many cases, these procedural ideals deliver the moral philosophy lectures themselves.

Śiva (see Figures 4–6), depicted as the ideal experiencing subject, and his consort Śakti (who is depicted as the full range of his emotional experiences, seen in Figure 7), are associated with teleological ethical theories, such as Kāśmīrī Śivism, or Vaiśeṣika.

Figure 4. Depicted here is the classic Śiva Liṅga (phallus), where Śiva, the ideal experiencer, is within and emerging from the experience of the yoni (vulva) that is Śakti (picture by pphl, *Canva*).

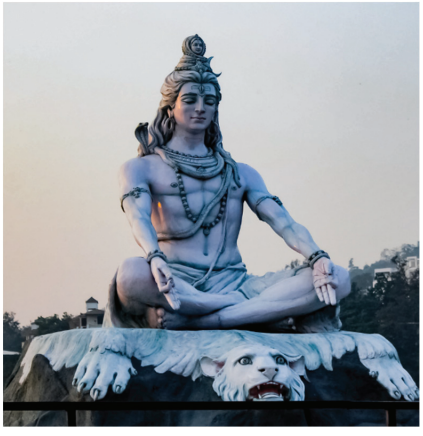

Figure 5. Here Śiva as the ideal experiencer is seated in meditation (picture by Sandeep Singh, *Canva*). He embodies the virtues of the ideal experiencer, unphased by turbulent events. Also, Śiva brings about good outcomes by way of meditative experiencing. For instance, the space around him in meditation is serene. Those who awaken Śiva from meditation are said to be burnt by a flame that originates from his third eye.

Here too, the various stories associated with these two are thought experiments of these ethical values of Consequentialism or Virtue Ethics, in various contexts.

As Hindus were not burdened with the linguistic account of thought, they were free to depict their moral values in art, and literature. Devotional practice that includes such artifacts is a way for devotees to formalize their relationship to these moral ideals and norms, and to rely on them in their own practice of dharma (as per the theory they adopt). Explicated, these values and norms do the moral philosophical explanation of what an appropriate ethical practice should look like. Disagreements, then, between different schools of which of the many values and ideals to venerate, are moral philosophically

significant. Western interpretation recasts propositions about these various values and norms as free-standing propositional attitudes in need of support.

Figure 6. Classically, Śiva is depicted as the Lord of Dance, Naṭarāja, who experiences from a state of flux. In this classic depiction he is seen dancing on a demon (picture by Lathish, *Canva*).

Figure 7. Here we see three expressions of Śakti, Śiva's consort. On the left we have Pārvatī (picture by Robertobinetti70, *Canva*), who looks very much like Lakṣmī: attractive. Then in the middle we have Durgā (picture by Pabitra Chakraborty, *Canva*), who is attractive but also fierce, displaying various weapons. On the right we have Kālī (picture by anonymous, *Canva*), who is outraged over the evil she destroys.

Of course, many Hindu schools and traditions, especially those that do not formulate their practice in terms of ideals, simply do not talk about *deva*s, or provide arguments for eliminating them from moral theory. The Pūrva Mīmāṃsā tradition is one prominent example. The *Sāṅkhya Kārikā*, which argues for a form of hard determinism, simply gets rid of talk of *deva*s. As Hinduism, precolonially, is not defined by any shared view, and was constituted by the explicatory freedom to pursue controversial positions, no option was barred. It contains at least one school (Nyāya, a form of Consequentialism) that took the trouble to defend the existence of Īśvara via intelligent design arguments (cf. Dasti 2017). And yet others, such as Rāmānuja (c. 1017–c. 1137 CE), a bhakti philosopher, prefiguring Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* by centuries, argued that the empirical evidence was insufficient to prove the existence of ultimate moral postulates (*Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, I.i.3).

A second objection worth noting is that while, indeed, Western interpretation does create an account of Hinduism in terms of belief, Western commentators are also known to

focus on Hinduism in terms of Hindu practices of religious worship and ritual. Caste, for instance, is often top of the list in an account of Hinduism. Hindus it would seem are defined by a commitment to caste, as found in texts of "Hindu Law" (such as the *dharmaśāstras*—deontological, ritual purity books written within the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā tradition) (cf. Lubin et al. 2010; Davis 2010). Is this not incongruous with the analysis presented here which focuses on beliefs?

The proper response begins with the observation that interpretation is the mechanism of the colonial presentation of Hindus by the *W*est. The colonial impact is to paint Hindus, a geographic identity, with one brush, with respect to various other matters, such as social practice. Given the batch of *W*estern beliefs interpreters take to be salient, some of which may involve law, caste, ritual or worship, we will find these matters dominating the interpretation of South Asia. What is interesting from an explicatory approach is that you will be able to find *W*estern sources for these concerns, including caste as theorized in terms of color, or *varna* in Sanskrit (see Plato's *Republic*). But which matter is salient in an interpretation will depend in large measure on the *W*estern interpreter. As always, these interpretations tell us more about the interpreter than the interpreted. Explicated, we would find that South Asian moral philosophy had many views on these topics, and there was no common Hindu position on these matters.

A final objection worth considering is that the preceding considerations do not explain how elements of the *W*estern tradition are counted as religious or spiritual. For instance, when Socrates consults his Daemon, who tells him to do philosophy (in the *Apology*), that seems like a spiritual matter. First, it is worth noting that the Daemon here plays a role in Socrates' moral argument for why he will not stop practicing philosophy, and in this respect, Socrates as a philosopher explicates his own position. But secondly, the preceding considerations show that the apparent religiosity or spirituality of a position, and beliefs associated with the position, depends upon three elements. The first is that it is interpreted; secondly, that it is interpreted on the basis of the *W*estern tradition; and third, that it is interpreted as a doxastic deviation from the *W*estern tradition. We can interpret the *W*estern tradition on the basis of itself and we simply reify its narrative of being the content of secular reasoning. When people participating in the *W*estern tradition interpret some part of the tradition as a deviation, they recast it as religious or spiritual, but it would depend on the interpreter and what they take to be central to the tradition.

5. Conclusions

In a *W*esternized world, brought on by centuries of *W*estern colonialism, the sociological norm is to interpret everything, including non-*W*estern traditions, on the basis of the beliefs of the *W*est. As part of its own difficulty in understanding what does not follow from its tradition, along the way it invents the idea of religion and spirituality. BIPOC traditions such as what the British named "Hinduism" had sophisticated philosophical theorizing about the distinction between believing and thinking, interpretation and explication, external imposition (of which colonization is an example) and personal autonomy, which reveals the precolonial tradition as a rich engagement in Secularism$_1$. For *W*estern colonialism to succeed, philosophy and explication—South Asian moral philosophy—has to be erased, as it constitutes a critical arena for the *W*est's claim to authority. Colonialism succeeds by changing how people think about this tradition from one of active philosophy that explicatorily probes options within a philosophical debate to clusters of religious belief. Hindus and everyone have a choice, however, as outlined in the *Yoga Sūtra*. We can be responsible explicatory thinkers, or interpretive believers. In being responsible thinkers, we can explicate the colonial history of religious belief. If we interpret, we give up reasoning, which is to our detriment.

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Notes

[1] I would like to thank the Academic Editor and the Peer Reviewers for their rich feedback that greatly improved this paper. I also would like to thank my York University colleague, Alicia M Turner, for supportively engaging in conversation with me about the ideas I defend here.

[2] Brent Nongbri in his *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (2015) pursues an argument regarding the relationship between religion and colonialism. This paper does as well. However, Nongbri suggests religion is a recent idea because he claims that "religion is anything that sufficiently resembles modern Protestant Christianity" (Nongbri 2015, p. 18). This is an interpretive criterion of religion, which allows him to discount earlier ideas of religion that do not meet this standard. For Nongbri, one of the distinctive features of this Protestant notion of religion is that it is private and personal (Nongbri 2015, p. 24). The explicatory approach to understanding the history of the idea of religion that I pursue shows in contrast that the political function of religion is to publicly marginalize BIPOC traditions that could respond critically to Western colonialism. This is as old as the Roman Empire. To this end, it's an old idea. The later Protestant idea of religion as a private affair is merely an acceptance of that political marginalization. Interpretive explanations are ironically a-historical, as they buy artifacts, like the Protestant idea of religion, as though they are foundational, when they themselves are in need of explanation.

[3] The Arabic verb '*nataqa*' means *to speak* or *utter*, '*mantiq*' is the word for logic, and '*natiq*' is often the word used for RATIONAL. (For instance, in Arabic discussions of Plato's tripartite division of the soul, the rational soul is often referred to as: *al-nafs al-natiqah*). I have this on the good authority of Muhammad Ali Khalidi. He is translator and editor of *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (Khalidi 2005).

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Article

Belief in Karma: The Belief-Inducing Power of a Collection of Ideas and Practices with a Long History

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Abstract: This article provides an analysis of the concept of karma and related concepts, such as rebirth, merit, and transfer of merit, along with a historical survey focusing on classical texts. The attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The second reason involves the idea of rebirth. The belief in both karma and rebirth can bring consolation with the hope of life hereafter, where one's destiny is determined not by chance, but by the moral quality of one's actions in this or previous lives. The belief in karma also incorporates diverging elements, such as transfer of merit. The practice of transfer of merit serves to improve an individual's moral and religious status through rituals or other suitable means, while the doctrine of karma itself strongly speaks to the strict fulfilment of retributive justice. Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, although their mutual compatibility is debatable.

Keywords: karma; rebirth; merit; transfer of merit

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1. Introduction

A popular Western idea of karma is that we always get what we deserve based on our actions and intentions. This idea implies that the universe is governed by the law of karma, which automatically guarantees a fair and just outcome for all, sooner or later. Furthermore, the popular idea of karma is associated with the belief that people are rewarded or punished by the natural (or societal) consequences of their actions in this life or hereafter. The idea of karma also indicates that what people are facing now and what they will face in the future have been concocted out of the thousands of choices they have made in this life or past lives. These choices have motivated actions that in turn have contributed to who people are today, with all their strengths and weaknesses. Aside from these popular beliefs, it is important to remember where the concept of karma originated. The concept has a long history in Indian-origin religions and currents of thought, which give it a much richer and more complex meaning than the simplified Western concept suggests.

This article discusses the power and attractiveness of the belief in karma, as well as the accumulated effect of deeds in past and present lives. The major questions to be addressed include: why do so many people seem to believe in karma, and what makes the idea of karma viable? To answer these questions, a philosophical analysis of karma and related concepts, such as rebirth, merit, and the transfer of merit, is necessary. This study provides these analyses, along with a historical survey focusing on classical texts and references.

I will defend the view that the rational and psychological attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is *the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts* on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The popular belief in karma underlines this ideal. The second reason refers to the idea of rebirth. The belief in karma and rebirth can *bring us consolation with the hope of life hereafter, where our fate will be determined not by chance*, but by the moral quality of our actions in this or previous lives. Faith in karma and reincarnation can give us solace by promising us another life, one in which our fate will be

determined not by chance, but by the moral quality of our actions, both now and in the past. Furthermore, this study draws attention to inconsistencies and conflicts in Indian philosophy and religion. I suggest that an inconsistent combination of religious beliefs and orientations can still be attractive because of persistent human desires and needs, such as the fulfilment of justice and the improvement of one's moral status.

1.1. An Asymmetry in Karmic Explanations for Life Events

The idea of karma originally comes from the South Asian religions of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, but, at least superficially, it is known globally. Although karma is an ancient belief, neither the Vedas nor the Brāhmaṇas contain the belief in karma in a more developed form as found, for example, in the Upaniṣads. Thus, the earliest Vedic tradition provides only a partial basis for the doctrine of karma as we understand it today. Against this background, some scholars hold that it was actually the Jains who introduced the idea of karma (Bronkhorst 2007).

As noted, the idea of karma is present in popular worldviews and Western culture. Many people refer, perhaps with a twinkle in their eye, to karma as an explanation for specific life events, more often for setbacks and failures than for success and achievement. In contrast, others, perhaps more seriously, refer to karma as a justice-serving order of reality that ensures that everyone gets their just deserts, either in this life or hereafter. It is noteworthy that in popular opinion and practice, there is sometimes an asymmetry between karmic explanations of success and setbacks. Both success and setbacks can be considered the fruits of one's actions, i.e., karma. Some people explain setbacks as metaphysical sanctions for bad deeds done in a previous life, while success is explained as a reward for good deeds mainly done in this life. This asymmetry—regarding bad deeds done in a past life versus good deeds done in the present life—is understandable, because an undefined reference to past bad deeds may mitigate one's negative moral status (for example, "the guilty one was my past self, about whom I know next to nothing"), whereas it is often pleasing, if not flattering, to ascribe credit for good deeds to oneself, namely, to one's present self.

Another asymmetry involving the concepts of karma and rebirth is present as well. There are many claimed accounts of people remembering their previous lives, while the basis ("residue") of individual karmic outcomes, rewards, or punishments, is usually not exactly detailed or remembered (Doniger 1980b, p. 372). Thus, in the context of the belief in karma, individual achievements or setbacks in life are not necessarily explained by specific good or bad actions in previous lives. Rather, karma is considered residual, meaning that the moral quality of human deeds is accumulated in personal karmic "accounts" or "bookkeeping", based on which it is not necessarily possible to discover which reward or punishment is due to which deed (or which karmic "bookkeeping entry").

1.2. The Common Non-Religious Notion of Merit

As was mentioned, an analysis of the concepts of rebirth and merit is necessary to understand the viability of the belief in karma. Let us start with the concept of rebirth. Although rebirth (S.: *punarjanma*, *punarbhava*) is often associated with the doctrine of karma in the classical Indian literature (Edgerton 1965, p. 30; Herman 1976, pp. 212–13; Halbfass 1991, pp. 291–92), the two ideas are logically distinct from each other. It is conceptually possible that every intentional action has either pleasant or painful consequences for its agent, based on the moral goodness or badness of the action, without the result of a consequent afterlife (Ayrookuzhiel 1983, p. 141; Fuller 1992, p. 246). Also, rebirth is possible without any such system as karma. Thus, karma does not imply rebirth, and rebirth does not imply karma (Sharma 1996, p. 29). However, to answer the question regarding why rebirth is needed, it is common to refer to the idea that rebirth makes it possible for the corrective justice entailed by the doctrine of karma to be fulfilled. In this sense, the notions of merit and demerit play an important motivational and explanatory role. One might say

that the belief in karma, being closely related to the notions of merit and demerit, sucks its power from that role.

To understand this concept, it helps to have a general, non-religious idea of what merit is (Lehtonen 1999, 2000). People often say that someone has merit when they think that that person did something good, and they give them credit for it. Giving someone credit for their deed entails providing a positive sanction, like verbalising gratitude or bestowing a reward. Along with receiving merit for their deeds, one can also be considered meritorious based on their traits, abilities, or capacities, such as their physique, stamina, or intelligence. Competitions involving each of these attributes can result in rewards. The examples here show that, in the right sense of the word, merit is more than just a good deed or quality. It also entails deciding that someone deserves praise or a reward for what they did. Such decisions are based on a social system that employs sanctions to enforce and strengthen order and discipline in society (Feinberg 1970, p. 23). Generally, one can only receive merit for actions that comply with social norms. In a social system, merit is *a deed or quality that is seen as a reason to praise or reward someone*. It is sufficient to point out here that some other terms, such as "credit", "desert," and "qualification", can be used in the same sense as "merit" in suitable contexts.

I have assumed that the concepts of praise and reward are intertwined with the concept of merit. According to conventional secular practises, praise or rewards are given only to those who perform good deeds or display virtue, and neither praise nor rewards can be transferred from one individual to another. Given this, the logic of merit includes the idea that merits are personal, meaning that the appreciation or reward for a deed or quality should only go to the person who did the deed or possesses the quality. The same is true for fault or demerit as a basis for blame or punishment: neither can be transferred, because one is blamed or punished as the person who did the deed or possesses the quality (Westermarck 1939, pp. 117–18). This means that, before receiving a reward or punishment, a person must have merit or demerit. Another premise of a standard system of reward and punishment is that rewards and punishments are proportional to merits and demerits. In addition, the concept of the agent, or the doer of the deed, is central to the distribution of rewards and punishments.

Aside from personality, another important aspect of the logic of merit is that having merit as a result of an action commonly implies intentionality. The assumption of intentionality can be seen, for example, in the fact that intentional actions are generally regarded as more meritorious than good, but unintentionally performed, actions. Unintentional actions can fall into two categories: those committed by accident and those committed knowingly, but unintentionally. One implication of the intentionality presupposition is that individuals, as well as groups or institutions, can be meritorious if they act intentionally. A football team, a construction crew, or an army, for example, can be considered meritorious if they took deliberate action to achieve a goal. However, the merit of a group requires not only intentionality, but also that the group's intention cannot be reduced to that of its individual members.

Let me summarise the key points of the preceding discussion. In secular contexts, appreciation or reward is only given to the person who does something good or has a good quality, and it cannot be given to someone else. Thus, merit logic is based on the idea that merits are personal. In terms of actions, merit implies intentionality: people or groups of people are considered meritorious when they perform intentional actions.

1.3. The Notion of Merit in Indian Religions

I have covered a few typical, non-religious applications of the term merit in the previous section. Based on these considerations, the following preliminary definition of merit is proposed: merit is a deed or quality that is seen as a reason to praise or reward someone. Next, I will examine how Indian religions view the notion of merit, because that notion is a central ingredient in the doctrine of karma and is essential for explaining the viability of that doctrine. I will focus on uses of the term merit in Indian religions that stand

out as unusual or troubling when compared to its use in secular contexts. Such uses may require special treatment or explanation, so as not to destroy the rational justification of the idea of karma.

However, before getting into the details of the idea of merit in Indian religions, it is helpful to take a quick look at the idea of salvation and liberation, especially in Hindu traditions. The ideas of merit and transfer of merits are part of the doctrinal context in which liberation is considered a central objective. According to the traditional Hindu view as described, for example, in the *Bhagavadgītā*, there are three ways (*trimārga*) in which *mokṣa*, or the liberation from the wheel of life and death (*saṁsāra*), is achievable, and negative karmic consequences can be avoided (Hopkins 1971, pp. 91, 93; Crawford 1982, pp. 123–29; Klostermaier 1989, pp. 46, 145–49, 184–85, 210–11; Weightman 1991, pp. 200, 214):

1. By acquiring merits, which is called *karmamārga* (*karmayoga*), or the way of works (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.49–51, Feuerstein 2014, p. 109);
2. By learning that the inner self (*ātman*), that is, the substrate of the individual, is identical with the absolute (*brahman*), which is called *jñānamārga* (*jñānayoga*), or the way of knowledge (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.37, Feuerstein 2014, p. 145);
3. By devotion leading to union with God, which is called *bhaktimārga* (*bhaktiyoga*), or the way of love (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.11, 6.30–31, Feuerstein 2014, pp. 137, 163).

One can try to earn karmic merits by, for example, performing sacrifices, offering gifts to Brahmins (*dāna*), and making religious promises (*vrata*) regarding the performance of some task or mission (Klostermaier 1989, pp. 169–72). Penance (*tapas*) or expiation (*prāyaścitta*), usually fasting (*upavāsa*), is often associated with religious promises (Wadley 1983, p. 149). Sometimes, expiation is also called medicine (*bheṣaja*, *cikitsā*), which illustrates its power to decrease the accumulation of bad karma (Tähtinen 1982, p. 34). The intensity of the suffering attached to the penance is believed to affect the time required to diminish demerits. The stronger the intensity of the suffering, the sooner the karmic demerits will diminish. In some ascetic groups, especially in Jainism, torturing the body is believed to hasten the "ripening" of bad karma so that the ascetics can detach themselves from *saṁsāra* and reach liberation sooner than their karma would require in ordinary circumstances (Brockington 1992, pp. 81–82; Bronkhorst 1995, pp. 333–35, 340–41; Oberhammer 1984, pp. 132–33, 149–50). Yoga, pilgrimage, and bathing in the Ganges River are also regarded as means of erasing negative karma. In the *Garuḍapurāṇa* (1.106.19–20), several courses of purification are given by which impurity can be washed away: lapse of time (*kāla*), rites in fire (*agni*), action (*karma*), earth (*mṛd*), wind (*vāyu*), mind (*manas*), knowledge (*jñāna*), penance (*tapas*), repetition of sacred words (*japa*), repentance (*paścāttāpa*), and fasting (*nirāhāra*) (The Garuḍa Purāṇa: Part I 1978, p. 322; Tähtinen 1982, p. 35).

Now, let us focus on the notion of merit. To begin, the term merit (S.: *dharma*, *puṇya*) is used in Indian religions in ways that are similar to how it is used in secular contexts. However, it is also used in ways that are not used in secular contexts. People believe that they gain special religious merit when they do things like feed monks, perform a ritual, go on a pilgrimage, build temples, worship gods, study the scriptures, and follow strict rules (Babb 1975, p. 92; Crawford 1982, pp. 128–29). For example, a priest might give a blessing or let a person take part in a religious ceremony as a reward for this kind of behaviour. The reward can also be supernatural, such as assistance from a deity that is anticipated to result in favourable karmic repercussions, such as a successful rebirth, positive harvest, or illness recovery. These examples demonstrate that certain behaviours and, in particular, rewards not found outside of religion are present in religion. Nonetheless, the formal criteria for determining merit in religion and outside of religion are often the same. To be of merit, something must be a good deed or have a good quality according to criteria for what is considered good. Thus, even if the extensions of merit differ, the intention of the term merit is often the same, whether it is used in a religious or secular context.

