

Article

# The Implicit as a Resource for Engaging Normativity in Religious Studies

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Academic Editor: Bharat Ranganathan

Received: 31 August 2017; Accepted: 6 November 2017; Published: 19 November 2017

**Abstract:** This piece recommends the *implicit* as a resource for examining normativity within the study of religion. Attention to the implicit serves at least two purposes toward this end. First, it gives the scholar of religion a clearer sense of the norms of the communities she seeks to understand, norms that, depending partly on one's methodological commitments, may be evaluated as well as described. Second, it deepens the scholar's reflections on the implicit norms that guide her own work. These claims—which extend the work of Tyler Roberts, Kevin Schilbrack, and Thomas A. Lewis—are embedded within specific understandings of language and mind as drawn from Robert Brandom and Peter Ochs. Brandom and Ochs help speak to the questions of whether the academic study of a religious tradition can or should evaluate that tradition, answering “yes” and “it depends”, respectively. This presents scholars of religion with both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge is that religionists no longer have recourse to a strict distinction between fact and value. The opportunity is that, by linking implicit facts and values to explicit analysis and evaluation, scholarly investigations can be expanded in both descriptive and prescriptive contexts.

**Keywords:** religious studies; method; logic; Robert Brandom; Peter Ochs; Scriptural Reasoning; normativity

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## 1. Introduction

“Both read the Bible day & night/But thou readst black where I read white.” These words comprise the final lines of William Blake's “The Everlasting Gospel.” Scholars of religion wishing to understand Blake's words might read them in any number of ways. For example, a biblical scholar might find a poetic analogy for *Sitz im Leben*, imagining Blake's words as extolling the virtues of identifying the social setting of a text. A historian of religion might place the poem alongside Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, asking what insights into religion in romanticism these texts might reveal. An ethicist might find grounds to criticize Blake's claim in that text that the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. For the present paper, these lines from Blake are highlighted for a different reason: raising the *implicit* as a resource for examining normativity within the study of religion.

For present purposes, *implicit* is defined as “suggesting or suggested by something present to conscious awareness”, and *explicit* as “present to conscious awareness”. *Normativity*, for its part, is defined as “the state of being normative”, with “normative” understood as “related to an evaluative standard”. As with the “white” that Blake reads, the implicit is omnipresent, both distinct and inseparable from the explicit text. That is, discussing something as implicit automatically makes it explicit, and explicit texts depend in their intelligibility upon implicit background assumptions and possible responses. Attention to the implicit serves at least two purposes with respect to normativity and religious studies. First, it gives the scholar of religion a clearer sense of the norms of the communities she seeks to understand, norms that, depending partly on one's methodological commitments, may be evaluated as well as described. Second, it deepens the scholar's reflections on the implicit norms that guide her own work within the academy.

These claims are embedded within specific understandings of language and mind as drawn from the work of Robert Brandom and Peter Ochs. Since looking at the latent assumptions or consequences of cultural phenomena is already a widespread practice within the study of religion—employed by Marxist or psychoanalytic approaches, among others—it is important to clarify what makes the Brandom-Ochs pairing unique. There are at least three factors. First, as part of their affinity with pragmatic philosophy, Brandom and Ochs share a common understanding of discursive thought as inherently linked to purpose, or to put it in slightly different terms, linguistic meaning as inherently linked to use. Such emphases regarding purpose and use render these thinkers' ideas well suited to examining normativity, not simply because normativity is understood to be inescapable, but because the presumption of normativity allows Brandom and Ochs to make fine-grained distinctions regarding epistemic access to normativity and the implicit.

Second, following from the previous point, Brandom and Ochs collectively offer some key distinctions that are potentially helpful to scholars of religion. First, they place implicit alongside explicit reasoning in such a way that the former both contextualizes the latter and expands possibilities for further inquiry. Second, they allow one to distinguish *within* the implicit a heuristic of two types: (1) background assumptions brought by an author to render the explicit text intelligible, *antecedent* to the explicit text; (2) intended patterns of reception through actions or changed habits of reasoning on the part of the hearers/readers, *subsequent* to the explicit text. The former govern the selection of how to present an explicit text, and the latter govern the interpretation of that explicit text, including how one might act in response.

Third, and most important, the Brandom-Ochs pairing speaks to the question of whether the academic study of a religious tradition can or should evaluate that tradition. On whether they can, the answer is “yes”. On whether they should, the answer is “it depends”. The norms that govern religious practices do differ from those of academic discourses, and there may well be cases in which it is neither necessary nor appropriate for the scholar to engage in explicit normative evaluation. Broad differences between these two cultures—the academy, religion—certainly exist, and that is fine. Academic research per se entails commitment to falsifiability, for instance, that is not required within religious communities. But more effective than determining large general categorical differences between religion and the academy, I think, is attention to particular inquiries within particular contexts. The Brandom-Ochs pairing suggests that attention to local context is the most effective way to evaluate the norms of the culture one is studying. By providing the scholar with more information about those local norms, the Brandom-Ochs method of making implicit normativity explicit is a helpful part of this task. This method also serves similar ends with respect to the scholar's *own* norms of inquiry, helping to determine whether a given mode of inquiry is appropriate to that particular religious community in that context.

There are two readerships that this paper serves. The first includes those who are interested in questions of normativity and method in religious studies. Figures who fit this description include Donald Wiebe and Russell T. McCutcheon, who argue for a relatively sharp divide between the study of religion and religion itself. Also included are Thomas A. Lewis, Kevin Schilbrack, and Tyler Roberts, each of whom finds some space for normativity within their work. These latter thinkers are thus open to the possibility of a closer proximity between religious studies and religion than are Wiebe or McCutcheon. In a broad sense, this paper can be seen as an extension of the Lewis-Schilbrack-Roberts position within this conversation. This is because the paper uncovers a specific way to demonstrate the truth of the claim that normativity is pervasive across both religious and academic cultures.

This demonstration proceeds by engaging two problematic disagreements, applying the Brandom-Ochs approach to making implicit reasoning explicit. The first disagreement concerns the status of homosexuality in the United Methodist Church. The key participants here are the Confessing Movement Conference, which opposes gay and lesbian inclusion in the church, and the Reconciling Ministries Network, which favors it. The second disagreement concerns the status of normativity in