According to the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara (700–800), people must work for their salvation and cannot transfer their karma to anyone, not even God (Potter 1980, p. 263; Reichenbach 1990, p. 152). This is also what the *Mahābhārata* (XII.279.15, 21) says:

> Whatever deed a man does in four ways viz. with eye, with thought, speech or action, he receives (in return) that same kind of action; a man does not enjoy (i.e., experience the results of) the good deed or evil deeds of another; man attains (a result) in consonance with the actions done by himself (quoted from Kane 1977, p. 1595).

Regardless of these views, the concept of merit transfer is prominent in classical Indian literature, particularly in the Purāṇas. The Purāṇas, however, disagree with one another regarding the potential for merit transfer (Doniger 1980a, p. 4; Fuller 1992, p. 246).

In classical Buddhist texts, especially the Hīnayāna/Theravāda tradition, individuals are solely responsible for their merits, and merits cannot be passed on to others. For example, in the *Saṁyattanikāya* (III. 43), the third collection of the *Suttapiṭaka* of the *Tripiṭaka*, the Pali canon of Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes the personal nature of karma and advises each being to achieve his or her own salvation (Woodward 1975, p. 37; McDermott 1980, p. 190). The *Saṁyattanikāya* (I.227) also states that you get what you sow. This means that those who do good receive good, while those who do bad receive bad (Davids 1971, p. 293). According to popular belief, the transfer of merit can be found in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It can be seen, for example, that at the end of every ceremony, an important part of Mahāyāna practice is to bestow the merit that has been attained to benefit other sentient beings (Williams 1996, p. 208). Wolfgang Schumann says that the Mahāyāna teaching of the transfer of merit "breaks the strict causality of the Hīnayānic law of *karman* (P.: *kamma*) according to which everybody wanting better rebirth can reach it solely by his own efforts". However, Schumann adds that the only difference between Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna on this point is found in the texts, because the religious practice in South Asia recognises the transfer of merit in Theravāda as well (Schumann 1973, p. 92).

1.4. The Historical and Doctrinal Context of Merit Transfer

In taking the most common examples into account, there are two main reasons why the transfer of merit is done. On the one hand, merit transfer is a way to help someone get healthy and live long, to have a good rebirth, or to help with the afterlife of a deceased loved one. Sometimes, it is said that what is given by the transfer of merit also includes progress toward *nirvāṇa* (Reichenbach 1990, pp. 173–75; Keown 1992, pp. 46, 89–90, 116–18, 121, 124–25; Tillekeratne 1996, p. 121). On the other hand, the transfer of merit is a way to avoid being unhappy in this life or in the next, especially because of bad karma, by making up for or getting rid of one's karmic flaws. In this sense, the transfer of merit is thought to stop bad karma from coming true, or, to use a metaphor, prevents the "ripening of the karmic fruits" (*vipāka-phala*) of bad actions.

There are numerous instances in classical Indian literature where merit is said to be transferred. In the Vedas, which were written between 1500 and 800 BCE, the idea of transferring merit was linked to the belief that merit came from performing rituals correctly. The merit gained by performing rituals correctly was thought to be transferred from the gods to the person on whose behalf the sacrifice was made via the priests who performed the ritual (Reichenbach 1990, p. 152). As a result, the person considered to receive the merit for the performance of a sacrifice did not have to be the one who carried out the ritual. In this regard, certain ritual practises altered the notion that one can obtain karmic outcomes only for actions performed by oneself. These rituals included Vedic *yajñas*, which were sacrificial ceremonies carried out by priests for people who had hired them by paying the required fee. The relationship between the one for whom the ceremony was performed and those who performed it was a constant and essential element in various *yajñas* (Krishna 1996, p. 12; Tull 1989, pp. 34–35, 107). According to Daya Krishna (1996, p. 172), *yajña* constitutes the core of the Vedas and the doctrine of karma. However, *yajña* and the doctrine of karma are at odds with one another:

> The hard core of the theory of the *yajña* is that one can reap the fruit of somebody else's action, while the hard core of the theory of karma denies the very possibility

> of such a situation ever arising in a universe that is essentially moral in nature (Krishna 1996, p. 175).

This kind of ambivalence and inconsistency is relatively common in religions. Different religious traditions include many ingredients that vary in their motivational bases. Here, *yajñas* serve to improve the individual's moral status through ritual actions, while the doctrine of karma strongly speaks to the fulfilment of retributive justice. Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through the transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, despite being potentially conflicting. The transfer of merit is intriguing, because it implies that it can change not only one's fate, but also what one deserves. Therefore, merit transfer could be described as "composite causality", in which influencing one's fate and basis for receiving a reward are inextricably linked.

Several scholars say that the idea of transferring merit can be found in its earliest form in the Brahminic funeral rites called *śrāddha*. In these rites, ritual food was given to the dead to try to keep them from being destroyed in the afterlife or from suffering "repeated death". The descendants also fed the priests who assisted them in performing the *śrāddha*. As a result of this rite, it was thought that some of the descendants' merit, such as the merit for doing the *śrāddha*, went to their dead relatives (Malalasekera 1967, pp. 86–87; Gombrich 1971, pp. 206, 210, 214–15; Knipe 1977, p. 112; Doniger 1980a, pp. 3–4, 10–11, 33–34; Bechert 1992, p. 100). Thus, as is similar to the transfer of merit, the *śrāddha* practise implicitly assumes that one person's actions can influence another's fate in the afterlife.

The lay Buddhist ritual *mataka dānē* was another practise of donating gifts, mostly food, to monks in order to gain merit for one's deceased parents or other relatives (Gombrich 1971, pp. 208–9; Bechert 1992, p. 100). The merit gained by feeding priests or monks was frequently thought to be given to gods in exchange for their protection, such as against sickness, crop failure, or evil spirits (Malalasekera 1967, p. 88; Gombrich 1971, pp. 207, 209–10, 214, 216; Gombrich 1988, p. 126). Later Hinduism's *prasāda* ritual assumes that a gift that has been blessed by a priest is given to a god to show the worshiper's devotion. The gift is then given back to the worshipper with extra merit. It is believed that by adding to a gift in this way, the worshipper will receive the god's favour (Doniger 1980a, p. 12).

A food offering served as the intermediary for the transfer of merit in *śrāddha*, *mataka dānē* and *prasāda*. However, *The Upaskâra of Śankara Misra* to *Vaiśeṣikasūtra* (VI.1.6) says that if the person who does a ritual is evil, the ancestors will not get any good from it:

> When evil Brāhmans, unworthy recipients, are fed at the obsequial rites, no fruit accrues from this to the ancestor; or [. . .] the result of the obsequial rites does not accrue to the ancestors (Gough 1975, p. 179).

Vrata ("will" or "what is willed"), a religious practise in North India, is another kind of ritual that involves the transfer of merit. Instead of giving food, it involves making a promise. A *vrata* binds a person to an act or service in order to make amends for past wrongdoings or to change his or her life path. Making amends is based on the idea that good deeds improve people and enable them to do more good deeds in the future (Vetter 1988, p. 99, n. 21). It is believed that the benefits of keeping one's vow sometimes extend to other people, typically to the vow holder's family, and particularly to their parents or kids (Wadley 1983, pp. 147–49, 158–59). This extended reward is called a transfer of merit in a figurative sense. In a similar way, an extended rewarding also takes place when a hereditary status, such as nobility, is transferred from one generation of a family to another generation of the same family.

1.5. The Development of Karma from a Ritual Concept to a Moral Doctrine

As has been explained, one fairly widespread theory holds that Vedic rituals provided some ingredients for, but not a full version of, the doctrine of karma. Good (*puṇya*) and bad (*pāpa*) referred to the value of an action (*karma*) based on how well it was done in the ritual, with good being the right way to do the rite and bad being the wrong way to do it (Tull

1989, p. 2). However, karma did not just remain as a ritual idea. Over time, it took on moral meanings, especially in the Upaniṣadic tradition (Collins 1982, pp. 55–58; Tull 1989, p. 41; Obeyesekere 2002, p. 4). According to the famous passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (III.2.13), "one becomes good by good action, bad by bad action" (Radhakrishnan 1990, p. 217). It is believed that this verse, which dates from between 600 and 500 BC, marked the beginning of karma as a doctrine with moral qualifications. However, the verse (III.2.13) is part of a conversation between two pandits, Yājñavalkya and Jāratkārava Ārtabhāga, which makes it seem like karma was a doctrine to be kept secret and not revealed to just anyone (Potter 1980, p. 266; Basham 1989, pp. 43–44). Insofar as karma is considered a moral doctrine, viewing it as a secret contradicts the idea that moral views should be widely accepted. According to the prevailing view, Siddhártha Gautama Buddha (ca. 563–ca. 483 BCE) was the first to completely make the concept of karma ethical (Gombrich 1988, p. 46). In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (III.415), the fourth collection of the *Suttapiṭaka* of the *Tripiṭaka*, the Buddha connects karma to intention or will (*cetenā*):

> I say, monks, that *cetanā* is *kamma*; having intended (*cetayitvā*), one does a deed by body, word, or thought (quoted from McDermott 1980, p. 181).

This particular statement does not say anything about how the actions in one's life affect the quality of another life. However, the Buddhist doctrine of karma is based on the idea that every intentional action has good or bad effects on the person who did it, depending on how morally good or bad the action was (Gombrich 1971, pp. 203–4).

The evolution of Indian philosophy toward a moral conception of karma is also reflected in attitudes toward the transferability of merit. The emergence of specific sociological and socio-psychological factors in Indian culture was linked to the development of a moral notion of karma. One of those factors needs to be highlighted in particular. Brahmanism (800 BCE–400 CE), the forerunner of classical Hinduism (400–1800), became a tolerant and adaptable religion in which the belief in the authority of Vedic literature was virtually the only doctrinal demand connecting different sects. However, between 700 and 300 BCE, there were religious reform movements in India that were not in line with this demand. Jainism and Buddhism were the most influential of these sects, and along with them, Indian thought became increasingly individualistic. Individualism made it harder to believe that merit could be moved from one person to another (Reichenbach 1990, p. 152). However, the denial of merit transfer was never supported by the majority of Buddhists. According to Heinz Bechert, the Buddhist doctrine of the transfer of merit (*pattānumodanā*) was fully formed between the 5th and 7th centuries CE (Bechert 1992, pp. 99–100). The transfer of merit continues to be a prominent religious practise in Mahāyāna Buddhism and in Hīnayāna lay Buddhism.

With regard to this discussion, Karl Potter has proposed that there are two major action orientations in Indian philosophy and religion. The "transactional" orientation presupposes a positive approach to action (*pravṛtti*), including the transfer of merit, whereas the "philosophical" (or "non-transactional") orientation presupposes a negative approach of withdrawal from action (*nivṛtti*) (Potter 1980, pp. 265–67). These two orientations have coexisted for thousands of years without weakening the strength or allure of the other, even though their compatibility is debatable.

So far, the provided examples of merit transfer have been related to various rituals. They all hold the same belief that merit is passed between living family members or between deceased relatives and their descendants. Merit transfer can also happen between a student and his teacher or between people and their ruler. The concept of group karma is frequently associated with the second type of merit transfer, or that which occurs between people and their ruler.

While ritual practises are often cited as the original setting for the transfer of merit, this is not the case for all of the classical examples of merit transfer. In India, it is widely held that good or bad karma can be passed from one person to another through social interactions, such as sharing a meal. Some Tamils, for example, believe that accepting cooked food from someone else, particularly a Brahmin or holy man, can result in good

karma. People also believe that eating food from thieves or prostitutes gives you bad karma (Daniel 1983, p. 29). Food is the most common medium of merit transfer in general (Doniger 1980a, pp. 12, 29). Additionally, among Buddhists, the most common form of merit is providing food for monks (Collins 1982, pp. 219–21; Gombrich 1988, p. 126).

The Mahāyāna belief in bodhisattvas ("a being aspiring to enlightenment") is linked to a certain type of merit transfer. Bodhisattvas are believed to do good things, not only for their own spiritual growth, but also to help other people who are suffering. It is thought that the transfer of merit is based on the bodhisattvas' promise to be reborn as many times as needed to reach full Buddhahood, not just for themselves, but for the benefit of all sentient beings (Suzuki 1990, p. 61; Dutt 1978, pp. 103–5; Williams 1996, pp. 49–54). The *Diamond Sutra* (*Vajrcchedikā*) (3) includes the following bodhisattva vow:

> As many beings as there are in the universe of beings, [. . .] all these I must lead to Nirvana, into that Realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind (Conze 1958, p. 25).

The bodhisattva's way of life is characterised by the compassionate development of six perfections (*pāramitā*): generosity (*dāna*), virtue (*śīla*), patience (*kṣānti*), vigour (*vīrya*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) (Harvey 1994, pp. 34–35; Williams 1996, pp. 204–14). It is thought that the bodhisattvas' efforts to reach these perfections help other people reach their own liberation. The bodhisattvas' vow says that they can never say no to helping other people (Gombrich 1971, p. 204; Schumann 1973, pp. 127, 130, 174). Nevertheless, fulfilling this obligation is not just a matter of being obedient. It is believed that bodhisattvas are full of compassion (*mettā*) and capable of erasing the negative karma of those in need (Harvey 1994, p. 13). According to Chapter 4 in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣyam* (108c-d),

> the Bodhisattva: this great-souled one, who yet possesses the most sublime perfections, acts through pure compassion; he acts without egoism, like a dog, in the presence of all creatures; he bears, on the part of all creatures, outrages and bad treatment; he assumes all fatiguing and painful tasks (Vasubandhu 1988, p. 691).

It is believed that bodhisattvas can cancel out bad karma because they are perfect and have a lot of merit from doing good things over an uncountable number of lives.

Listening to a bodhisattva's teaching is widely held to be one of the most effective ways to clear away negative karma. It is assumed that some of the karmic outcomes of a bodhisattva's good deeds are passed on to his audience through his teaching. People believe that the good karma of the bodhisattva will cancel out the bad karma of those who listen to him and help them reach *nirvāṇa* faster. This idea has been put in a figurative way by saying that the bodhisattva's longer path to *nirvāṇa* makes the path of those who hear him shorter (Bechert 1973, pp. 15–16; Bechert 1992, pp. 98–99; Williams 1996, p. 208).

When someone receives a gift from a bodhisattva, they have a moral obligation to become a bodhisattva themselves and help other beings who are suffering. This is an important part of the bodhisattva belief. (Schumann 1973, p. 178; Bechert 1973, p. 18.) Another important part of the bodhisattva belief is that a bodhisattva does not risk losing his status as a bodhisattva by giving (*pariṇāmanā*) his karmic merit to other people. Because he gives karmic merits to those in need without expecting anything in return, he receives good karma even though he is not aiming for it. In this way, the bodhisattva can never run out of the good karma he has earned (Schumann 1973, p. 111).

Ascetics in the *pāśupata* school of Hinduism act in the opposite way of bodhisattvas. The *pāśupata* ascetics try to make up for their faults by humiliating themselves in front of their audiences. They do this by imitating snoring, making erotic gestures, and acting crazy (Oberhammer 1984, pp. 178–81, 186–87). The ascetics are thought to have been cleansed of their demerits and to have gained merits as a result of being so publicly humiliated. In turn, those who witness an ascetic's humiliation are thought to gain demerits. As a result, the *pāśupata* ascetics are thought to gain merit by provoking people to do wrong. Another Hindu belief is that devotion to God (*Īśvara*, "Lord"), the author of the law of

karma, cancels the devotee's accumulation of bad karma and prevents negative karmic consequences from manifesting. For example, the *Bhagavadgītā* (9.30–32, 12.6–7) says that if even a very bad person devotes himself to Kṛṣṇa, his pious intention (*bhakti* or loving devotion) will be counted as virtue. His soul will be purified, and he will achieve complete liberation (Feuerstein 2014, pp. 199, 247, 249; Doniger 1980a, p. 28; Basham 1989, p. 92).

Classical Hindu scriptures are also more cautious about whether bad karma can be erased in ways other than by receiving the bad karma's consequences. For instance, the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa* maintains that one must experience all of the positive and negative karmic effects. For until and unless they are enjoyed, karmic repercussions persist, even after a hundred million aeons. In a similar way, the *Gautamadharmasūtra* (14.5) states that "because the deed does not perish whatever human action it may be, whether good or evil, it cannot be got rid of except by enjoying its consequences; know from me that a man gets rid of good and evil deeds by enjoying (their consequences)" (Kane 1973, p. 39).

I have considered some classical examples of merit transfer, in which the belief is motivated by humans' needs to improve their moral and spiritual status and prospects for the afterlife. In light of classical examples, there are primarily two different categories of merit transfer. First, the transfer of merit is associated with rituals in which an offspring's merit is believed to be transferred to their deceased ancestors for support in the afterlife. Another major type of merit transfer is associated with the Mahāyāna belief in the bodhisattvas' compassion for other beings. Bodhisattvas show compassion through their teachings and other good deeds, which are believed to cancel out the bad karma of the people they meet. I have also paid attention to how attitudes towards the transferability of merit changed as Indian philosophy evolved towards a moral understanding of karma. The transfer of merit has been rejected by some philosophical schools due to the doctrine of karma, which states that people can only acquire karmic outcomes for actions they have performed themselves. As has been stated, even if different religious ideas vary and seem to draw from different directions, that has not prevented conflicting ideas and doctrines from maintaining viability. Thus, a religious outlook on life does not need to be maximally consistent, and complex traditions with internal tensions can still be psychologically attractive and convincing.

1.6. Beliefs in the Effects and Non-Effects of Karma

One view commonly that is associated with the moral notion of karma is that a person's accumulation of karmic merits and demerits has an effect on the physical and socioeconomic circumstances under which he or she will be reborn. In particular, karmic accumulation is believed to affect whether a person will be reborn as a human or as an animal, whether he will be healthy or disabled, and whether he might be reborn in heaven or hell (Chakrabarti and Lehtonen 2020, p. 32). In Hinduism, *dharma* is a concept that helps explain karmic accumulation and effects. *Dharma* ("what holds together") is the basis of a cosmic moral order (*ṛta*) that determines the duties of each caste (*Bhagavadgītā* 2.31, 18.46; Feuerstein 2014, pp. 103, 313; Crawford 1982, p. 60; Keyes and Valentine 1983, p. 20; Fuller 1992, p. 245). Karmic accumulation is believed to determine the social rank into which a person will be reborn if they are reborn as a human being. According to the *Manusmṛti* (8.386), there would be no thief, no adulterer, no defamer and no aggressor if the basis of all order (*dharma*) is followed (Olivelle 2009, p. 151; Tähtinen 1982, p. 10). This indicates that following the social and moral order or breaking it is the ultimate cause of pleasure or pain, respectively. Thus, no one meets with success or hardship by accident; pleasant experiences will come of merit, and painful experiences will come of demerit, according to the law of karma. In this way, karma functions as an explanation of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. This makes the belief in karma psychologically motivating, as well as possibly also comforting.

Especially in Theravāda Buddhism, the view is found that it is also possible to experience pain that is not caused by karma, but by mere external causes (Halbfass 1991, p. 320). According to *Milindapañha* (134–135; 4.1.63):

> It is not all suffering that has its root in Karma. There are eight causes by which sufferings arise, by which many beings suffer pain. And what are the eight? Superabundance of wind, and of bile, and of phlegm, the union of these humours, variations in temperature, the avoiding of dissimilarities, external agency, and Karma. From each of these there are some sufferings that arise, and these are the eight causes by which many beings suffer pain. And therein whosoever maintains that it is Karma that injures beings, and besides it there is no other reason for pain, his proposition is false (Davids 1965, pp. 191–92).

This view is historically related to the discussion of whether the Buddha's suffering resulted from his bad karma (Walters 1990, pp. 81–82).

1.7. Karma as a Theodicy

The consideration that the concept of karma can offer a moral explanation for every experience has made several authors regard it as an apt theodicy. For example, Max Weber claimed that the doctrine of karma is the most consistent theodicy:

> Karma doctrine transformed the world into a strictly rational, ethically-determined cosmos; it represents the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history (Weber 1958, p. 121).

In a similar way, Mircea Eliade stated,

> in the light of the law of karma, sufferings not only find a meaning but also acquire a positive value. [. . .] Karma ensures that everything happening in the world takes place in conformity with the immutable law of cause and effect. [. . .] the archaic world nowhere presents us with a formula as explicit as that of karma to explain the normality of suffering (Eliade 1971, pp. 98, 100).

Several contemporary writers have also paid attention to karma as a moral explanation for pain and pleasure. According to Wendy Doniger,

> [. . .] one must not underestimate the value of karma (and fate) as a plot device, karma ex machina explains what cannot otherwise be justified. Thus inconsistencies in character, such as an inappropriately virtuous demon, or in experience, such as the sufferings of a good man, are explained by reference to karma accumulated in unknowable previous lives (Doniger 1980a, p. 28).

Crawford (1982, pp. 145–46) also states, "By linking the present with the past, the law of *karman* attempts to explicate the mysteries behind individual inequalities, and the problem of suffering". In a similar vein, Gombrich (1988, p. 47) says, "Karman thus offers an explanation for the problem of suffering. It is probably its apparent explanatory power which has made the theory so widely accepted". For his part, Reichenbach (1990, p. 29) conveys that "It is precisely the strength of the doctrine of karma that it links the pain and pleasure that we experience with cosmic or environmental conditions, and these conditions in turn with the moral quality of actions performed". Thus, the attractiveness of the doctrine of karma can be said to be based on its ability to frame people's life experiences with the fulfilment of retributive justice. This may sound like an experiential, if not evidential, basis for the belief in karma. However, I think that the doctrine of karma should be described as a desire-based framing, rather than as an epistemic explanation for the problem of suffering. Thus, as far as I can see, the belief in karma reflects the desire for justice and the desire to improve (and approve) oneself and to understand one's life.

Even if Weber praised the doctrine of karma as "the most consistent theodicy ever produced", theodicy is not the most suitable term for the view of suffering associated with karma. This is because that doctrine does not include the idea of the justice of God (θεός + δίκη) (Lehtonen 1999, p. 88; Chakrabarti and Lehtonen 2020, p. 28). This is not merely an etymological remark; the main difference between the classical theodicies and the karmic view of suffering is their different relations to theistic beliefs. A theodicy attempts to answer the questions that arise when the problem of evil is associated with the theistic beliefs regarding the goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience of God. A karmic answer to the

problem of suffering does not need to treat the problems associated with theistic beliefs (Harvey 1994, p. 30; Herman 1976, pp. 143–291) unless God is regarded as the author of the law of karma, as some Hindus believe. The idea of "God behind karma" is discussed by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), the second president of India, as follows:

> If the law of karma is independent of God, then God's absoluteness is compromised. The critic who declares that we cannot save the independence of God without sacrificing the doctrine of karma has not the right conception of the Hindu idea of God. The law of karma expresses the will of God. The order of karma is set up by God, who is the ruler of karma (*karmādhyākṣah*). Since the law is dependent on God's nature, God himself may be regarded as rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. To show that the law of karma is not independent of God, it is sometimes said that, though God can suspend the law of karma, still he does not will do so. Pledged to execute the moral law which is the eternal expression of his righteous will, he permits evil which he might otherwise arrest. The inner ruler has regard in all cases to the volitional effort which prompt a man's action. He does not care to upset his own laws and interfere with the world-scheme. God, though immanent in the world, does not wish to be intrusive (Radhakrishnan 1997, pp. 694–95).

For all its advantages, a karmic answer (if it can be considered an answer at all—perhaps rather an expressive reaction) to the problem of suffering is not perhaps fully satisfactory for the reason that one does not usually know or remember what good or bad one has done in his or her previous lives (a fact I referred to at the beginning of this study when pointing out asymmetries with the concepts of karma and rebirth). This lack of awareness of one's past can have a negative effect on whether a person can regard his or her sufferings as justified, and, obviously, it is difficult to feel guilty for something about which one knows nothing. In relation to this, Wendy Doniger points out that the doctrine of rebirth in a way neutralizes or impersonalises karmic demerits:

> The myths of karma do blame man for evil, but they neutralize any implication of personal, individual guilt by shifting the blame to a previous existence, of which one cannot be conscious (and for which one cannot truly experience guilt), though one can still make personal efforts to dispel that evil in the future (Doniger 1980b, p. 372).

What the doctrine of karma does not tell either is why there is wrongdoing and suffering at all. Furthermore, if humans are accountable for their destinies, as the doctrine of karma asserts, then they must have some control over them. Nevertheless, human beings cannot control suffering associated with the misfortunes and accidents they meet (Babb 1983, p. 175; Fuller 1992, p. 249). Thus, an individual is responsible for his experience of bad karma, which he is unable to control, just as a lawbreaker has himself to blame for his being punished, although he can avoid or mitigate his punishment in no way.

Thus, a widely held belief is that the doctrine of karma serves as an explanation for the suffering and injustice brought about by prior deeds. However, some empirical studies suggest that people who know the idea of karma and believe in karma may attribute their failures and misfortunes to factors other than karma. Lawrence Babb notes that, although the doctrine of karma appears to be nearly omnipresent in Hindu culture, its role in popular religion remains unclear. Babb bases his view on fieldwork observations from the Chhattisgarh region of Central India:

> The idea that the things that happen to an individual are the "fruits" (*phal*) of past actions was obviously familiar to my informants, but they seemed to regard this a more of somewhat remote and theoretical possibility than as a convincing or satisfying way of explaining misfortune in any concrete instance (Babb 1983, p. 168).

According to Babb (p. 168), "the doctrine of karma explains misfortune with something approaching logical perfection. But this does not seem to commend it to villagers, who

under most circumstances apparently prefer other modes of explanation". These other modes of explanation are, for instance, fate, the anger of unpropitiated deities, and the evil deeds of ghosts. Babb (1983, p. 168) says that "although in the popular traditions of India, karma is indeed one way to explain human fortunes, it is by no means the usual way, or even a very important way, at least as far as certain everyday misfortunes are concerned" (regarding karma as an explanation of suffering in popular Hinduism, see also Ayrookuzhiel 1983, pp. 125, 131–32; Fuller 1992, pp. 248–50). Explaining why the doctrine of karma, even if well-known and widely believed, is not always or necessarily used as an explanation of one's failures and misfortunes may be due to the fact that other explanations (like one's childhood experiences and traumas, or the activity of ghosts and spirits) may avoid the necessity of consenting to the view that one's moral and spiritual status is somehow weak and inadequate because of one's actions.

Even some classical texts imply that karma is not an unfailing guarantee of justice. For example, in the famous *Mahābhārata* (I.63.91–96) story, the sage Māṇḍavya chastises the god Dharma for harshly and unjustly punishing him for torturing a fly as a child (Williams 2003, p. 56). The story appears to call karmic justice into question, and implies that the dispenser of justice must use discretion on a case-by-case basis. The *Mahābhārata* story is also intriguing because it recognises the special status of those who are underage and emphasises that even the dispenser of justice is not above the law.

One could suggest that the transfer of merit is a means by which an individual can strengthen his control over his destiny. However, not even the possibility of the transfer of merit can change the fact that an individual is unable to fully control her destiny in terms of karma, because the karmic order "implicates the entire world-career of the self in its present experiences, and in so doing leaves obscure the question of how an individual might specifically respond to a particular problem" (Babb 1983, p. 178). Thus, it is unknown in a single case which merits are sufficient or which actions are necessary so that karmic misfortunes can be avoided or mitigated. Babb (1983, p. 174) states that, because the other reasons for everyday misfortunes are therapeutic as well as explanatory, they are more usual in popular Hinduism than karma. These other reasons include witches and malevolent spirits against whom specific measures can be taken, as well as annoyed deities, who can be appeased by doing certain things.

1.8. Reasons for Ambivalence in the Belief in Karma

In this study, I have defended the view that the rational and psychological attractiveness of the belief in karma lies in two main reasons. The first is the moral ideal of getting one's just deserts on the basis of one's actions and omissions. The belief in karma underlines this ideal. The second reason involves the idea of rebirth. The belief in karma and rebirth together can provide comfort with the hope of an afterlife in which one's fate is not arbitrary, but rather justly and strictly based on the moral quality of one's deeds in this or previous lives. Although there are many stories of a remembered past life, their justificatory role in the belief in rebirth is not necessarily decisive; the hope for an afterlife may play a more important role. Be that as it may, the belief in karma also incorporates diverging elements, such as the transfer of merit, which confirms that, in Indian traditions, there are two main ways to consider actions. The transactional orientation assumes the positive approach of action, whereas the non-transactional orientation assumes the negative approach of withdrawal from action. The transfer of merit follows the transactional orientation and presupposes karma as the accumulation of merits and demerits. The practice of the transfer of merit serves to improve an individual's moral and religious status through rituals or other suitable means, while the doctrine of karma itself strongly speaks for a strict and non-manipulatable fulfilment of retributive justice. Both motives—fulfilling justice according to the law of karma and improving one's moral status through the transfer of merit—are psychologically powerful and attractive, although their mutual compatibility is debatable. Thus, an inconsistent combination of religious ideas can be spiritually and

psychologically viable because of persistent human desires and needs, despite, one might say, insufficient epistemic justification (viz. lack of evidence or lack of logical argument).

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East Meets West: The New Gnoseology in Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming

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Abstract: This study examines the various explanations of the deliberative humanity, regarding a new gnoseology in the intellectual contexts of Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming during the 15th and 16th centuries. In a similar way to Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno for the European Renaissance, Wang Yangming is the enlightener among the representatives of Neo-Confucianism in early modern China. Each of these three takes an individual's mind as the point of departure. They then modify the traditional theory of gnoseology, in search of the good and principle. Nevertheless, behind these similarities on the surface, the metaphorical and theoretical interpretations follow different directions. Marsilio Ficino translates hierarchic Platonism as a transcendent norm. Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming, however, seem to liberate the individual's humanity from the traditional norms of gnoseology. In their methodologies, they both have developed a generative gnoseology that differs from the orthodox pattern of knowledge in their respective traditions.

Keywords: gnoseology; mind; Giordano Bruno; Wang Yangming

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the gnoseological and historical insights of Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno, who construct an independent humanity at the individual level. In my view, Wang had a similar impact on Chinese heresy as that of Bruno on Western civilization in the early modern period. Considering Wang Yangming as a reformer of the Neo-Confucians' path of knowledge, I am seeking to identify the Chinese counterpart to the Italian Renaissance experience that would facilitate Sino-Western intercultural exchanges, as well as learning from both cultural and historical traditions (Lu 2014a). They both established new paradigms for successive intellectual movements, while, at the same time, drawing on a great deal of information and inspiration from their respective traditions. Thus, the emergence of their "heretical" thought should not be perceived as a simple disruption of the previous cultural contexts.

In the fifteenth century, during the Renaissance, there was an intense and ubiquitous enthusiasm for classical research. Along with the consistent enthusiasm for the translation of and commentary on *Prisci Theologi* (pristine theologians), the discovery of ancient text was the common vocation of Christian humanism (Borghesi 2019). Thanks to the laborious and excellent work of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), European intellectuals confronted, for the first time, the fully-fledged genuine doctrines of the "heretical" Greek classics, particularly the significant corpora of Plato and Plotinus (Di Dio 2016).

In recent years, Bruno has often been redefined as the philosopher of a vision of occultism, of the absolute One, as the substratum that, with the Neoplatonic tradition of Ficino, lies behind his "heretical claim" of infinity. This is only true, however, of the metaphysical principle—the divine paradigm of which the infinite universe is the image or shadow. Bruno's infinite universe itself is based on the idea of individuality and homogenous potency between the species. Unlike Ficino in the preceding century, Giordano Bruno (1548–1600) did not call himself a *pius* (pious) Christian Platonist. His approach was similar to that of the naturalistic philosophers who upheld independent investigation

against religious authority. His thought derived a great deal from the humanists of the preceding century and a half: a belief in the primacy of the power of the intellect, idea that true wisdom is rooted in the doctrines of the ancients, naturalness of religion in man (who himself is a microcosm in which divine and earthly elements are conjoined), and desire to revise and systematize ancient wisdom (Celenza 1999). Such naturalistic ontology and generative gnoseology lie behind Bruno's contribution to the scientific revolution, which is not of secondary importance (Z. Wang 2022).

In a similar way, there was great emphasis on the gnoseological interaction of *nei sheng* 内圣 (inner sageliness) and *wai wang* 外王 (outer kingliness) in ancient Confucian thought, and this paper will focus on the humanity and individuality in the implicit interconnections between the two terms (C. Chen 1986). Firstly, the acquisition of inner sageliness consists in individual cultivation, metaphysical intuition, cosmological intelligence, an ultimate religious orientation to wisdom, the gnoseological view that there is a perceptible "way" of how the cosmos works, and an ethical theory of the human mind–heart (Angle 2009). Secondly, the accomplishment of outer kingliness is manifested in social and political governance, along with the application of gnoseology and ethics (W. T. Chan 1963).

During the fifteenth century, as well as the beginning of the sixteenth, in China, when Wang Yangming王阳明 (1472–1529) was alive, Zhu Xi's朱熹 (1130–1200) Neo-Confucian doctrine was dominant in Chinese epistemology and generally recognized as the authority of Neo-Confucianism (Cheng 1970). However, Wang preferred the doctrine of Lu Jiuyuan陆九渊 (1139–1192), a contemporary rival of Zhu during the Song period (960–1279), who is considered as one of the founders of the Learning of the Mind–Heart (*xinxue* 心学) (Tillman 1992). Against the dualist pattern of "*li*理" (principle) and "*qi*气" (material), Wang posits that mental or emotional structure is identical with the pattern of the universe and, as such, forms "*yi ti*一体" (one body, or one substance) with "*tian di wan wu*天地万物" (heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures of the world). Wang's philosophy has a considerable inclination to liberate an individual's mind from the force of exterior authority (Chou 2008).

In Wang Yangming's philosophical terminology, the intelligent and emotional aspects of an individual's mind co-constitute *tian li* 天理 (heavenly principle or principle of the universe) and authentic human nature. The "genuine" mind–heart as *ti*体 (substance) is not different from *liang zhi* 良知 (innate knowing) as its materialization, or *yong* 用 (function). Compared to Confucius, who emphasizes *ren*仁 (humaneness), and Mencius, who highlights *yi*义 (righteousness), the foundation in Wang Yangming's ontology is *zhi* 智, which creatively refers to "knowledge" or "wisdom". Another core concept of Wang Yangming is the "unity of knowing and acting" (知行合一), which means that knowledge and action are one simultaneous gnoseological process, not two separated paths. Still, if learning and practicing are one act, then the learner is a practitioner in learning, and the practitioner is learning in practicing. That is to say that, in learning, a learner is not merely an objective investigator, but also a subjective participant. Equally crucial is that a learner's activities cannot be limited to discovering existing knowledge, but also to relating himself to actively generating or producing knowledge (Chen 2019). Hence, "innate knowing" in Wang's gnoseological framework relates to the embodiment of various practices, ethical acts, and value judgments, indicating the genuine intuition of supreme good.

As a modern historian, Hou Wailu侯外庐 (1903–1987) constructed the history of the Renaissance in China. He maintained that, in the middle and late Ming period (from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century), there was an intellectual movement similar to the European Renaissance (Hou et al. 1984; Li 2013). Though my description and methodology are different from his, my philosophical study will share some similarities with his historiography. By aligning the gnoseological models of Giordano Bruno and Wang Yangming, I will attempt to demonstrate that both of them have proposed a generative gnoseology that initiated an epistemic turn against their respective despotisms for subsequent ideological movement.

In this paper, I want to argue that Wang Yangming is the initiator of self-emancipation for the Chinese early modern (Ming-Qing) period, in a similar way to how Giordano Bruno

is for the European. Wang Yangming's impact on the modern transition from the Ming to the Qing dynasties is as tremendous as the scientific revolution. As Huang Zongxi宗羲 (1610–1695), the Chinese pioneer of democratic thought, described it, it was similar to 'Thunder that wakes people from sleep, and lightning that clears away bewilderment' (Z. Huang 1986). It is at this point that we can find the gnoseological consonance between Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno, because both assert an independent human mind that becomes aware of the immanent nature of its founding and unifying one-body. This point can be labeled as 'heretical individualism' against abstract dogmas and transcendental authorities. Other similarities between these two thinkers lie, firstly, in their common strategy in defending the spontaneity of innate knowing and feeling: both provided a psychic explanation by analyzing the gnoseological relationship between intellect and will; secondly, in their gnoseology: both asserted the generative and interior path for attaining the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理) or divine truth, and both emphasized that one should initially pay attention to the obscure and insignificant beings and then incorporate them conscientiously with myriad things in the universe.

In our current investigation, I will refrain from two improper considerations, which take the conventional generalizations in European ideologies of Chinese traditions. The first inappropriate opinion claims that there is no philosophical system in Chinese thought, and the traditional European field is the only authentic source of theoretical philosophy. The second one concedes the legitimate status of Chinese philosophy, but it can be represented only through the lens of western paradigms. These foregoing views treat Chinese culture as auxiliary material for the existing philosophy in western society (Lu 2014b). By comparing Renaissance gnoseology to the Neo-Confucian tradition, I attempt to clarify the experiential structure of Wang Yangming's renovation but, at the same time, set it within its specific intellectual and historical context.

2. The Gnoseological Relation between Intellect and Will

Which is the reliable spiritual "light" for man's faculty of judgment? The medieval theologians have two dominating interpretative paths, with respect to the *intellectus-voluntas* debate (Cottingham 1988). The first path, regarded as the "intellectualistic", was emphasized by Saint Thomas Aquinas and the Dominican Order; the second, "voluntaristic" in nature, is represented by its apologist John Duns Scotus and the Franciscan school (Davies 2014; Derry 2006).

The dilemma of scholasticism became a purely theoretical one: whether *priori status* should be ascribed to the speculative area (represented by the internally operating *noesis*) over the appearances of objects (the concern of the externally stirring will) or, in other words, whether outward phenomena should be afforded primacy over the innate intellect of mankind (Terracciano 2011). Compared to the traditional paradigm adhered to by medieval theologians, Ficino emerges as an early modern interpreter of the gnoseological mechanism for attaining knowledge. Ficino expresses his views in a passage of *Theologia Platonica* (Ficino 2011):

> "In a graphic picture and the structure of a building, there reflects the design and the genius of the artist. Moreover, one inwardly catches sight of the disposition and somehow the form of the soul itself. Nevertheless, the soul of the artist reaches light most explicitly in speaking, singing, and sounds. Through the whole disposition of the mind, the will is completely revealed". (Ficino 2011)

The gnoseological and hermetic attempts in Ficino's commentaries on the pages of Platonic works deeply inspired Giordano Bruno. Despite his naturalistic philosophy, especially in the metaphorical and philosophical poem *Gli eroici furori* (*The heroic frenzies*), which is known for its passionate character, Bruno chose a different way from Ficino's Platonic theology). He integrated intellect and will as two complementary efficacies in the same process for his interior praxis. Bruno defined and described heroic desire in the third dialogue of Part I:

> "These passions which we are discussing are not a forgetting, but a memory; they are not the negligence of oneself, but love and desire of the beautiful and good through which one tries to perfect himself by resembling it and transforming himself into it. It is not a rapture under the laws of an unworthy fate with the snares of feral affections; but a rational impetus that pursues the intellectual apprehension of the good and beautiful which it knows, which it would likewise please by conforming to it. In this way, it comes to be kindled and imbued with quality and condition that make it appear illustrious and worthy". (Bassi 2004)

Thus, its substance lies in its intellectuality as a passionate will. Furthermore, the heroic desire grants "enlightened a double joy" (Bassi 2020), which seeks the structural parallelism in the dual goal of his *nova filosofia*: the good and beauty. There is no superiority between intellect and will in Bruno's heroic lover. Without the stimulus of cognition, the affections would be impotent; however, without the incessant passion for union with the divinity, man would never realize his capacity for knowledge (Bassi 2004).

Similar to Bruno, who sets an individual's mental structure and emotional code as the starting point, Wang also changes the traditional Chinese cognitive pattern in searching for the gnoseological good (*liangzhi* 良知, original knowing of the good) and ontological principle (*tianli* 天理, Heavenly principle) of Neo-Confucianism. Based on an empirical investigation of nature (*xing* 性), Zhu Xi asserts that feelings generated by the human mind are not a reliable source. How do we acquire the knowledge of the Heavenly principle (*tianli* 天理)? According to Zhu, one can approach the principle of the universe through the learning of classics and investigation of things in nature.

Wang's concept of *xing* is markedly different. Wang is opposed to Zhu's theory that the principle of the universe is merely transcendental and abstract. For Wang, the general term "principle" (*li* 理) is often interchangeable with "Heavenly principle" (*tianli* 天理, namely the "principle of the universe"). Therefore, Wang's gnoseology has two connotative meanings, cognitive and ontological, and both are intertwined. According to Wang's cognitive pattern regarding the organic universe, *tianli* should be connected with the heart–mind (*xin* 心), since the heart–mind is the substance of human nature, myriad beings, and even the principle of the universe (W. T. Chan 1998). Accordingly, Wang treats his innate knowledge (*liangzhi* 良知) as the ontological creative power of myriad things in the universe. Wang claims: "*Innate knowledge* is the spirit of creation. These spirits create heaven and earth, become demons and gods" (W. T. Chan 1998). For Wang, innate knowledge becomes the creative power that ontologically works in the universe.

In Confucian orthodox tradition, the only way to understand the notions of "Dao道" (logos) and "Ren仁" (benevolence) was through the mediation of classic works, or to depend on the Confucian cultural hierarchy, which is based on the degree of refinement of knowledge (Cheng 1997). However, in certain ancient books of Confucianism, such as the *Da Xue*大学 (Great Learning), social ethics and political governance could be also built on nondistinctive self-cultivation. Consequently, when the above pre-Qin Confucian text was consecrated as a part of the elemental classics of literati's pursuit from the Song Dynasty (960–1279), Neo-Confucian philosophy began to lay much emphasis on the humanistic value of inner sageliness (N. S. Chan 2011).

Following this revival of the learning faculty at an individual level, Wang says in *Chuan xi lu*传习录 (Instructions for Practical Living), "The succeeding Confucians did not understand the doctrine of the sages, and did not realize that *liang zhi* 良知 (innate conscience) and *liang neng* 良能 (innate abilities) are attained in their hearts through an individual experience; instead, they tried to know what cannot be known and to do what cannot be done" (Lu 2014a; Peng 2003).

The theory of "*liang zhi*良知" (innate or intuitive knowledge) is perhaps the most unique conception of Wang's, which is markedly distinguished from the Confucian tradition in his time, which was dominated by the doctrines of "*xing ji li*性即理" (the nature is Principle). On the one hand, it affirms the equality of all human beings, with respect to society and culture; on the other hand, it attributes a subordinate position to the canonical

doctrine. For the individual, as the indisputable protagonist in the reflection of *"liang zhi良知"*, the value of the Confucian classics will be considered as less important than self-cultivation.

Wang claims further in his work *Da xue wen大学问* (Inquiry of Great knowledge) that, once we realize that good is rooted in our mind, which it does not rely on any external research, "the will follows a certain direction" (*zhi you ding xiang志有定向*), without the danger of dispersion and confusion in a thousand details (Lu 2014a). In the absence of this danger, the mind will be in a state of quiet, our choices will be perfect and correct, and the highest good can then be obtained. However, Wang points out that our quiet state is acquired through *"kuang狂"* (frenzy, unshaken, fierce, or ambitious), namely striving with passion and will.

Therefore, Wang states that:

> "Now I believe in my innate intellect, and for me, it is just what is right, and wrong is what is wrong. I act spontaneously without worrying about hiding anything. Only now have I started to feel free and without restraints. Let the people say that my actions do not match my words, I do not care". (Peng 2003)

We notice here the phrase "*feel free and without restraints*", literally "*the free mind without restraints*", which refers to an episode mentioned in both *Mencius* (*孟子*) and the *Analects* (*论语*): when Confucius (551–479 BCE) found his disciples were not able to practice "moderation and balance" (*zhong yong中庸*), he was contented with the ambitious and irreversible ones (Chu 1988). On the other hand, the use of the emotional concept *"kuang狂"* in Wang has no negative meaning, not even imperfection, compared to those who can be moderate, according to the words of the classics (W. T. Chan 1962). Instead, it is the character of a sage in the process of self-cultivation, because it reflects the spontaneity of innate conscience. In addition, the *"bu yan不掩"* (undisguised) used by Mencius indicates the inadequacy of frenzied behavior, but in Wang's philosophy, this criticism was ignored (Y. Wang 1963; X. Zhang 2021).

3. The Ontological Debate between *Creatio Ex Nihilo* and *Creatio In Situ*

Both Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno assumed the individual mind as their starting points in gnoseology. Interestingly, their beliefs in innate knowledge or abilities both drew on a great number of resources from their ontological discussions. In my opinion, both of the two philosophers' gnoseologies possess a dual cognitive-ontological character. Cognitively, their doctrine teaches us that one should know myriad things (which means the plurality of the Universe), in terms of the principles of the universe; ontologically, their philosophy indeed teaches about the expanding and cultivating of one's mind, as an act of participation in the creation of the world.

As a general principle, the genesis of the world can be reduced to two ontological paradigms: *creatio ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing) and *creatio in situ* (creation within context). Here, I will present a brief overview of the differences between Renaissance and Confucian viewpoints on creation or generation (Ge 2018).

Historically, Ficino represents a Christian humanist position that develops the concept of creation in the Judeo-Christian religion, while reconciling it with the eschatology and ontology of Neoplatonism (Howlett 2016). Should the shadow be regarded as a stray from or approach to the sun? It is a classical Platonic metaphor that concerns how we should treat the relationship between a reflected world and the absolute One.

As previously mentioned, Ficino emphasized that the will's nature of action is entirely focused on the external world. It is consequently better equipped to return to the *summum bonum* (which, by definition, is external to itself) than the intellect, which exactly reshapes the world in its own image (Di Dio 2016). Consequently, Ficino shifted his focus from the contemplation of wisdom to the *gaudium* (joy) approachable by the will: "We want strongly to see to be ecstatic with joy; we do not seek happiness for the sake of seeing. For us, it is not enough to simply observe, but rather to see the things that bring us joy" (Ficino 2011)

and "Joy is richer than cognition, for not every man that knows rejoices, but those who rejoice necessarily know" (Ficino 2011).

This kind of joy is passive, which depends on the grace of God with a pious love. Ficino's humanism, therefore, identifies the heretical rationality with Christian morality and spirituality. Goodness, therefore, is an attribute of divine creativity. Meanwhile, an antithesis, which has its origin in the renaissance, as well, argues that Nature is its own creator, in the sense that everything has its own ultimate purpose. In Italy, process philosophy emerged with the naturalistic studies of atheistic philosophers, such as Leon Battista Alberti, Pietro Pomponazzi, and Giordano Bruno (Hendrix 2002).

On the other hand, Bruno criticized it as a donkey's worship, used as the carrier of the sacrament without self-consciousness. Bruno's work was the opposite of Ficino's: he wished to completely disaffiliate his philosophy from the dogmas of Christianity. Unlike Ficino, Bruno put contemplation and free philosophical inquiries above revelation from the transcendent God. He was fully conscious of his own phantasmatic and speculative ability; that is to say, the preference for following God within himself (Dougherty 2012).

The dialogue *De la causa, principio ed uno* provides a logical and metaphysical basis for the distinction made in *Gli eroici furori* between the immanent and transcendent aspects of God. Accordingly, since God was the first cause of the one and infinite universe, Bruno's concept of the universe was intertwined with the all-pervading divinity, which is intelligible and comprehensible to the human mind. Hence, the human mind should be emancipated from unnecessary dogmas and intermediaries and attempt heroically to explore and penetrate the secrets of the universe. Even though Bruno's intelligible universe corresponds to the Neoplatonic *anima mundi* (world soul), the total explication consists in the infinite universe itself, rather than emanating from a transcendental and abstract God. For Bruno, the ultimate knowledge of the principle of the universe in Neoplatonism is inaccessible and indirect. As in *Gli eroici furori*, it is stated that God is known in nature, rather than in himself. In other words, Bruno's divine truth is to be recognized as the natural discourse of the "*sommo bene in terra*" (ultimate good on earth) and not as a theological intuition of a mystical transcendence.

Actually, from Bruno's early mnemonic work *De umbris idearum*, which still conveyed a Neoplatonic flavor with a Platonic metaphor of light and shadow, he had already realized that the human intellect is to ideas as the eye is to light. The first truth and goodness are hidden from rational search. The nature of man's knowledge of ideas is always *umbratile* (shady); hence, he provides the title *De umbris idearum*. "Our nature is not such that by its ability it can inhabit the very field of truth . . . Thus, it is sufficient and much for it to sit in the shade of the good and the true" (Borghesi 2019).

In this method, Bruno denied the supernatural or superadded gift of grace from God (*donum superadditum*). He realized that the distinction between the nature of humanity and the grace provided by God is incompatible with his interpretation of nature as an image of God. According to his intellection, a supernatural state of perfection through God's divine grace is redundant and unnecessary.

"*Creatio in situ*", according to Chinese philosophy, is a holistic process. It is not an orderly theological hierarchy, but instead a process of dynamic transformation. In light of this tradition, a metaphysical question arises: how can the multitude of a phenomenal world persist, given that plurality is perishing constantly? The universe embodies itself as myriad beings, but it cannot be manifested through its "plurality" because, without an organic context, things are fragmented everywhere, and it is impossible to recognize and define them. As a contemporary representative of the Chinese-Western comparative philosophy, Wen Haiming温海明 points out, "Chinese philosophy has a principle of generating meaning by juxtaposing two antithetical terms against each other" (Wen 2010).

Accordingly, we can elucidate this gnoseology and ontology within a larger historical context of the Confucian intellectual tradition. There are two principal paths that were raised by classical Confucian philosophy during its historical development (Kupperman 2010). According to Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), the classical canons *Zhong Yong* 中庸

and *Yi Zhuan*易传 indicate a process of idea from transcendence to immanence, considering that these texts are ontologically based on Heaven; the concept of Heaven influences an awareness of authentic humanity and, finally, culminates in a conscious interior mind–heart (Mou 2003b). Conversely, the approach of the *Meng Zi* 孟子 is from immanence to transcendence, insofar as its theoretical processing is derived from a reflection of mind–heart, and it is based on that to make deductions about the internal sincerity by cultivating the supreme actualization of moral feelings and gaining access to Heaven only in this way.

Hence, "Heaven", in Wang's term of "knowing Heaven", could seem to be a conception that is both gnoseological and ontological. Moreover, Wang Yangming asserts that "*zhi tian* 知天" is not only "knowing Heaven", but also "participating in Heaven," which means being merged with Heaven (M. Zhang 2022).

This character is demonstrated intensively by recognizing the mind–heart structure of Wang's ontology. The principle of Neo-Confucianism, which Wang accepted, is that we and the universe "share the same body" (*yi ti*一体). As opposed to Zhu, in Wang's principle, nature and the mind–heart are unified. The fundamental assumption behind this metaphysical teaching has already been introduced: we and the universe are subordinated to the same mechanisms. Thus, we and myriad beings are equally endowed at birth with a pure and perfect emotional and mental deposition. In its original and innate structure, our minds correspond to "principles" (*li* 理) that manipulate normative paradigms and the generation of the universe. Furthermore, while human nature in Zhu is relatively static, the mind in Wang is active, as it is identical to the continual influx and perpetual creativity of the universe.

This psychic and cosmological correspondence provided Wang with a means of explaining the various phenomena and resolving metaphysical and ethical dilemmas (Tien 2010). Consequently, Wang indicates that we and the world share a common innate mind or instinct. The practical effect of this shared mind or principle is that we feel attached to and affected by every existing being in the universe, just as we realize ourselves connected to every organ of our physical bodies (Ivanhoe 2011).

We can detect great confidence in Wang's holistic cosmology, which leads toward developing a coherent process philosophy, based on the most insignificant mind. However, as the Chinese contemporary New-Confucian philosopher Yang Guorong杨国荣 observes, what Wang emphasizes is not a belief in the existence of a physical world beyond the mind, but rather "creating a world that has its own meaning" (*yi yi shi jie*意义世界), which is internal to our mind (Yang 2016; Chen et al. 2020). Therefore, what we see is a complete reflection of reality. So, for Zhu, the world is not an external reality to human nature, but the mutual interaction between the subject and object.

4. Against External Authority: Bruno and Wang Yangming on the Relationship between Transcendence and Immanence

As a commentator on Platonism and Neoplatonism, Ficino considers the ancient doctrines not only as archaic sources of philosophy but also as prophetic interpreters of Christianity (Meng and Boyd-Wilson 2018). The respect for ancient authority was too great to permit more than a reworking and reconciliation of classical and Christian doctrines. Ficino tries to keep this separation between the immanent mind and transcendent world: the intellect makes the world "mind like", while they will guarantee that the mind becomes "world like". World and mind, accordingly, keep moving towards each other, without ever coinciding. There will always be a cognitive mind aware of an external reality, and there will always be a phenomenal world of things awaiting its perception. To weave the gap of the two worlds, in some of his celebrated and oft-cited phrases from the *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino stresses the importance of an intermediary function of the *anima mundi* (world soul) between the two separated worlds. He describes the soul as the "center of nature" (*centrum naturae*) and "the copula of the cosmos" (*copula mundi*) (Ficino 2011; Lazzarin 2011). Ficino depicts the "world soul" as a divine track of the Spirit, which can descend into the human

mind and, from there, ascends back again to the absolute One. It is a kind of reflection that makes the soul the mirror of God.

Unlike Ficino, who provides a metaphor of man as the obscure *image* of the transcendent God, Bruno, as a naturalistic philosopher, treated individual minds as an infinite *simulacrum* of the principle of the universe (Z. Wang 2022). Bruno clarified these attributions when he explained his statement that the universe is "all infinite", rather than, similar to God, "totally infinite", in which God is totally present. Thus, this is why Bruno will not need the soul as the celestial quintessence for mediating the principle of God.

In his cosmological work *Cena de le ceneri*, Bruno strongly exalted the dispersion of divinity, emphasizing the immanence of the dispersion of God in all things. Furthermore, in *Gli eroici furori*, Bruno pointed out that our knowable object, even though it is not identical with the ultimate cause of the universe, is exalted to a position of equality with that hidden principle. In *Furori*, the symbolized figure of Actaeon was adapted from Greek myth to illustrate the philosophical quest for the immanent potency. Upon seeing the resplendent beauty of the nude Diana, he is changed into a deer (Bassi 2020). The meaning of this myth is that, when the lover beholds and receives the divine beauty and goodness of his object, i.e., the hunter's prey, he is transformed into his beloved (Davies 2014). This "object" is fully capable of satisfying the subject of heroic love. In this ethical poem, he describes the process by which the heroic lover comes to know his exalted object. The supreme happiness, which the subject of this love seeks, is found in his satisfaction by his object.

By following this path, the sixth dialogue of Part II brings us to what Giordano Bruno calls "a natural contemplation". According to the last part "Canzone degli illuminati" (Song of the Enlightened), those enlightened and renovated philosophers are ready to probe into "those eternal laws" that govern "the blazing sky, where lies that luminous area in which the prominent Chorus of your planets can be seen" (Bruno 2000, pp. 958–59). This concept of the transcendental immanence of the objects of knowledge is celebrated at the epilogue of *Furori*, where the "the ultimate good on earth" represents an entirely new approach to addressing this subcelestial particularity. As Gatti pointed out, it is what distinguishes him from the shadow of Ficino, who had encouraged the philosophical mind to look away from the world of multiplicity, in order to contemplate the absolute One (Gatti 2011, p. 153).

What is noteworthy here is that Bruno's description of the transcendence and immanence of human mind, which is both an effector and receptor, reminds us of the characteristic ancient Confucian instruction that a human being should constantly expand his own mind to the realm of the extensive (博), vast (大), perfect (精), and profound (深), so that even a single mind can be combined with myriad beings in the universe. Accordingly, Wang practices his transcendental "monist doctrines" *(wan wu yi ti*万物一体) in addressing the problem of acquiring holistic consciousness and universal empathy (Chen 2019). In the *Great knowledge*, one of the fundamental classics for Confucianism, the opening sentence is "the way of ultimate wisdom is the comprehension of absolute integrity, genial development of the common people and endless pursuit of the perfection of humanities" (Chu 1988; Zheng 2021), which is very famous and often quoted by Zhu Xi. Wang Yangming disagreed with Zhu's interpretation on the priority between immanence and transcendence. In *Inquiry on the Great Learning (da xue wen* 大学问*, 26: 4–5)*, Wang points out,

> "In the phenomena, there is what is fundamental and what is secondary. In the past, a Confucian thinker (Zhu Xi) considered the *ming de*明德 (brilliant virtue) as the fixed *a priori*, and the *qin min*亲民 (love or empathy for the people) as secondary; he saw the two things in opposite relation, being an interior and an exterior". (Y. Wang 1992; Ivanhoe 2009)

In short, Zhu Xi claims that human nature limits the direct contact with *"ming de*明德" (briliant virtue), since it is inaccessible and incomprehensible through our senses. Wang denied that Zhu substituted *"qin* 亲*"* (love or empathy) with *"xin* 新*"* (renovate), which means reformation of the people in Zhu's doctrine and neglects the meaning of "love" in the original text. According to Wang, the revised sentence cancels an individual activity

of integration and combination with the people. The defect remains that there is always a separation between the subject and object in the ethical aspect.

Wang's argument was based on his belief that the common people can make the right moral judgments by themselves. Wang claimed, "The virtues that can be acquired and practiced by individuals of simple intelligence are referred to as universal virtues. Heterodoxy is the term used to describe what men and women of ordinary intelligence cannot understand or practice". (Y. Wang 1963).

Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), as an important forerunner of Jesuits to China, translated some extracts of the *Great Learning*, one of the central classics for Confucianism, into Latin. Interestingly, according to the translation of Ruggieri, the interpretation of *ming de*明德 (brilliant virtue) is correlated with the concept of *lumen naturae* (light of nature), which is in contrast with the light of religious revelation in a Renaissance context (Zheng 2021). This distinction between the light of nature and that of religion by Ruggieri has been designedly misinterpreted. It was a pragmatic strategy for the Jesuits' missionary work in China, since they maintained that the later Chinese Neo-Confucians were deceived by the dissimulation of natural phenomena, rather than the light of the Divine. However, when their message about China was spread in Europe, it is equivalent to suggesting that an atheistic nation can cultivate virtues without religious belief and revelation, and a pagan community can flourish in a manner that is even comparable to Europeans. The message was expressed by Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), a follower of the heretical tradition, similar to Giordano Bruno. To demonstrate his atheist theory, Bayle famously cited contemporary China as an example.

Similar to the ideological transformation of the Confucian doctrine elaborated by the Jesuit Ruggieri, as the mentor of Lorenzo de' Medici, Ficino's *Prisca Theologia* (pristine theology) has the same responsibility to convert Platonic philosophy as a Christian ethical and legitimate norm. Ficino is conscious of writing for aristocratic audiences and infuses a courtly atmosphere and attitudes into his dialogues. Bruno and Wang, however, each see themselves as the teachers of the masses in ordinary life. They wish to enlighten secular men, who would listen in the face of the institutionalized "ignorance" and mediocrity of schools or churches. Even though the "heretical" men could never capture the ultimate truth, they can still approach it by incessant participation or practice in the progress of evolution through liveliness and vicissitude.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, nuanced study reveals that the transformative meaning of Wang Yangming's gnoseology to Chinese humanistic enlightenment is similar to that of Giordano Bruno to European early modern renovation. It has been shown that the study of 'heretic' mentalities can be crucial to understanding the mental similarities among various comparative studies in Sino-Western modernization. In *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, Hegel considers Giordano Bruno's philosophy to be "a bold rejection of all Catholic beliefs resting on mere authority" (Hegel 2009). By challenging the truth and value of the entirety of Christianity, in his *De la causa, principio et uno*, Bruno claims that the individual is capable of intuiting the universal principle in an infinite universe (Bruno 2000). Similar to Bruno's heretical doctrines against the Catholic Church, Wang also dared to criticize the external authorities of his time by introducing a new significance to the value of a concrete individual. According to Zhu Xi's orthodox criterion of "nature is principle" (*xing ji li,* 性即理), one can approach the Heavenly principle by learning the classics and investigating the empirical things in nature. Compared to Zhu's gnoseology, that was merely transcendental and abstractive, and Wang's redefinition of human nature was markedly rebellious. For Wang, Heavenly principle (*tianli,* 天理) can be generated and intuited by means of concrete individual knowing and feeling. Accordingly, Wang's ontology was grounded in his immanent philosophy of "one-body humaneness", which was famously expressed in *Questions on the Great Learning*: "Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad things as their own bodies" (Ivanhoe 2009). Similarly, Bruno's infinite universe was also a new organic

one, in which the individual soul searches for unity with the *anima mundi* (world soul). The world soul is "all in all and in every single part" (Bruno borrows Plotinus's conception in *Enneads*, VI.4.12), that is, present wholly and indivisibly in each and every thing to the degree that it is capable of receiving it. Although Bruno does believe in a world soul of Neoplatonic source, he denies any kind of mystical inspiration and divine grace. According to his anti-Catholic position, a rational principle of the universe always works within the infinite vicissitudes of the natural world.

According to Wang Yangming and Giordano Bruno, will and intellect are two operationally related facets of the independent mind responding to the holistic principle in the universe. Although, sometimes the correlation between intellect and will presents an asymmetrical state in the gnoseological process, the two immanent faculties of the mind are never considered as parallel, nor is there a disparate approach to the transcendent good and principle in Wang and Bruno's ontological levels. Thus, a "heretic mind" refers to the gnoseological and ontological forms of various spiritual and practical facets that constitute "mental and emotional structure", which are embodied in common sense and social behavior (Santangelo 2018). However, notably, the principle of the universe and the supreme good cannot be understood exhaustively, but only to the extent of the individual's dynamic mind; in both of their views, only the genuine human nature can get access to Heaven or macrocosms, and so "exhausting the heart, knowing genuine nature and joining in Heaven" are not guidance for mediocre people in either rational inquiry or emotional practice (Zheng 2021).

Consequently, the significance of their renovated gnoseology should not be disparaged as an agitated heresy against authority. Both of them proposed generative gnoseologies that differ from traditional authoritative pattern; therefore, even though the human intellect has a finite nature and ability, there is no limit to our happiness during the process of pursuing good and principle (Z. Wang 2022). Wang claims in *Instructions for Practical Living*, "Pure knowing is nothing other than the clear awareness that spontaneously reveals Heavenly principle". (Y. Wang 1963). Compared with previous Confucian philosophers, Wang's pursuit of the Heavenly principle relied on the mental awareness of the original heart in concrete conduct, not abstract human love (Mou 2003a). In other words, human intellect and feeling are the generative insight of the Heavenly principle. Wang explains this generative gnoseology as follows (*Instructions for Practical Living*: vol. 1):

> "Knowing is the original substance of the heart-mind. When it sees the parents, it spontaneously knows that one should be filial. When it sees the elder brother, it spontaneously knows that one should be *ti*体 (*substance*). And when it sees a child fall into a well, it spontaneously knows that one should be commiserative. This is pure knowing and need not be sought outside. If what emanates from pure knowing is not obstructed by selfish ideas, the result will be like the saying "If a man gives full development to his feeling of commiseration, his humaneness will be more than he can ever put into practice". (Y. Wang 1963)

According to the renovated gnoseology of Wang Yangming, knowing and feeling are not only individual and daily experiences, but they are also moral and social phenomena, since even minor minds contain symbols, motivations, beliefs, and values that are shared by the "collective unconscious" of a specific tradition. Thus, we can posit the human mind–heart or "*liang zhi* 良知" as possessing a finitely infinite potency. This is the reason why personal commiserations of mind should be taken into consideration; they are not pure knowing in the strictest sense, as they are reflections of long duration or gnoseological complexes.

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Article

Afro-Brazilian Religions and the Prospects for a Philosophy of Religious Practice

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Abstract: In this paper, we take our cue from Kevin Schilbrack's admonishment that the philosophy of religion needs to take religious practices seriously as an object of investigation. We do so by offering Afro-Brazilian traditions as an example of the methodological poverty of current philosophical engagement with religions that are not text-based, belief-focused, and institutionalized. Anthropologists have studied these primarily orally transmitted traditions for nearly a century. Still, they involve practices, such as offering and sacrifice as well as spirit possession and mediumship, that have yet to receive attention from philosophers. We argue that this is not an accident: philosophers have had a highly restricted diet of examples, have not looked at ethnography as source material, and thus still need to put together a methodology to tackle such practices. After elucidating Schilbrack's suggestions to adopt an embodiment paradigm and apply conceptual metaphor theory and the extended mind thesis to consider religious practices as thoughtful, we offer criticism of the specifics of his threefold solution. First, it assumes language is linear; second, it takes a problematic view of the body; and third, it abides by a misleading view of the "levels" of cognition. We conclude that the philosophy of religion should adopt enactivism to understand religious practices as cognitive enterprises.

Keywords: Afro-Brazilian religions; Candomblé; Umbanda; religious practice; religious cognition; embodied paradigm; conceptual metaphor; extended mind; languaging; enactivism

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1. Introduction

In 1945, French anthropologist Roger Bastide wrote, "[Afro-Brazilian] philosophy is not a barbarian philosophy, but a subtle thought that has not yet been deciphered" (Bastide 1945, p. 134). We accept the hypothesis of a "subtle thought" waiting for us to decode it: a revealing opening to human religiosities that, despite having received much attention from anthropologists, has not been engaged with by philosophers of religion—not even in their birthplace. Regarding the two main African-derived traditions in Brazil, namely Candomblé and Umbanda, we aim to demonstrate that these traditions raise methodological worries that the current philosophy of religion has no tools with which to face. In so doing, we aim to offer suggestions on how to remedy this.

In the last decade, the philosophy of religion has withstood mounting attacks on its methodology, scope, and motivations, but not much has changed. Many see it as a discipline in which, on the one hand, outside influences, such as upbringing and education, play a pernicious role, and on the other, a tendency to explore and even formulate its questions solely in terms of its own practitioners' traditions is prevalent (De Cruz 2018a). The titles of monographs and edited volumes have announced its end (Trakakis 2008), questioned its purpose (Knepper 2013), called for its renewal (Draper and Schellenberg 2017) and reconfiguration (Kanaris 2018), and wondered what its future might look like (Eckel et al. 2021). To date, perhaps no work has more forcefully argued for overhauling the philosophy of religion than Kevin Schilbrack's *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto* (Schilbrack 2014).

Schilbrack diagnoses the traditional philosophy of religion as narrow, intellectualist, and insular. Narrowness refers to the fact that it suffers from a very restricted diet of examples. Even though attention to traditions other than Christianity has been growing, the two main branches of the philosophy of religion—natural theology and epistemology of religion—engage disproportionately with Christian traditions. Intellectualism refers to the fact that the philosophy of religion is biased toward the analysis and assessment of religious beliefs to the exclusion of other practical religious phenomena, such as rituals, pilgrimages, feasts, and dietary laws. Finally, insularity refers to the lack of connection between the philosophy of religion and other disciplines in the academic study of religion and even from different fields within philosophy. Traditional philosophy of religion, Schilbrack remarks, does not "play well with others" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 20).

Because they constitute a significant step in the right direction, Schilbrack's insights merit close examination and, if and where necessary, expansion and revision. In Section 2, we offer Afro-Brazilian religions as a case study to illustrate the methodological poverty of the current philosophy of religion. We show that the absence of discussion of Afro-Brazilian (and, more broadly, African-derived) religious traditions substantiate Schilbrack's assessments. In Section 3, we present Schilbrack's threefold solution to methodological poverty: adopting an embodiment paradigm on the one hand and employing the theories of conceptual metaphor and the extended mind on the other. While agreeing with the spirit of Schilbrack's suggestions, in Section 4, we criticize Schilbrack on three counts, namely for thinking of language as linear, adopting a "standard" conception of the body, and conflating basic and high-level (as well as online and offline) cognition. We conclude that adopting enactivism may fruitfully amend Schilbrack's account and point towards avenues for future research.

2. Afro-Brazilian Religions

Atlantic slave traders forcefully brought to the shores of Northeastern and Southeastern Brazil more enslaved Africans than any other country in the world: an estimated 5.8 million people between the arrival of the second Portuguese India Armada headed by Pedro Álvares Cabral on 22 April 1500 and the phasing out of the slave trade in 1866 under Brazil's last monarch, Pedro II (Gomes 2009). These were people of diverse African ethnic and cultural backgrounds who found themselves mixed indiscriminately, especially in the first two capitals of Brazil: Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. They brought their languages, deities, devotions, rituals, cuisine, dances, and music. These mixed with traditions brought by enslaved people from other regions and syncretized with the Roman Catholicism imparted by the Portuguese colonizers. The two main traditions arising from this convoluted and intricate process are Candomblé and Umbanda.

The "Sudanese" and the Bantu people were the main ethnic groups brought to Brazilian shores from Africa. "Sudanese" referred not to present-day Sudanese but West Africans from present-day Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, and Togo. They include, among others: the Yoruba, known in Brazil as *Nagô* (subdivided into *Queto*, *Ijexá*, and *Ebá*, among dozens of others); the *Jêje* (from the Ewe and Fon peoples); and the Ashanti. These populations labored in northeastern sugar mills after arriving in Brazil between the middle of the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. Meanwhile, "Bantu" encompassed present-day Congo, Angola, and Mozambique populations. They included the Angolans, Kasanje, and Mbangala peoples, among others. The most significant number of enslaved people is estimated to come from this group. The Bantus arrived mainly through the port of Rio de Janeiro. They labored along the coast and the interior, especially the region between the present-day states of Minas Gerais and Goiás. They were brought into the country from the sixteenth century until the nineteenth century.

Their diasporic worship traditions did not simply replicate their African forms in Brazil. Slavery forced people accustomed to living within specific social, political, and religious organizations into a completely different context as laborers within a society that put an end to previous structures of organization. It also forced them to negotiate their

religion in a hostile environment and articulate their old social customs within the confines of oppressive slave culture. Thus, Afro-Brazilian religions manifest a history of resistance, and the construction of Black and Afro-descendant identities as a wide variety of African nations reorganized themselves in the diaspora to support daily life in a slave regime (Engler and Brito 2016). This negotiation is a process that endured through the abolition of slavery and is still ongoing.

The standard narrative, especially among practitioners, is that the ensuing Afro-Catholic syncretism present in most forms of Candomblé up to this day resulted from the prohibition against worshipping their deities. For example, the deity associated with hunting and usually depicted armed with a bow and arrow, Oxóssi, was syncretized with Saint George in Bahia and Saint Sebastian in Rio de Janeiro. Thus, as Ayodeji Ogunnaike (2020) observes, many analyses of Afro-Catholic syncretism frame it through the metaphor of a mask in which enslaved Africans ingeniously employed the traditions of Catholic saints to disguise their worship of African deities, ensuring the preservation of their practices. In recent years, however, many practitioners of Candomblé have sought to "re-Africanize" their traditions by removing the white masks from their deities. Over the past several decades, it has become one of the most critical aspects of discourse and ritual.

The landscape of African-rooted religions in Brazil is richly varied, including traditions such as Babassuê, Batuque, Jarê, Macumba, Omolocô, Pajelança de Negro, Quimbanda, Tambor de Mina, Terecô, Xambá, Xangô de Pernambuco, and others. Nevertheless, pride of place is usually given to Candomblé for historical, cultural, and demographic, if not simply chronological, reasons. Candomblé is an Afro-diasporic religious tradition—or rather a family of religious traditions subdivided into many "nations"—that developed in Brazil mainly during the 19th century. It features the invocation and celebration of African deities (*orixás*, *inquices*, or *voduns*, depending on the nation in question) as well as semi-divine ancestors and other powerful spirits who possess initiated people.

Candomblé teaches that while every human being is under the government of deities whose identity is revealed through divinatory rites (*ifá*), only some persons can "incorporate" the divine beings in their bodies. The deities are associated with specific elements of nature, such as the air (Oxalá), freshwater (Oxum), the sea (Iemanjá), thunder and lightning (Xangô), rain and wind (Iansã), forests (Oxóssi), iron (Ogum), mud (Nanã), and others. They "come down" to possess human beings in festive and public ceremonies in a specific kind of trance characterized by the complete or near-complete loss of consciousness on the part of mediums. Homage must be paid to the deities through offerings and animal sacrifices to facilitate the transmission of the sacred, vital force (*axé*), which is held to be indispensable for maintaining health and well-being. The worship of the deities, through possession and sacrificial offerings, forms the basis of several religious traditions born in the context of New World slavery, including Cuban *Santería*, Haitian *Vodou*, and Dominican *Vudú*.

The bridge between Candomblé and Umbanda is Kardecism, a Brazilian transplant of the nineteenth-century French Spiritist tradition initiated by Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail, best known by his pen name Allan Kardec. Brazilian Kardecism has developed more explicitly religious dimensions than its French counterpart: for example, emphasizing healing and miracles, reflecting a mixture of popular, especially Afro-Brazilian, practices and sanctifying leaders because of their healing and psychic abilities. Brazilians employ the term "Spiritism" (*Espiritismo*) in different ways: broadly, any mediumistic practice including popular religious beliefs, Afro-Brazilian traditions, Umbanda, and Kardecism; more narrowly, Umbanda and Kardecism; and more narrowly still, limited to just Kardecism (Engler and Isaia 2016).

Umbanda is a Brazilian hybrid of Candomblé, Kardecism, and popular Catholicism, with romanticized indigenous elements (Engler 2012). In Umbanda, one incorporates spirits but not deities—although *orixás* frequently take attendance, represented by spirits belonging to a group (called *linha*, "line" or *falange*, "phalanx") that mediates contact between practitioners and deities. However, Umbanda varies greatly, to the point where one can safely say that there is not one Umbanda but many Umbandas, with a great diversity in

beliefs and rituals (Motta 2006). It varies along a spectrum going from more Africanized to more Europeanized forms. While Umbanda most often assimilates elements of Candomblé, its core doctrines are Kardecist: God created all spirits equal and undeveloped, and their purpose is to evolve spiritually through multiple incarnations; spirits develop at different rates: some are sufficiently advanced that they no longer need to incarnate, but they sometimes choose to, motivated by charity, to help less developed spirits who still live in this world—much like, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, bodhisattvas vow to remain in *saṃsāra* until every last sentient being is saved (Chödrön 2007, p. 358).

As Steven Engler (2021) explains, Umbanda has two main types of spirits: guides who perform acts of charity and guardians who protect from dangerous forces (particularly evil spirits). Mediums develop a deep, personal relationship with certain spirits of each type with which their community or house works. The most common guides are *caboclos* (kindly but magisterial Indigenous spirits; specialists in healing) and *pretos velhos* ("old black person"; wise, elderly, formerly enslaved people). Other spirits include *crianças* ("children"; innocent and playful), *malandros* (rogues, womanizers, drinkers, gamblers), *ciganos* ("gypsies"; happy, disorderly spirits), and *sereias* ("mermaids"). Two other essential types of spirits incorporate in some groups as guardian spirits: *exus*, powerful male tricksters, and *pombas giras*, female spirits with a sexualized moral ambivalence.

To speak of variegated, plural, and malleable traditions almost always involves a significant risk of overgeneralization. Even so, we cannot avoid some measure of generalization if we are to speak about them at all. Notably, we want to highlight four characteristics of these two traditions. First, they are orally transmitted, and there are no agreed-upon textual sources. Second, they are noninstitutionalized in that no central authority controls Candomblé or Umbanda, and practitioners organize in autonomous groups. Third, they are ritual-focused, and there is no centrality to the profession of faith. Fourth, they are significantly embodied in their ritual ceremonies that involve dancing, singing, and drumming. Regarding these last two points, we may say they are "not so much thought out as danced out" (Marett 1909, p. xxxi). Thus, these traditions deviate from the rarified academic Christian theism that still permeates the philosophy of religion.

We submit that attending to traditions such as Candomblé and Umbanda can offer the philosophy of religion a mirror through which to see its methodological limitations. Schilbrack points out that it has been practiced narrowly, ignoring a vast expanse of religious traditions outside Christianity and other major religious groups. He notes (Schilbrack 2014, p. 12) that almost no philosophers of religion are working on African traditions even though there may be 50 million people who practice Yoruba religion alone (Prothero 2010). There are also next to zero philosophers of religion working on the indigenous wisdom traditions of Australia, North America, or South America as well as New Religious Movements.

In ignoring so many traditions, the questions philosophers of religion ask (and the answers they offer) reveal a degree of religious illiteracy that throws doubt on its relevance to the academic study of religion and on whether it even deserves the name philosophy of *religion*. However, even within its narrow confines, the traditional philosophy of religion has been slow to move beyond a highly intellectualized and abstract "theism" that bears little resemblance to how religions are practiced and lived (Hewitt and Scrutton 2018). One sees this conspicuous intellectualism in the almost unswerving focus on belief and doctrine at the expense of all other practical aspects of religious life. Ritual practices that are not only endemic but central to Candomblé and Umbanda, such as offering and sacrifice, spirit possession, eating, drinking, dancing, and singing, have been investigated almost exclusively by other branches of the academic study of religion. In this, the philosophy of religion reveals its insularity, being practiced in near isolation from anthropology, psychology, and cognitive science, for instance, but also being slow to incorporate insights from fellow philosophical disciplines such as the philosophy of mind.

These traditions raise specific and compelling questions for the philosophy of religion, and the discipline needs to review and expand its methodology to deal with them. Thus, the contact between these hitherto isolated worlds can illuminate the study of both. Consider

the practice of sacrifice—with very few exceptions, it is altogether absent from discussions in the philosophy of religion (Burley 2020). In *Hearing the Mermaid's Song*, Lindsay Hale provides a vivid description of sacrifice in what he calls "Afro-Brazilian Umbanda" (in contrast with "White Umbanda"):

> It was quiet and cool and just about midnight when I heard Seu Silva singing about blood and Tranca Rua, his rough voice wafting in from the gate outside the House of Father John. The forty or so people who had come to consult the spirits that night had left, as had most of the mediums. Only a handful of the most senior mediums—along with Jorge, Fernando the drummer, and me—were left still inside, barefoot on the packed dirt floor of the *barracão* (the main ritual space), as the soft night breeze lifted Seu Silva's hymn to Tranca Rua. We followed the sound out to the gate. There on a low stool, his sanguine complexion even redder in the candlelight, sat Seu Silva, a large clay bowl of manioc flour stained reddish orange from *azeite de dendê* (red palm oil) at the feet of his thick short legs. Fernando handed Seu Silva a young live chicken. Seu Silva took a swig from his beer, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and picked up a sturdy knife. Holding the chicken above the bowl, he cut its throat, letting the blood spurt over the offering, and then on the gate, and, finally, with the last drops he sprinkled the street that runs by the gate in front of the House of Father John.
>
> (Hale 2009, p. 134)

In both Candomblé and Umbanda, deities and spirits are active and immanent in our world, working for people on this side, being received by initiated practitioners, and communicating instructions and advice. The purpose of offering and sacrifice is to fortify and nourish deities and other spirits as well as appease them to act on the subject's behalf. When it is successfully performed, the deities feed on the energy (*axé*) of the sacrificial victim, and this energy returns to the devotee. What is the view of the afterlife held by these traditions? Do they postulate immortality? What ontological commitments are implicit in their ritual practices?

"Possession" is a broad term that refers to an integration of spirit and matter, force or power, and corporeal reality in a cosmos where the boundaries between an individual and her environment are recognized as permeable. How can mediumship be seen as evidence for their view of what happens to us after bodily death? What do these practices entail concerning the relationship between human beings, spirits, and deities? How can offerings and sacrifices be seen as evidence for the view of the nature of spirits and deities supported by Candomblé and Umbanda?

If the philosophy of religion will not ask such questions, how can it offer anything in the way of an answer? We argue that the discipline is unable, as it stands, to deal with ritual-based, embodied oral traditions with no central theological authority, such as Candomblé and Umbanda. Still, taking this direction would mean expanding and re-evaluating the discipline's methodology. We should raise questions that can be an antidote to narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity. For example, what does it mean to consider the religious person an embodied subject? How should the material and social aspects of religious rituals figure in an explanation of religious cognition? How can we develop a philosophy of religious practice?

The philosophy of religion must move beyond its current focus to become a global form of critical reflection on religions in all their varieties and dimensions in dialogue with other branches of philosophy and with other disciplines of the academic study of religions. Moreover, if one wants to philosophize about religion, then, as Timothy Knepper notes, "one needs to understand religion in all its messy cultural-historical diversity. Insofar as one considers only a limited set of traditions or reasons, one's philosophy of religion is limited" (Knepper 2013, p. 76). However, as soon as we try to bring new religious traditions into the fold of the philosophy of religion, especially ones that are ritual-focused and orally transmitted, we are faced with the question of how we should go about this task (De Cruz 2018b). The philosophy of religion has paid almost no attention to ritual, even

the ritual life of those religions that have received pride of place within it. Philosophers will not be able to rely on the same *sources* when thinking about religions that are not codified, text-based, institutionally centralized, and do not have a theological tradition as input. Thus, we argue that attention to cultural anthropology and ethnography is crucial to philosophizing in Afro-Brazilian contexts.

3. Body, Language, and Cognition

After diagnosing the traditional philosophy of religion, Schilbrack contends that we should adopt an embodiment paradigm to see religious practices as thoughtful (Schilbrack 2014, p. xiv). Such a paradigm would entail conceiving of a religious body not only as a passive object on which culture operates but also as the seat of subjectivity and religious being-in-the-world. Building on this, Schilbrack recommends two theoretical tools that assume an embodiment paradigm and that, he argues, help us understand how embodied, situated, and materially extended practices are properly cognitive.

The first is the theory of conceptual metaphor, first explored by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Schilbrack argues that it lets us see how abstract religious thought draws on embodied knowledge learned in the physical exploration of the world. The second is the theory of the extended mind, first stated by Andy Clark and David Chalmers in their seminal paper (Clark and Chalmers 1998). Schilbrack argues that it lets us approach the material aspects of religious practices as cognitive prosthetics that help practitioners remember and process information.

Schilbrack argues that the two theories complement each other in that the theory of conceptual metaphor focuses on embodied knowledge that is mainly prelinguistic and, to that extent, shared across cultures, while the approach of extended mind focuses on aspects of religious practices that are culturally particular. In this section, we will briefly expound on the ideas Schilbrack relies upon and recommends before we can offer some (hopefully constructive) criticism of his suggestions in the next section.

3.1. The Embodiment Paradigm

Schilbrack recognizes that the philosophical study of religious practices is a relatively unexplored field. The traditional division of labor in religious studies ascribes the study of religious beliefs to philosophy as if the mind was its proper object of concern. In contrast, it ascribes the study of the practical, material, and social aspects of religious phenomena to the social sciences: anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history. However, this division of labor does not do justice to the philosophical tools developed in the last decades.

The body became a significant source of philosophical attention in the phenomenological tradition. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty conceives the body as a non-dualistic, active, basic source of our relatedness to the world (Merleau-Ponty 1945). He criticizes the then-prevailing Cartesian dualism for conceiving of the soul and the body as two separate entities: the soul as immaterial, rational, and spontaneously active and the body as a passive entity in a perceptual relationship to the system of material objects. Schilbrack levels the same kind of criticism at the division of labor in the traditional philosophy of religion. It no longer needs to restrict itself to beliefs and doctrines, having theology and sacred texts as its only source, since it can now investigate the body as an actor in religious practices.

The anthropologist Thomas Csordas (1990) was responsible for bringing the embodiment paradigm to bear on religious studies. For Csordas, embodied cognition is more than a thesis that enables a new analysis of knowledge: it consists of a methodological perspective that takes the body as a condition for subjectivity and intersubjectivity, not a passive object determined by forms of social consciousness. That opens new paths to introduce different objects of study and renewed perspectives on religious practices, such as the role of the body in rituals. Nevertheless, despite a slow methodological shift in recent decades, the academic study of rituals still predominantly occupies itself with the study of symbols and abstract meanings referred to through semiotic analysis. However, we cannot

fully understand these practices with these methods alone. The way bodies interact during rituals and the actions of agents involved in them elicit the reactions of others. Again, the body is not simply a passive object on which cultures write their different meanings but is also the source of one's engagement with the world. Therefore, the embodied paradigm is not only instrumental but essential to understanding the body's active role in rituals.

Schilbrack distinguishes between the *pre-reflective* and the *reflective* body, which corresponds to what Merleau-Ponty calls the *lived* and the *objective* body. These are not two distinct bodies we possess but the same body under different forms of consideration. The lived body is pre-reflective because it is the body from the standpoint of our everyday experience. It is a pre-reflective body because it is available but "absent": it does not make itself conspicuous in a flowing action such as effortlessly running or playing an instrument. In these contexts, the body is not the object of one's awareness; it is the ground from which one perceives and acts in the world (Schilbrack 2014, p. 14). On the other hand, when one thinks, considers, and observes one's own body, it becomes an object. That is the reflective body. In this case, the body is a physiological entity, a spatiotemporally extended thing. We cannot separate these two perspectives because they unfailingly interact: for instance, a lesion in the brain's parietal lobe causes disturbances in the lived body.

The dialectics between these perspectives is intricate. On the one hand, the pre-reflective body cannot be an object of one's attention at the cost of interrupting the flow of action. On the other, as the reflective body seems to be the pure consciousness of an owned body, it also paralyzes the agent in a state of absorbed attention that makes the body unavailable to action. We can coordinate the pre-reflective and reflective perspectives on the body by considering how the body can be owned or unowned, present or absent, and available or unavailable.

Shaun Gallagher (1986) delineates three descriptions of the relationship between consciousness and the body inspired by Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of the lived and objective body. The first description is *the presence of the body*: the body is present when a particular tension arises and reveals it as part of the field of perceptions. In this case, the body is thought of as owned, and the "I" who experiences it knows it to be one's own. An example of this relationship to one's body would be the perception of a broken finger—the pain and swelling one feels is a visually and perceptually conscious way of sensing the presence of the body as one's own. In this case, the body is present to consciousness, owned, but not necessarily available because it is objectified and cut off from action.

The second description is *the ambiguity of the body*. Merleau-Ponty dubs this a pre-conscious knowledge of the body with no clear and articulate perception of it. In this case, there is no explicit consciousness of the body but only implicit or tacit knowledge. No reflective or objectifying conscious observation occurs, only the ownedness of an available body. Gallagher explains it is "not a possessive owning" since "the body is not a thing which 'I' own and which therefore makes me the subject and it the object" (Gallagher 1986, p. 144). The ambiguity of this presence is related to the fact that the body assumes the margins of our consciousness: the surrounding situation and the body's physiological state determine how its potentialities appear to pre-consciousness. The body is not absent from consciousness but is owned and available.

The third description is *the elusiveness of the body*. The body can escape consciousness as if it were not even in the margins of one's awareness of the world: it is "repressed below personal existence" (Gallagher 1986, p. 146). This is the body as experientially absent of conscious experience, but it can indeed be owned and unowned by the subject. In this case, the body may be absent and unowned, and its availability depends on other factors.

Concerning the concept of presence, Gallagher calls our attention to three possibilities. First, there is the lived presence of the body as owned is possible because one consciously feels pain or tiredness, for instance. That is the simplest case where the subject has the body present to consciousness and owns a body that is one's own. Second, there is the "unowned" presence of the body as a total otherness. That happens in the case of patients who suffer from somatoparaphrenia, a monothematic delusion that involves the denial of

ownership of bodily parts (Sacks 1984). The body is present but not owned, as if belonging to another person. Some of these patients complain about having a strange limb attached to them and even try to excise their arms or legs. Third, there is the body as absently available and owned, which Gallagher believes is more fundamental since it is pre-reflective. This is the body when it is in tune with the environment during an action or absorbed perception. When there is a smooth connection between both the body and the relevant surroundings, we are not aware of our leg kicking the ball but instead are "lost in focused intensity" (Gumbrecht 2006, p. 51); we do not feel our hips moving to the side in relation to our body's center of gravity, only the delight of swinging to the music. In this case, the body is muted and flows with the elements involved in the action.

That raises the question of how one can experience the absently available body. Gallagher contends that the biological and psychological sciences have offered enough evidence to demonstrate that there is a *body image* and a *body schema* (Ataria et al. 2021). These two concepts help explain experiences of ownership, availability, and the presence of the body. The body image is the picture of our body that we form in our mind, that is, how the body appears to us (Schilder 1935). This picture is constituted in consciousness as the body incorporates habits related to the kinds of objects of the environment and how the perceptions, emotions, and actions of others affect the subject. Body image makes the body owned, present, and no longer anonymous. The arrangement and systematization of body images from different contexts enable the constitution of body schemas.

The body schema is the standard against which all subsequent changes in bodily posture are measured before they enter consciousness. These standards are unconscious and result from actively organizing bodily performance in given contexts without forming a general representation of the body. The body schema is not a perception of the body as one's own. Instead, it situates the body with respect to a particular context, allowing it to be in communion with the environment. In sum, the body image is a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs present to consciousness or its margins; and the body schema is a non-conscious system of processes that constantly regulate posture and movement (Schüler 2011). When the body acquires a style, any state can be regulated by insertions of conscious adjustments using body images.

As Boyer and Liénard (2020) observe, various distinct cognitive mechanisms are engaged in various combinations in the diverse interactions called "rituals". With the conceptual framework of the embodied paradigm, we can begin to criticize those approaches to studying religious practices that assume they are thoughtless, non-cognitive enterprises. As Schilbrack observes, religious practices are not only expressions of religious thought but also instances of that thought. They are opportunities for cognition and inquiry about health, love, duty, maturity, sovereignty, purpose, or, more abstractly, the nature of human existence and the entities embodied and honored (Schilbrack 2014, p. 44). The dialectics between body image and body schema allows us to learn to see the body as the means through which practitioners investigate and create meaning. In participating in embodied religious practices, one learns about oneself, those with whom one interacts, the world, and the superempirical resources that make the practice successful (Schilbrack 2014, p. 45). In other words, the embodied paradigm allows us to recognize that the religious subject is an active inquirer.

Building on this, Schilbrack suggests that philosophers of religion should employ tools from cognitive linguistics and the philosophy of mind to take seriously the embodied knowledge and material culture that bring about and result from religious practices. Whether participants in such practices are consciously aware of it or not, rituals are encoded with meanings or cognitive contents. They are there for the interpretations and explanations of what is going on, that is, to see religious practices as having a cognitive function because they frame how participants conceptualize abstract features of their lives.

3.2. Conceptual Metaphors

Cognitive linguistics sees human cognition as dependent on mappings between domains, with "mapping" understood as a correspondence between two sets that assigns to each element in the first a counterpart in the second. It asserts that human cognition is independent of language and that linguistic manifestations of cross-domain mappings are surface manifestations of deeper cognitive processes. These mappings take several forms. Perhaps the most significant is what Gilles Fauconnier refers to as "projection mappings" (Fauconnier 1997, p. 9). In these, part of the structure of a more concrete or organized *source* domain is used to understand and talk about another, usually more abstract or less structured *target* domain. Since our primary and most highly structured experience is with the physical realm, the patterns we encounter and develop through the interaction of our bodies with the physical environment serve as our most fundamental source domains (Slingerland 2004).

In this context, conceptual metaphor theory argues that the capacity for abstract thought is based upon the application of structures encountered in embodied experience and transferred to various other domains. Crucially, sensorimotor and image structures play a primary role in shaping our concepts and modes of reasoning. Humans subconsciously draw on embodied experience to form templates (or image schemas) that structure the comprehension of abstract concepts. For example, categories are conceptualized as "containers", purposes as "destinations", and so on. Lakoff and Johnson offer some representative primary metaphors such as AFFECTION IS WARMTH, IMPORTANT IS BIG, and MORE IS UP, specifying their sensorimotor source domains and the primary experience correlations that give rise to them:

> (a) Purposes are Destinations
>
> Subjective judgment: achieving a purpose;
>
> Sensorimotor experience: reaching a destination;
>
> Example: "He'll ultimately be successful, but he isn't there yet";
>
> Primary experience: reaching a destination in everyday life and thereby achieving a purpose (e.g., if you want a drink, you need to go to the water cooler).
>
> (b) Actions are Self-Propelled Motions
>
> Subjective judgment: action;
>
> Sensorimotor experience: moving one's body through space;
>
> Example: "I'm moving right along on the project";
>
> Primary experience: common action of moving oneself through space.
>
> (Lakoff and Johnson 1999, pp. 52–53)

As Johnson explains, the label PURPOSES ARE DESTINATIONS should be seen as shorthand for the complex web of connections in our experience and understanding formed by this mapping across domains of experience rather than a propositional statement: "the metaphor itself is not reducible to the proposition we use to name it" (Johnson 1987, p. 7). In short, conceptual metaphor theory claims that we draw on our basic bodily experiences and spatial perceptions to form models that allow us to grasp and manipulate abstract concepts.

Edward Slingerland (2004) argues for the usefulness of the analysis of conceptual metaphors for the study of comparative religion, and Schilbrack follows him in saying that structured religious activities participate in both the physical experiences that generate patterns of understanding and the conceptual metaphors that deploy those patterns to reason about the world. In this way, they provide the patterns of experience on which religious teachings draw and can also deploy them to develop and teach ways of life. Schilbrack suggests mortality as an example of a target domain:

> Religious communities practice rituals that frame this feature of human existence according to different metaphors. A given funeral ritual might frame the experience of death as if it is a departure for a journey. This conceptualization would be

> conveyed by how the body is handled, what is buried with it, and the physical markers that are used. If one sees death as a departure for a journey, then ritual participants will think of the deceased as a kind of traveler, they will feel that he needs to be equipped with the accessories needed for the journey, and the question of his final destination will become central. A different funeral ritual might teach that death is a release from pain and bondage, and this metaphor will entail a different set of activities. Another might teach that death is going to a permanent sleep, another that death is a return to one's proper home, or another that death it is simply the end of life and that nothing comes after.
>
> (Schilbrack 2014, pp. 39–40)

Schilbrack's point is that the practice's gestures, architecture, implements, and words can teach metaphorical frames that shape the affective and cognitive responses to the phenomenon. Thus, conceptual metaphor theory reminds philosophers of religion that human subjects' engagements with the world are far more complex than the computations of disembodied minds processing raw data. Because abstract religious knowledge draws on embodied knowledge learned in the physical exploration of the world, we agree that conceptual metaphor theory provides an elegant framework for taking religious practices seriously as cognitive enterprises.

Schilbrack illustrates conceptual metaphor theory by citing the example of the Chinese Buddhist story *Journey to the West*. It describes the allegorical quest of the Tang dynasty monk Xuanzang and his "piggish and monkeyish" pilgrim companions as they overcome hazards on a journey to India to secure Buddhist scriptures (Schilbrack 2014, p. 48). Schilbrack highlights that this fictional narrative deploys the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. However, as Mikel Burley (2015, p. 238) notes, since *Journey to the West* is a text, analyzing its allegorical structure does little to reorient philosophy away from texts and toward responsiveness to embodied practices. Burley argues that we should acknowledge that an analysis of actual pilgrimages could and should accompany the analysis of textual accounts. He advocates for philosophers' real-life engagement with ritual practices—in this case, observing a Buddhist pilgrimage could help us consider how it embodies the belief in karma and the conviction that the voluntary taking on of hardship is spiritually purifying (Burley 2015, p. 238).

3.3. The Extended Mind

The extended mind thesis was formulated by Clark and Chalmers (1998) and elaborated by Clark (2008), Richard Menary (2010), and others. Clark and Chalmers' best-known example involves Otto, who carries a notebook in which he writes important information he would otherwise forget and consults it whenever necessary. The argument for the extended mind starts from the observation that the functional role of Otto's notebook and that of the internal neural memory system of someone who can access the relevant information without the notebook is the same. The information in Otto's notebook is easily and directly accessed and is generally not doubted or questioned, just like the information in a neural memory system. If internal brain processes are constitutive of memory, we should also view Otto's notebook as part of his memory. Clark calls this the parity principle (Clark 2008, p. 77). In short, the material vehicles that realize the mind sometimes encompass not just neural or bodily activity but also the material environment. Since we can offload cognitive work onto physical media through extracranial tools, the extended mind thesis states that "mental states (such as believing) can be realized, in part, by structures outside the human head" (Schilbrack 2014, pp. 42–43).

In applying extended cognition to the study of religion, Schilbrack draws on work by Matthew Day (2004), who argues that we should reconsider the possible roles and significance of material culture in religious cognition. In Day's words, rituals, music, relics, scriptures, statues, and buildings associated with religious traditions are more than quaint "ethnographic window dressing" (Day 2004, p. 101). As Schilbrack notes, just as notebooks, computers, and smartphones, the material aspects of religious practices can serve as

cognitive "prosthetics". To clarify this, Schilbrack offers a helpful example of extended cognition that involves looking to one's environment for help with memory or with the provisional steps in problem-solving and manipulating the external tools themselves:

> In Scrabble, as in many games and other intellectual puzzles, one's ability to reach a solution does not emerge solely from inner cogitation. Instead, one arranges and rearranges the Scrabble tiles in order to create a variety of fragmentary inputs that will prompt the recall of whole words from one's ability to see and complete patterns. There is a sustained and iterated process of interactions between one's brain and the external physical props. . . . [T]he example of the Scrabble pieces illustrates how thinking may use cognitive prosthetics not solely as an aid to memory, but in some cases involves their manipulation to find the best solution, a solution that does not merely help one recall what one already knows but rather fits one's situation best. Thus, when one finds the best arrangement in games like Scrabble, one does not say: "Ah, now I remember," but rather: "Ah, there you go."
>
> (Schilbrack 2014, p. 41)

In this way, cognitive prosthetics introduce tangible features of the world that can be physically manipulated and tracked in real time. Material culture thus transforms the computational assignment. In religious contexts, implements, artworks, offerings, and other physical media can serve as cognitive prosthetics and allow people to exchange intricate offline problems in dealing with counterintuitive, invisible, and supernatural agents for online cognitive tasks at which humans are proficient (Day 2004). These will be perceptual rather than imaginative tasks, including recognizing patterns, modeling worldly dynamics, and manipulating objects.

Some material artifacts involved in religious practices, such as the rosary for Catholics, the misbaha for Muslims, or the japamala for Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists, resemble memory prompts similar to notes left on one's fridge. However, how religious practitioners interact cognitively with their ritual environment is sometimes like moving around Scrabble tiles. Consider first one of Schilbrack's illustrations, the Stations of the Cross: fourteen images that depict the events in the crucifixion and burial of Jesus to foster contemplation and devotion. He quotes a treatment for children of the fifth station, in which Simon the Cyrene helps Jesus (Mark 15:21):

> *Fifth Station: Look at Jesus.* Jesus is so tired that the soldiers know he cannot carry the heavy cross by himself. So they look around and see someone who looks strong enough to help Jesus carry this cross. This person's name is Simon. Jesus just looks at Simon and quietly whispers, "Thank you" to Simon. Then they continue on the long road, carrying the cross together.
>
> *Look at Your Heart.* Sometimes helping someone can be difficult, for so many different reasons. Maybe you haven't finished something that you like to do, when someone asks you for help. Or maybe you just don't feel like helping that person. Can you think of a time when you were asked to help someone and did not want to help? Show Jesus what it was like when that happened, and picture Jesus loving you as you show him your heart. Maybe you can even hear Jesus whisper, "Thank you for helping." When you are ready, you can ask Jesus to help you to have a helping heart.
>
> (Schilbrack 2014, p. 46)

Schilbrack comments that these ritual devices use a series of images as memory pumps to remind participants of their dramatic narrative contexts. However, the practitioner must decide which images with which to identify, which actions to emulate, and how those actions can fit her own life. There may be one best answer about which scene is most fitting to one's life or what interpretation of that scene to draw. Still, participants are relatively free to apply the norms represented in images to their situations. Like the tiles in Scrabble, the physical representations provide incomplete prompts to engage participants to think in

a certain way—about themselves, others, and the world. Schilbrack notes that the material environment provides the conditions for making progress on normative problems like paper and pencil for solving math problems.

Now, consider the practice of spirit possession as it occurs in Umbanda. Spirits incorporate in mediums during rituals, in which they offer one-on-one consultations, advice, consolation, and ritual healing services—a practice it shares with Kardecism but not Candomblé, in which only the deities incorporate. Engler (2021) observes that a dozen to several hundred clients might attend a ceremony, each being seen and spoken to by a spirit who has incorporated in one of the half-dozen to fifty or more mediums. The spirits' needs (organizing clients, spreading incense, providing liquor, lighting a cigar, or fetching herbs for healing smoke) are often catered to by mediums in training. What is remarkable here is that spirits, otherwise invisible, are believed to *take attendance*. By coming down and incorporating in mediums, spirits talk, laugh, joke around, admonish, smoke, and drink. In an Umbanda ceremony attended on 2 July 2022 in Salvador, a *caboclo* incorporated in a young female medium hugged one of the authors of this paper, almost lifting him off the ground. Another, incorporated in the "father" (*pai*) of the *terreiro*, singled him out, called him forth, and asked him to dance along with the *caboclo*.

However, we agree with Schilbrack that religious cognition goes well beyond interacting with supernatural beings, such that the religious use of cognitive prosthetics exceeds helping participants deal with them. In terms of what James Gibson called *affordances*, humans see their environment as providing opportunities for action, not merely receiving sense data but perceiving value-laden properties of things in the world. That gives us a way to speak of religious affordances: religious practices are not just mechanical actions but modes of subject formation that train people to see the world as providing opportunities for proper action. The values that participants believe they see and respond to may well be values in the world. Thus, religious practices are materially afforded and cognitively extended opportunities for inquiry, and for this, if not for many other reasons, they merit attention from philosophers of religion.

4. Objections

4.1. Language as Linear

In his use of conceptual metaphor theory, Schilbrack assumes that patterns of sensorimotor activity are the "sources" of linguistic metaphors (Schilbrack 2014, p. 41). For example, movements such as standing are the basis for understanding the sense of verticality in space. Furthermore, more abstract ideas, such as "life is a journey", are grasped from the time-linearity of movements such as a ball rolling. Humans observe how movement works in nature by manipulating objects; afterward, they compare it to the patterns of their bodily movements. We then use these movements and relationships to build up concepts that will finally compose sets of categories and hierarchical relationships. This model is tacitly committed to a linear understanding of the relationship between body and language:

- Sensorimotor activity is the source;
- Processing organizes information;
- Language as behavior constitutes the target.

While we agree that the body is a source of powerful metaphors that enable understanding the world and ourselves, the assumption of linearity in describing how sensorimotor activity grounds language is problematic. Instead, we argue that language is not constituted by linear causation, where we can distinguish a source and a target, but by circular processes carried out by continuous co-determination loops. If the process were linear, as Schilbrack describes it, we would not be able to understand how religious concepts and abstractions can also conversely shape organic and sensorimotor processes.

Consider what Susan Hurley (2001) calls the *sandwich model of cognition*. This once-mainstream model has three central tenets. First, perception and action are separate from each other and peripheral. Second, thought and cognition are the central core of the mind: the mind decomposes vertically in modules where cognition interfaces between

perception and action such that, in this "sandwich", cognition is the filling between two bodily positions, the input (perception) and the output (action). Third, cognitions are processes involving symbols and syntactic structures.

Schilbrack's implicit commitment to linearity chimes with Slingerland's idea that our primary experiences are with the physical domain. In other words, the primary input to build language comes from the physical world, including the body. However, Schilbrack himself contends that the physical world is neither as naïve realists nor as anti-realists understand it. Still, if it is not the "independent" physical world that offers a primary input, we are left without a clue as to which world this is. We no longer know the origins of the sensory experiences that should ground our capacity to grasp and manipulate abstract concepts.

We can solve this puzzle by adopting an *enactive* conception of the relationship between the body and the world. This conception can solve problems entailed by linear conceptions of language development and enable an understanding of how abstract thought can also shape bodily experiences. That is important for our concerns because we agree with Schilbrack that embodied religious practices are cognitive but not only in enabling abstract linguistic knowledge. Religious practices constitute ways of being in the world in which we find different bodily postures, styles, feelings, emotions, and practical perspectives on existence.

According to enactivism, there is no pre-given world that provides information for our processing. Instead, organisms and the environment are co-constitutive (Stewart et al. 2010). Through each organism's contingent interactions with the environment, a world of experiences emerges for that organism, which implies existence is an active process. Enactivism conceives life and mind as emerging together from dynamic processes and life as essentially *autopoietic*. That means that life is a self-organizing phenomenon since it produces the conditions of its existence. In that sense, every living being is an autonomous adaptive unit trying to remain a system identical to itself and dynamically related to the environment. However, to reach this goal, living beings must select, modify, and construct the frames with which they make sense of the world (Di Paolo et al. 2018). Therefore, living beings are also *sense-makers*. Sense-making explains how experience arises, for it is the means through which a system acknowledges what is relevant to its maintenance. Living beings *enact* their bodies and the world since the reality of their bodies and the physical world is dynamic: it depends on the sensorimotor contingencies that bind perception and action to "bring forth a world" (Varela et al. 1991, p. xxxix). In a nutshell, without action, there is no world and no perception.

Human sense-making is social and linguistic. Through language, humans monitor, evaluate, regulate, and organize their existence by employing a form of sense-making that Humberto Maturana (2000) calls *languaging*: a form of social agency involving a double regulation of self and interaction that integrates the tensions inherent in dialogical organization and participation genres. Thus, human sense-making is verbal and assumes different forms of expression because, for humans, meaning is conveyed not only in concepts and propositional thought but also in ways of enacting the world and the body. Accordingly, here, we part ways with Schilbrack since he does not offer a conception of the body in interaction with the physical world (nor of the world involved with action and perception). Acknowledging mutual constitution allows us to avoid problems concerning the priority of the body over the physical world or the physical world over the body. Consequently, we also avoid linear conceptions of relatedness.

The different layers of embodied existence are continuous. Recognizing this is vital if we wish to explain how religious linguistic metaphors enact forms of bodily existence that causally influence all levels of living existence, from micro-organic processes to the health of individuals. As Thomas Fuchs (2017) observes, different layers of integral causality connect basic metabolic and conscious linguistic existence. Integral causality connects causal relationships within a domain with new layers of phenomena with its non-reducible causal laws emerging from more basic ones. Because language arises out of more basic autopoietic

activities, it does not originate only from the topography of bodily movement, as Schilbrack intimates. It arises in connection with the different layers of interconnected living activity, such as social interactions, patterns of sensorimotor activity, affect, sensation, values, and metabolism that build up the experience of being embodied. To generate linguistic phenomena such as metaphors, many layers of emergent properties must connect in bottom-up causation. Conversely, the upper layers of embodied phenomena constrain these layers by top-down causation. They reciprocally reorganize emotions, affect, sensation, metabolism, and embodied patterns of sensorimotor activity (Merleau-Ponty 1942).

In her study of Afro-Brazilian religious practices, Rebecca Seligman (2014) notes an excellent example of how linguistic metaphors affect the body. She notes that spirit possession is a privileged context in which to investigate the effects of meaning on the body. Ideas, beliefs, and discourses transform people's bodies, resulting in healthier conditions and well-being. Religious practices modify dietary habits, bodily posture, movement style, social interactions, and anxiety levels, affecting general mental health and well-being.

In sum, we submit that the enactivist framework can enrich the study of religious practices because it sees the human body not only as a structure for action but as a living entity that acts in conformity with its biological, psychological, social, and even historical needs. Enactivism has the virtue of looking at religious practices both holistically and in segmented, partial ways. It connects different domains of existence in bottom-up and top-down causation, enabling a broad understanding of the possible effects of religious practices in human life.

4.2. The "Standard" Body

Schilbrack's arguments reveal a tension between his theory of embodied realism and his description of the spatial logic of the world, leading him to a problematic conception of the body. He describes a child manipulating objects and moving her body to constitute an image schema of how the world works and responds to action, affirming that these image schemas are unreflective and nonpropositional: "templates for engagement with the world, they are not static but carry expectations and entailments" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 41). However, it is unclear what these templates are. Matylda Ciołkosz describes them as "the minimum content mediating between basic and scaffolded cognition. They are pre-conceptual representations of varieties of motion and sensation out of which fully fledged concepts may be built" (Ciołkosz 2017, p. 138).

On the one hand, if image schemas are pre-conceptual representations, this is consistent with Schilbrack's embodied realism, which claims that there is no single objective and independent spatial logic of the world. However, adopting a representationalist framework brings on difficulties in explaining how the congruence of representations is possible since they entail some degree of private ownership. That is why Schilbrack is committed to a universal pre-reflective body that grasps the same spatial logic everywhere in action. Otherwise, he would be unable to explain cultural congruence unless he were to consider it a mere coincidence. As he observes, conceptual metaphor theory explains divergent cultures in terms of shared experiences by showing how diverse ways of conceiving the world share metaphors and how those metaphors arise in universal or near-universal patterns of embodied activity (Schilbrack 2014, p. 49).

Robin Zebrowski (2009) dubs the received view of the body in cognitive science and conceptual metaphor theory *the standard body*. This conception results from projecting a standard body constructed by anatomical, neurological, and physiological similarities. It envisages the body doing the same sorts of things, having the same types of environmental stimuli, and reacting in the same way everywhere, resulting in a basic bodily structure that leads to the same kinds of patterns of embodied activity. However, while embodied experience grounds language and thought, it is problematic to project the same embodied pattern of experience universally.

First, it creates a dichotomy between the universally biological and the culturally specific in our embodied dealings with the world. If what is knowable is only the shared

and universal aspect of our experience, then actual living bodies with their idiosyncrasies and historical, geographical, and socio-cultural practices would be lost to the darkness of their intentions. Furthermore, differences in body structure, physiology, skin color, hair texture, weight, and ability would not be considered relevant to the meanings experienced and generated by living human bodies.

Second, it splits individual cognition and social cognition. Individual embodied cognition would be a private, internal, and particular result of deep biological structures. At the same time, language and culture would be social, public, and outer manifestations of thought belonging to a separate human world. This rift casts material culture and social meanings as otherworldly entities and biology into a rigid and deterministic structure.

Third, it deleteriously affects our understanding of the cognitive nature of religious practices. The standard body leaves aside the plastic acquisition of "particular histories, idiosyncratic in-the-world perspectives and styles, and intercorporeal openness of embodied being" (Cuffari et al. 2015, p. 1118). It blinds us to how individuals live out embodied religious practices in their context and culture, losing sight of the perspective of lived experience in which agents often struggle with their different bodies interacting in particular and multilayered ways.

Consequently, we should adopt a different understanding of the relationship between body and meaning to deal with these problems. It is not an abstract notion of the body that grounds the possibility of shared meanings: meaning is present from the start. Again, sense-making is central to understanding how bodies coupled with other bodies and the environment create and compose meanings and evaluate the world through action and perception. The body is never in isolation, and cognition is the proper way of relating to this world. Against the standard body, we hold that the body is always idiosyncratic since differences and particularities are essential to how meaning is generated and transformed in the interplay between the unfolding interaction process and the individuals engaged in it (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007).

In addition, the body is indissociably coupled with the social world. The biological interpenetrates the social, and the social interpenetrates the biological. Hence, the body's uniqueness is expressed in its style, ways of acting and reacting, personal experiences of pleasure and pain, and so on. It is in constant dialogue with others and the world in co-created conversations, altering its style, reframing its actions and reactions, and learning from experience. In sum, autopoietic systems show *adaptivity*, an operational property that allows an organism to regulate its coupling with the environment according to its conditions of viability (Di Paolo 2005). Adaptivity entails the interrelationship between bodies and environmental structures that comprise an extended ecology. The ecological perspective takes bodies and the environment as co-determined, mutually adapting to each other.

If adaptivity is a characteristic of living beings, it must carry consequences to studying religious practices. We hold that religious practice is a human form of sense-making. Embodied religious practices result from the dialectics of past, embodied, singular experiences that compose the processes of current embodiment and the manifestations of life in autopoietic sense-making existence. We can thus investigate how meanings are embedded, rituals adapted, and practices taken up or abandoned. Meaning is shared not because of a universal pattern of bodily experience but because of engagement with particular environments and persons. It unfolds across multiple timescales in an ongoing process of joint achievements through various interactions with shared symbols and emergent interactive dynamics.

4.3. Levels of Cognition

We agree with Schilbrack when he declares that we should not "exaggerate the idea that religious practices are a source of novel thinking" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 44). Indeed, many religious practices are repetitive or mechanical. In various contexts, practitioners are indubitably passive in the face of traditions and authorities, some subject to indoctrination

or even brainwashing. Nevertheless, even practices that can seem automated or thoughtless, be them memorizing scriptures, reciting mantras, or undertaking pilgrimages, can serve as *opportunities for inquiry.*

Still, when Schilbrack says that "the theory of conceptual metaphor . . . lets us see ways in which abstract religious thought *draws on* embodied knowledge learned in the physical exploration of the world" (Schilbrack 2014, p. xiii, our emphasis), we insist that this is only half the story since in this scenario the individual cognizer is not necessarily in constant co-constitutive relationship with her environment. Conversely, when Schilbrack concludes that conceptual metaphor theory and extended mind together give philosophers of religion the tools to see that "insofar as a religious practice houses metaphors about a 'target' domain . . . then participating in the practice is *itself an exercise in abstract thought*" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 39, our emphasis), he is opening himself to the criticism that this constitutes a gross conflation of basic and higher-level as well as online and offline cognition.

That we can and should see religious practices as ways of imaginatively and effectively interrogating one's environment is something we enthusiastically support. As we saw in Section 3.2, mortality is an example of a target domain in conceptual metaphor theory to which we can metaphorically apply knowledge drawn from other domains. That, in turn, generates hypotheses about the nature of mortality by positing specific similarities to other domains. Again, this means that abstract thought draws on embodied knowledge, a judgment Schilbrack is theoretically well-equipped to make. However, he cannot be justified in declaring that religious practices are in and of themselves exercises in abstract thought while escaping from the double accusation that he is at once conflating the operational conditions of cognitive processes and assuming a disembodied, computational-functionalist model of cognition.

A solution to this problem is to abandon the idea of a Cartesian split between basic and higher-level as well as online and offline mental functions, relegating it to the status of a metaphor about levels of description—a sometimes helpful but misleading heuristic tool. In other words, we should abide by a broad notion of sense-making that does not forget the involvement of the whole organism and forsake the idea of decoupling by placing the cognizer in constant co-constitutive relationship with her environment. For instance, Roberto Motta (2005) shows that trance is a characteristic of Afro-Brazilian religions in which we can speak of social cognition through embodied practices such as dancing, drumming, and singing. In these practices, individual and collective participation interpenetrate without the Cartesian split. In this way, the motivation behind Schilbrack's need to say that religious practices are exercises in abstract thought—namely, to justify their philosophical relevance—becomes redundant. Cuffari et al. (2015, p. 1093) observe that the commitment to a fundamental principle of continuity means that we can apply coupling and autonomy not only to "low-level" sense-making. We must rely on them to explain all linguistic sense-making—including religious practices, which, in agreement with Schilbrack, we are convinced to be properly cognitive enterprises.

5. Concluding Remarks

We have offered the Afro-Brazilian traditions of Candomblé and Umbanda as examples of the lack of reach of the philosophy of religion not only because the philosophy of religion has, by and large, ignored these traditions but, most importantly, because it does not possess an appropriate framework for philosophically investigating them. Again, this is because the philosophy of religion has focused on text-based and institutionalized traditions and the doxastic aspects of such traditions while, for the most part, ignoring the practical and embodied aspects involved in liturgical performances. For this reason, it is necessarily at a loss regarding what to say about the central phenomena of Candomblé and Umbanda, namely mediumship through spirit possession, dancing, singing, and the preparation, consumption, and offering of ritual foods.

While these traditions are not text-based, have not developed systematic theologies, and do not offer philosophers the usual sources they usually rely on, cultural anthropol-

ogists and ethnographers have attended to them for nearly a century. When it comes to these traditions, it is thus not a matter of choice but of necessity to do *ethnographically informed* philosophy of religion—especially but not exclusively if one does not or cannot engage in participant observation for oneself. As Burley (2020) forcefully argues, relying on thicker modes of description and fostering interdisciplinary methods helps promote a global–critical philosophy of religion that can tackle phenomena routinely neglected by the mainstream philosophy of religion. Significantly, it can aid in pursuing a philosophy of religious practice that does not sanitize or homogenize and that embraces these practices in their messy cultural-historical diversity: "What's ragged should be left ragged" (Wittgenstein 1984, p. 45).

In terms of avenues for future research, we suggest enactivism will shed light on orality through the notion of participatory sense-making—the capacity of two or more agents to evaluate and cognize the environment and themselves in normative and collaborative ways. Cuffari et al. (2015) discuss languaging as a special kind of social agency that emerges from participatory sense-making. Languaging is a way to deal with the tensions that social beings experience, which involves the capacity to generate culturally shared horizons of normativity. Moreover, it is how social beings individuate themselves out of intersubjective processes that incorporate sensitivities and powers. We learn how to live in a language and to build and maintain linguistic practices. In Afro-Brazilian religions, orality is one of many participatory sense-making practices, but it is undoubtedly the most crucial form of languaging. Through spoken words, secrecy is transmitted, power is managed, and survival strategies are traced (Johnson 2002). We can thus understand orality as an adaptive practice.

Afro-Brazilian religions do not possess a central authority, so this demands a different understanding of how they organize their identity. Every *terreiro* has its idiosyncrasies, particular practices, and ways of conducting rituals, but there is also a tradition transmitted by learning with the elders. Thus, there is a degree of self-regulation and freedom where the practitioners must adapt to the reality at hand. Still, some mimicking of the past regulates the possibilities of the present. We can likewise understand non-institutionality with the notion of participatory sense-making, through which we can access how collaborative networks of practitioners enrich and share meanings, practices, and cognition. Enactivism also takes into account the embedded historical and social influences that make up the context in which a meaningful practice arises. This is a fundamental tool that helps us not to discard possibilities of practices still connected to Afro-Brazilian religions but in somewhat different fashions.

Many Afro-Brazilian priestesses (*mães de santo*, lit. "mothers of [the] saint[s]") say that theirs is a "religion of the hand" that consists less in believing than in doing. One has to go through the rituals themselves to learn to see anew. Enactivism proposes that cognition emerges from the dialectic between the cognitive agent and the environment. The agent actively explores the environment to constitute cognition and a set of abilities necessary for its development, and yet, at the same time, their actions also constitute the environment. It is through the constant interaction between world and subject that the world becomes something for the subject and the subject something for the world. Hence, if Afro-Brazilian religions are focused on doing, enactivism helps us understand how they bring forth a world with a different objecthood for their practitioners. Significantly, Afro-Brazilian religions reframe the ordinary world of the practitioner as it *heals* them (Montero 1985). Healing encompasses enacting various forms of relationships to food, sex, social circles, work, and so on. In this sense, enactivism facilitates the comprehension of changing relations and the constitution of processes.

Finally, embodied practices such as dancing, drumming, and singing in rituals are fundamental to elicit the invocation or "coming down" of deities, semi-divine ancestors, and other spirits. Here, enactivism can clarify the relationship between normativity and embodied practices. Dancing steps, musical rhythms, and chanting are all normative practices that regulate the rituals in embodied ways. The agent perceives what the environment

solicits and offers, while the environment affords the agent interaction possibilities so that the environment is valued and assessed in the very act of perception (Gibson 1979). Accordingly, sets of abilities are constituted as the practitioner becomes involved in Candomblé, Umbanda, or related traditions. Those abilities are the means through which the practitioner relates to what the *terreiro* affords to their perception. For instance, perceiving the spatial organization of the *terreiro* affords where and how one dances; learning to feel the music and the drumming affords the production of trance; and the different rituals of the *terreiro's* calendar afford the rhythm of one's life, including work, conjugal, and social life.

Schilbrack has undoubtedly made great strides in remedying narrowness, intellectualism, and insularity in the philosophy of religion. By pointing to the need for an embodied paradigm and suggesting tools such as conceptual metaphors and extended cognition, he has made us more aware of the importance of the way abstract thought draws on embodied knowledge and of the significance of material culture for religious cognition. We have stood on his shoulders in an attempt to look further, motivated by the impression that he came close to adopting the enactive approach and the conviction that it can mend extant issues in his methodology. These are the first (and admittedly rudimentary) steps in adopting enactivism as a framework for studying religious practices. There is still much work ahead, which is especially true regarding aspects Schilbrack overlooks, such as the religious significance of social cognition and the affective scaffolding (Colombetti and Krueger 2014) afforded by shared rituals and religious material culture. We hope that we have shown that enactivism is a viable framework to pursue a philosophy of religious practice that will encompass traditions that we may say are prototypical in their orality, non-institutionality, focus on rituals, and embodiment.

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Reviving Pagan Spirituality: A Manifesto

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Abstract: Numerous contemporary neopagan movements are attempts to revive or reconstruct ancient religious belief and practice. For instance, the worship of the ancient Norse gods has been restored to Iceland by the Asatru Fellowship. In this essay, I defend neopagan movements against the charge that ancient spirituality cannot be recovered in identifiable form. I note that today's dominant religions, such as Christianity, also face questions of the continuity of identity and argue that if such problems are tractable for current religions, then, in principle, they are resolvable for neopagans. I further argue that there are three broad themes of spirituality that are identifiable in ancient pagan religion, and that these are permanent possibilities recoverable by modern people. I also defend the relevance and importance of these themes.

Keywords: neopagan; pagan; Asatru; soteriology; Axial Age; mythology; Norse; classical Greece; John Hick; Paul Tillich; Mircea Eliade; sacred space

In the year 1000 C.E., Iceland became Christian. Now, after a hiatus of over a thousand years, a temple to the Old Gods is being built in Reykjavik. In 1973, Ásatrú, the worship of the Norse gods and goddesses, was officially recognized as a practiced religion in Iceland, meaning that the Ásatrú Fellowship *(Ásatrúarfelagið)* qualified to receive state support (Paxson 2006, p. xiii). Icelandic Ásatrú is hardly an isolated phenomenon; it is one of many religious movements that seek to revive or reconstruct ancient religions:

> These include Celtic traditions, among them the different kinds of Druids; the Hellenic traditions, which draw from ancient Greece; the Kemetics, who base their practice on the religion of Egypt; Baltic traditionalists, who have revived their native religions in their newly independent nations; and the religions of the Germanic peoples in Scandinavia, on the Continent, and in England. (Paxson 2006, p. xxii)

Each of these movements represents an effort to restore a kind of spirituality that is not merely pre-Christian but pre-Axial Age.[1] The distinctive features of Judaism (and, consequently, Christianity and Islam), Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism took shape during this "Axial" period. We may call "pre-axial" the "national" religions of ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and the Norse/Teutonic regions of northern Europe, as well as the animistic and shamanistic religions of preliterate peoples.

I could refer to these ancient religions as "archaic," but I will call them "pagan," though that was originally a term of abuse. I call them "pagan" because that is the term that is commonly used by those who today identify with those ancient religions, and who often refer to themselves and their practice as "pagan" or "neopagan."

However, is it even possible to revive an ancient religion? Can we engage in the authentic spirituality of people who lived millennia ago in very different material and intellectual conditions, or will we only be fooling ourselves? Put bluntly, will we be indulging only in a kind of religious cosplay, pretending to be something we can never really be, like those who dress up as Klingons or Jedi at fantasy conventions? I will consider Icelandic Ásatrú as a case study and respond to Michael Strmiska's argument that Icelandic paganism cannot be reborn (Strmiska 2000).

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To address Strmiska's argument we will have to ask just what it means to say that a religion is "reborn," "revived," or perhaps "reconstructed," and this will require an analysis of what qualifies as identity versus innovation with respect to religious belief and practice. My conclusion will be that certain forms of spirituality transcend the limitations of time and place and represent permanent possibilities of relating to the sacred. If ancient people were aware of such possibilities, there is in principle no reason why they cannot be rediscovered. I argue that it is apt to speak of the "revival" of ancient religions but not a literal rebirth. That is, that core ancient pagan beliefs, practices, and modes of spirituality can be identified and legitimately appropriated by today's neopagans.

1. Can Nordic Paganism Be Reborn?

In his article "Ásatrú in Iceland: The Rebirth of Nordic Paganism?" Michael Strmiska questions the possibility of the revival of Icelandic paganism:

> . . . I will attempt to show that however much this religion attempts to revive elements of the pre-modern Pagan past, it is in fact a quite postmodern movement. The self-understanding of the religion's beliefs and conception of the sacred are riddled with uncertainty and historical confusion. Within the movement there are many possibilities of understanding and experience and the believers lack the means to resolve these ambiguities in a clear and compelling manner—a dilemma entirely reflective of our current historical period rather than of the era to which the movement hearkens back (Strmiska 2000, p. 106).

Strmiska is not a hostile or ideological critic of Icelandic Ásatrú. On the contrary, he has firsthand experience of the ceremonies of the Ásatrú Fellowship, and frequently expresses admiration for their beauty. His chief objection arises from his observation of irresolvable conflict about the appropriate nature of worship and ceremony:

> One faction . . . is eager to have more . . . exuberant, participatory activities, and to move in a direction of more ecstatic and sensually exciting experience. Another camp . . . prefer more staid and dignified procedures. For them, a cheerful evening of shared food, drink, and heartfelt recitations of poetry in a consecrated setting is sufficient (p. 123).
>
> These divisions became deep enough to lead to the departure of some members from the Fellowship (p. 123).
>
> Strmiska comments:
>
> This dispute points to a fundamental problem which goes to the very heart of the Neopagan enterprise. By [High Priest] Jormundur's own admission, the surviving texts and other related materials concerning the original Norse Pagan religion are too fragmentary and incomplete to provide a definitive basis for all Ásatrú rituals and pursuits, and must be judiciously supplemented by ideas and practices improvised in the present or borrowed from other sources. This is where the dilemma arises if Ásatrú or any other Neopagan group, goes too far from its original core traditions, the sacred forms of the cherished Pagan past, it loses its claim to authenticity. But if it is so slavish and bookish in its fealty to ancient lore that it excludes new possibilities of encountering or conceptualizing the sacred, it closes itself off from spiritual vitality (p. 128).

Yet such conflicts relating to differences in belief and practice have afflicted all religions. Christianity is a prime example. Intractable disagreements over Christian doctrine and worship have embroiled the Christian Church from the earliest times, as evidenced by the letters of St. Paul. Much of the subsequent history of the Church is a story of schism, conflict, faction, and the proliferation of "heresies." Repeated attempts to impose unity by appeals to authority or force were never wholly successful. Efforts by Christians of later ages to identify an "original" *kerygma* or to reconstruct the historical Jesus have been "riddled with uncertainty and historical confusion." There are (and always have been)

many Christianities, "many possibilities of understanding and experience," and it may be fairly added that "the believers lack the means to resolve these ambiguities in a clear and compelling manner." As for styles of worship, current Christianity evinces an enormous diversity, from Pentecostal ecstasies to the most reserved high church liturgies. Mutatis mutandis, the same sort of thing may be said about other major religions. It appears, then, that a defender of Ásatrú would at least have *tu quoque* replies.

All religions also face the dilemma of identity versus innovation. What, after all, is continuity in religion? Continuity of religious identity is not the possession of an immutable essence. The various fundamentalist and ultra-orthodox movements in all religions are only deluding themselves in thinking that they alone possess such an essence pure and unsullied. *Any* reading of an ancient text, no matter how strongly one is committed to expounding "original intent," is inevitably an interpretation that imports assumptions and modes of thought reflective of one's own intellectual and cultural milieu. Further, religions constantly reinvent themselves, and necessarily so. Such continuity as they possess is a matter of family resemblances in the Wittgensteinian sense—connections maintained, broken, reestablished, modified, and projected across time and place. What would a first-century Christian think if transplanted into one of today's megachurches? Yet, if Christian identity is possible across the upheavals of 2000 years, considerable latitude must be granted to the members of the Ásatrú Fellowship in their claim of identity with ancient Norse religion.

To assess that claim we need a clarification of terminology. Strmiska uses the terms "rebirth," "revival," and "reconstruction" without clearly distinguishing their meanings. I think we should. Let us say that a religion is "reborn" if it is brought back in its exact original form, with all of the beliefs and practices of its ancient adherents. To say that a religion is "revived", on the other hand, should mean that core elements of ancient spirituality have been found and reclaimed in identifiable form, recognizing, for reasons given in the previous paragraph, that our appropriation may differ significantly from its ancient instantiations. A "reconstruction" of an ancient religion would be its transformation into a self-consciously modern religion, with elements "inspired by" ancient traditions and others improvised or borrowed from other traditions. Which term best describes what modern pagans such as the Ásatrú Fellowship are doing?

I think it is obvious that it is neither possible nor desirable to bring back an ancient religion in its precisely original form. For one thing, it is doubtful that ancient religions had a single, unitary form. Rather, there were probably considerable differences in practice from one time or locale to another.[2] Further, our evidence for ancient beliefs and practices is usually too skimpy to be sure that we have recovered in toto any version of an ancient religion. Finally, some aspects of ancient religions, such as human sacrifice, are obviously not desirable to recover.

I believe that Strmiska would agree that an ancient religion can be reconstructed, that is, turned into a self-consciously modern religion that is motivated and inspired by an appreciation of ancient traditions. Is it appropriate to say that Icelandic Ásatrú has "revived" and not merely "reconstructed" the ancient Norse religion? The answer depends upon our assessment of how successfully they have addressed the identity/innovation dilemma. Clearly, modern followers of Icelandic Ásatrú believe differently from the ancients. As Strmiska notes, hardly any of them now literally believes in the Norse deities. It is safe to say that hardly anyone now believes that Odin is riding about on his eight-legged horse or that Thor is pummeling giants with his mighty hammer. The attitude of modern-day followers is much like that of liberal Christians towards a literalistic reading of the Adam and Eve story. While such narratives are taken as having allegorical, symbolic, or metaphorical significance, they are not regarded as actual history. Of course, fundamentalists regard such liberals as "not real Christians," but such judgments can only be based on question-begging criteria.

A deeper qualm about the recovery of an ancient spirituality is this: Religions have a particularity of time and place; they are both the cause and effect of the culture of the

societies in which they are embedded. Cultural identity necessarily includes religion among its essential components; that is, a society, past or present, is just not identifiable without reference to its religion. Is this relationship between culture and religion symmetrical? If culture cannot be understood without reference to religion, is religion likewise inextricable from its ambient culture? Must we assume that religion is always and only an idiosyncratic and strictly culture-bound enterprise, expressive only of the mores of a delimited time and place?

Some of the greatest religious thinkers, including Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich, and John Hick have disputed such an astringent view and have argued that basic elements of religiosity are transcultural and transhistorical. Tillich, for instance, famously identified religion with the "depth" dimension and ultimate concern:

> [Religion] is at home everywhere, namely, in the depth of all functions of man's religious life. Religion is the dimension of depth in all of them. Religion is the aspect of depth in the totality of the human spirit. What does the metaphor *depth* mean? It means that the religious aspect points to that which is ultimate, infinite, unconditional in man's spiritual life. Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern. And ultimate concern is manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit (Tillich 1959, pp. 7–8).

Otto identified a primal sense of the sacred, the holy, or the numinous (his own word) as the core of all religions: "There is no religion in which it does not live as the real innermost core, and without it, no religion would be worthy of the name." (Otto 1958, p. 6). Hick's magisterial *An Interpretation of Religion* defends a pluralistic view that regards all religions as human responses to the transcendent—what he calls "The Real"—a reality that is encountered by all, but which cannot be fully encompassed by human concepts.

There therefore appears to be no basis for dismissing a priori the claim that core elements of ancient religious belief and practice can be identified and appropriated by latter-day adherents. Yet is it really possible to reclaim a lost religiosity? In general, we have a variety of means of accessing ancient religious belief and practice. For the Norse/Teutonic religion, for instance, there are rich textual sources such as the Norse myths as recorded in the *Eddas*, Icelandic sagas, and Germanic heroic poems. There is also the evidence supplied by artifacts and archaeology, such as runestones, carvings, and gravesites. Of course, we would like to know more, but through these sources we can discern a cosmology and vibrant mythology that tells us much about the values, worldview, and spirituality of the ancient peoples of northern Europe. Modern followers of Ásatrú must supplement these sources with imaginative reconstructions of ancient practice, but, as we say, many other religions must do the same.

I claim that, considering ancient pagan traditions in general, and not just their Norse/Teutonic versions, we may identify three very broad themes of pagan spirituality, themes that can be differently appropriated by worshippers today. I defend each of these claims in separate sections below.

(1) Religion is not about salvation or liberation from a putatively corrupt, fallen, or debased reality. Rather, religion is about maintaining order, balance, and harmony in our relationships with the gods, with natural forces, and with each other. Life is not seen as in need of wholesale redemption or transformation, nor are believers expected to achieve a radical new self-understanding. The world is not in any sense to be abjured or escaped. On the contrary, religion affirms and celebrates the value of earthly life. Religious practices provide stability through life's vicissitudes and continuity through major transitions. Participation in ceremonies and rituals reinforces a sense of solidarity and identity within communities.

(2) The divine is present, pervasive, and accessible, not sequestered in a distant realm. Access to the divine is not controlled by institutions or parceled out through authorized providers. The gods are there for everyone. Further, there is no sharp distinction between the sacred and the secular. Ritual and ceremony are important parts of the

religious life, but spiritual potencies permeate nature and the mundane so that there is no hard division between ordinary life and special religious occasions.

(3) Myth is powerful. Religious identity is not established by creed, a declaration of required beliefs, but by sharing in a rich body of myth. Myth is a heterogenous set of narratives originating in the distant past and told and retold across the generations. Telling and hearing these narratives unites people with their past, affirms their basic values, and reinforces their membership in a community. Myth does not contrast with truth, but is defined by its function in conveying meaning and a sense of belonging and identity.

In the remainder of this essay, I will elaborate and defend these claims as elements of a viable neopagan religiosity.

2. Salvation versus Affirmation

Should religion be about liberation from the world or about living harmoniously in the world? Hick identifies a soteriological emphasis as distinguishing those religions that arose during and after the Axial Age. Of course, those religions do instruct their followers about the conduct of their quotidian lives, sometimes in excruciatingly minute detail. Yet themes of salvation, redemption, transcendence, liberation, escape, release, and personal transformation do play an essential role in the doctrines of the world's currently dominant religions, while being notably absent from pre-axial traditions. Rather, the emphasis of pre-axial religion was on providing guidance and meaning for individuals and the preservation of balance, cohesion, and harmony in society. Hick comments:

> Pre-axial religion has both psychological and sociological dimensions. Psychologically it is an attempt to make stable sense of life, and particularly of the basic realities of subsistence and propagation and the final boundaries of birth and death, within a meaning-bestowing framework of myth. This serves the social functions of preserving the unity of the tribe or people within a common world-view and at the same time of validating the community's claims upon the loyalty of its members. The underlying concern is conservative, a defense against chaos, meaninglessness and the breakdown of social cohesion. Religious activity is concerned to keep fragile human life on an even keel; but it is not concerned, as with post-axial religion, with its radical transformation (Hick 2004, p. 23).

With their vague beliefs about the afterlife and this-worldly emphasis, pre-axial religions had no notion of eschatology or salvific transformation to a higher level of being:

> The religious system functioned to renew or prolong the existing balance of good and evil and to ward off the possible disasters which always threatened. But it did not have in view any transformation of the human situation. There was no sense of a higher reality in relation to which a limitlessly better future is possible (Hick 2004, p. 28).

For pre-axial religion there was no idea that natural human life was radically defective or that the human personality required extensive overhaul. On the contrary, religion affirmed and reinforced the goods potentially enjoyable in earthly life. Of course, life had its ups and downs, and pain, sickness, and death always threatened, but the idea that life or human nature is comprehensively and fundamentally flawed was unknown.

For post-axial religions, on the other hand, motifs of the radically unsatisfactory nature of human life are central themes:

> They [post-axial religions] all recognize, first, that ordinary human existence is defective, unsatisfactory, lacking. For the Jew, we suffer from an innate inclination to evil, the *yetzer ha-ra*, and we live in a world in which evil forces have long been harassing God's chosen people. For the Christian, this is a "fallen" existence ruined by the primordial sin of our first ancestors. Inheriting their fault, or its consequences, we live in alienation from God, from ourselves, and from one

> another. For the Muslim we human beings are weak and fallible and our life is commonly lived in *ghafala*, forgetfulness of God . . . For Hindus of all kinds, as also for the Jains and in modern times the Sikhs, the ordinary human condition is one of immersion in the relative illusoriness of *avidyā*, subject to the recurrent pains and sorrows of birth and death round which we are propelled by our karmic past. And for the Buddhist, the first Noble Truth is that all life involves *dukkha*, an "unsatisfactoriness" which includes pain, sorrow, and anxiety of every kind (Hick 2004, pp. 32–33).

Having identified the putative diseases, post-axial religions offer the putative cures:

> The great post-axial traditions . . . exhibit in their different ways a soteriological structure which identifies the misery, unreality, triviality, and perversity of ordinary human life, affirms an ultimate unity of reality and value in which or in relation to which a limitlessly better quality of existence is possible, and shows the way to realize that radically better possibility. This may be by self-committing faith in Christ as one's lord and savior; or by the total submission to God which is *islam;* or by faithful obedience to the Torah; or by transcendence of the ego, with its self-centered desires and cravings, to attain *mokşa* or Nirvana (Hick 2004, p. 36).

Tillich echoes these themes by talking about the "emergency character" of religion (Tillich 1959, p. 9), the emergency being "the tragic estrangement of man's spiritual life from its own ground and depth." (Tillich 1959, p. 8).

How would the intelligent pagan respond to such talk? I think he or she would ask, "What emergency? What estrangement? What limitlessly better existence?" Some years ago, in the Atlanta area, a local evangelical church printed up bumper stickers for display by its members reading "I found it!" A local Jewish congregation responded with stickers reading "We never lost it!" I think the pagan's reply to talk of alienation or estrangement would be similar. To the extent that modern humans experience angst, anomie, or alienation, the pagan would indeed consider such a condition as the result of a fall—the fall from paganism. Hick partially agrees:

> The profound changes initiated during the axial age brought loss as well as gain. In pre-literate tribes life's hardships are to be endured and its joys communally celebrated in ways that largely unknown to us individualized men and women. In the archaic religions of the ancient Near East and of India there were an affirmation of life and a natural acceptance of death which have been largely lost since the discovery of sin and salvation, *avidyā* and illumination. Indeed, the axial age could be seen as the fall of humanity from a state of religious innocence (Hick 2004, p. 28).

I think our hypothetical pagan would reply "'Discovery?' No. 'Invention.'" Such a pagan might agree that modern humans are indeed alienated from nature, from their neighbors, and from themselves. All three forms of alienation are evident in the self-induced solipsism of our addiction to electronic devices. I will not launch into a neo-Luddite jeremiad, but I will just note the radical impoverishment implied by internet "friends" as opposed to real friends, by absorption in cyber worlds rather than the real one, and by a "social" media that serves largely to increase isolation, polarization, and tribalism. Neopagans would offer a cure in the form of reconnection, not repudiation, release, or redemption.

3. The Nearness of the Gods

For the classical Greeks, there was no clear demarcation between the secular and the sacred or between their religious and civic life. The great annual religious festivals were sponsored by the state, and participation in them was both a religious and a civic duty. In fact, the concept of "religion" as a distinct category did not exist:

> The Greeks had no word for religion. Gods were thought to be everywhere, and religion was a part of everyday life: it was not divorced from mundane activities and therefore no word categorized it (Adkins and Adkins 1997, p. 284).

Greek religiosity thus retained features of preliterate religion as characterized by Hick:

> Whereas in the thinking of modern technological people "the spiritual" is generally relegated to a margin of private fantasy or "faith," it seems that for pre-literate people it has always been a part of the world. The forests, hills, streams, rocks, sky are full of unseen beings and forces which have to be taken into account. There are local gods and spirits . . . who are to be variously worshipped. There are magical and ritual practices of many sorts. In all this there is no division between ordinary secular life and special religious moments but rather a single seamless fabric in which what the modern world sees as the "natural" is everywhere suffused with "supernatural" presence and meaning (Hick 2004, p. 24).

As Hick notes, for ancient people the natural world was full of gods, so divinity was as close as the local river or forest. Artists have evoked the sense of awe and dread that ancient people felt living within and wholly dependent upon of a vast landscape and its resident gods. Sibelius' symphonic poem *Tapiola* depicts the dark, brooding northern forest and Tapio, the mighty forest god of pagan Finns. Some places had a particularly sacred character, that is, they were places where the presence of the divine was particularly felt. Sacred natural places have always been important for Native American religion, and monuments such as Stonehenge show the efforts to which ancient people would sometimes go to construct their own sacred spaces.[3]

Not only were the gods near, you could also variously interact with them. In the scene that opens the *Iliad*, Achilles, furious at the greed and arrogance of Agamemnon, starts to draw his great sword, but he suddenly feels a tug on his hair. He turns to see the blazing gray eyes of Athena who warns him that Hera orders him to control his anger. Reluctantly, he obeys and lets his sword slip back into the scabbard. He verbally lashes Agamemnon and then departs to his tent to nurse his injured pride and to begin his famous sulk. One notable thing about this passage is that Achilles, though surprised, does not appear particularly startled by the theophany, and is certainly not overawed. Interactions between gods and humans occur often in the *Iliad*.

Everyday Greeks, and not merely Homeric heroes, were on familiar terms with their gods:

> . . . they [the Greeks] did not think that the deities on whom they most depended were transcendent and far-removed. Rather, they were close at hand, as close as the hearth (Hestia), the *herma* or boundary stone in the street (Hermes), the shrine before the house, which was perhaps sacred to the Apollo of the Roads, the large jar in the storeroom sacred to Zeus Ktesios (guardian of the family possessions), and the courtyard watched over by Zeus Herkeios . . . All formal occasions required the invocation of a god or gods—marriage, for instance, or the reception of a newborn baby into the family circle, or at the death and burial of members of the family. Farming and other occupations could not be successfully pursued nor a journey on land or sea attempted without approval of the gods. The address to the gods on such occasions was simple and courteous but not servile, a natural, almost unreflective gesture of cooperation and community, not dominated by fear (Noss 1969, p. 55).

So, the Greek gods were near and familiar and present in the everyday world. For the ancient Greek, Zeus was a partner or patron, and the relationship was one of cooperation, not command and obedience. Zeus expected only courtesy and respect and was not jealous of partnerships with other gods. By contrast, the God of the Abrahamic religions is The Lord, who demands obedience, submission, and a commitment that is absolute and exclusive.

For ancient and modern followers of Norse paganism, the relationship with the gods is even closer:

> The old Viking concept of "friendship" with the gods characterizes the relationship many heathens have with their deities today. In *Eyrbyggjassaga*, Thorolf Mostur-Beard is described as "a close friend of Thor" . . . In *Gisli's Saga*, a man called Thorgrim was "a friend of Freyr" . . . Friendship provides a useful model for our relationship with the gods and goddesses and other wights. Like any other relationship, friendship with a god requires mutual respect and attention. We talk to our deities, share our food and drink with them, and quiet our minds so that we can hear what they have to say (Paxson 2006, pp. 98–99).

What would this idea of the nearness and accessibility of the gods mean to someone like the modern follower of Icelandic Ásatrú who no longer believes in the literal existence of the gods? I think it would mean this: That daily life is suffused with spiritual potencies, that is, that even in the midst of the most mundane activities, we can experience awe and wonder that is properly termed "religious" in its quality and intensity. What? When cutting grass, washing dishes, or stuck in traffic, we can have a frisson of the holy, a taste of the mysterium tremendum? We can. I have. Usually, we don't. The world is too much with us, as Wordsworth noted, and he envied the "pagan suckled in a creed outworn," who might

> Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
>
> Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

Nature, music, art, acts of especial charity or kindness, and the love of human or animal can usher us into the precincts of the sacred—if we let them. As Hick noted, the archaic worshipper recognized the interpenetration of the sacred and the secular, the mundane and the transcendent. Such paganism was not a creed outworn but is wiser than we.

4. The Power of Myth

What is the function of myth? Eliade says that myth brings the sacred into the world, and explains both how and why the world exists:

> The myth reveals absolute sacrality, because it relates the creative activity of the gods, unveils the sacredness of their work. In other words, myth describes the various and sometimes dramatic irruptions of the sacred into the world . . . It is the irruption of the sacred into the world, an irruption narrated in the myths, that *establishes* the world as a reality. Every myth shows how a reality came into existence, whether it be the total reality, the cosmos, or only a fragment—an island, a species of plant, a human institution. To tell how things came into existence is to explain them and at the same time indirectly to answer another question: *Why* did they come into existence? The why is always implied in the how—for the simple reason that to tell *how* a thing was born is to reveal an irruption of the sacred into the world, and the sacred is the cause of all real existence (Eliade 1959, p. 97; emphasis in original).

In myth, the how and the why are united; for us today they are not. Myth explains in terms of the actions of personal agents, whereas such accounts were long ago barred from natural science. Explanations in the natural sciences are in terms of impersonal entities, processes, forces, and laws—and rightly so. Attempts to inject personal explanations into modern science result in absurdities such as "scientific creationism" and "intelligent design theory." On the other hand, if we take myth as myth, and do not turn it into a pseudoscience, how can we view myth as anything but quaint stories made irrelevant by science?

Maybe we just interpret away the mythical element. In the twentieth century, theologian Rudolf Bultmann argued that the mythical context of religion, if taken as an outdated cosmology, becomes a stumbling-block for modern persons, preventing them from confronting the true, radical message of the gospels. He therefore recommended that

Christian belief be "demythologized (Bultmann 1958)." For Bultmann, "demythologizing" the New Testament message is not a cut-and-paste job—like Thomas Jefferson's version of the Gospels with the miraculous bits excised—but a radical reinterpretation in the light of his identification of a "true" meaning. Drawing upon Heideggerian philosophy, Bultmann interpreted the gospel message as the confrontation of human beings with the choice between an authentic and inauthentic existence.

By contrast, the neopagan recommendation is to "re-mythologize." That is, that we should immerse ourselves in the great myths, determined to let them speak to us rather than to press them into our philosophical molds. Of course, we are not our ancient ancestors. As noted earlier, probably few people today think that Thor is slaying giants and that Odin is galloping on his eight-legged steed. However, the power of a story is not a function of its perceived factuality, but of the deep emotional resonance it has for us. Myth can be amusing, and one of the chief values of myth is that the tales are often so much fun. On the other hand, myth can be disturbing, even terrifying. Like music, myth can provoke many different feelings. The cognitive value of myths, the lessons we can learn from them, is not a product of philosophical analysis, but a sharpening, clarifying, or deepening of our intuitions and the enlivening of our imagination.

Consider the closing lines of James Weldon Johnson's magnificent version of the Biblical creation myth:

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

Then into it He blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul.
Amen. Amen.

Myth, like all great literature, empowers us to transform our perceptions, to discover significance, and to *feel* truth and not merely to acknowledge it.

Is the transformative power of Johnson's poetry diminished by knowing astrophysics and evolutionary theory? A number of poets, including some of the greatest (e.g., Walt Whitman's "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"), have held that nature is drained of wonder when we understand it scientifically. In Keats' words, a mere touch of "cold philosophy" can "clip an angel's wings."

This is a deep mistake. The basis for this error seems to be that the poets, like many philosophers, have seen emotion and intellect as distinct and opposed. The poets judged feeling to be better than intellect; the philosophers made the opposite judgment. In fact, of course, human nature is not so simplistically bifurcated, and feeling and intellect need not be in opposition. It is no accident that the greatest scientists were passionate thinkers who yearned for understanding as the mystic yearns for God.

Myth is not opposed to science unless we lapse into the follies of the fundamentalists and try to turn myth into science. It is precisely by taking myth as myth that we yield to its transformative power. The various neopagan movements each celebrates and expounds its own ancient mythos. To adopt such a tradition and make it your own is to put yourself into

a community that extends deep into prehistory, but which offers you a sense of wonder that is augmented, not diminished, by scientific understanding.

5. Conclusions

It appears, then, that there are identifiable modes of spirituality that were common among ancient pagans, and which can be recovered by today's neopagans. Like the ancients, we can regard religion not as a means of salvation or release from a dismal state, but as an affirmation of life's riches and values and a source of comfort and stability through life's inevitable travails and tragedies. Further, we can experience the world as the interweaving of the sacred and the secular, the transcendent and the mundane. We also can rediscover the power of myth: It connects us to our past, centers us in the present, and opens unexpected possibilities of feeling and imagination.

Of course, I have here only vaguely characterized these modes of spirituality; each branch of neopagans will express them in the idiom of their own traditions. There is no reason why core elements of ancient spirituality cannot be identified, recovered, adapted, and made a crucial part of our spiritual experience today, as the Icelandic Ásatrú Fellowship and many other neopagan groups have done. Naysayers cannot burden neopagans with requirements stricter than any that are met by other post-axial religions. If, despite the upheavals of twenty centuries, current worshippers can legitimately call themselves Christian, then there seems to be no greater difficulty in identifying as a pagan. Further the enormous changes in our material and intellectual environment over thousands of years do not preclude the existence of permanent possibilities of spirituality, and their potential to enrich current lives as much as ancient ones.

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Notes

[1] The Axial Age, dated very roughly from 800 to 200 BCE, is the period religious scholars have identified as the era in which the archaic religions were replaced by what John Hick calls "the religions of salvation or liberation (Hick 2004, p. 29)." This was the period of Confucius and Lao Tzu in China, of The Buddha and Mahavira in India, of Zoroaster in Persia, and of the great Hebrew prophets. The term "Axial Age" derives from Karl Jaspers' identification of the *Achsenzeit*, the occurrence, geographically widespread but concentrated in time, when major religious and philosophical figures arose in diverse cultures.

[2] Greek religion, for instance, was unified by a common body of myth, by sites universally recognized as of religious significance, such as Delphi, and by the celebration of panhellenic festivals such as the Olympic Games. However different *poleis* celebrated different festivals, such as the *Karneia* and *Hyacinthia* in Sparta and the *Heraea* in Argos (see Adkins and Adkins 1997, pp. 356–57). In fact, as the *Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization* notes:

> Turning to the analysis of Greek religion as it appears in the post-Geometric period, we find in common with most pre-modern societies a strong link between religion and society to the extent that the sacred/secular dichotomy as we know it has little meaning for the Greek world. Greek religion is community based, and to the extent that the *polis* forms the most conspicuous of communities, it is therefore *polis*-based. (Hornblower and Spawforth 1998, p. 590)

There were, therefore, significant local variations in ritual and practice.
As for Norse religion, as David M. Wilson notes:

> This was not a centrally organized religion; although there were cult places, temples and altars (some of which were more important than others), there was no strict religious discipline. The priests were not set apart . . . There was no recognized doctrine, no uniform method of worship; a man chose his own god and went his own way calling on different gods in different circumstances. (Wilson 1989, p. 42)

[3] Mircea Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane*, is, of course, the classic account of ancient religiosity with many examples of the ritualistic creation of sacred time and space.

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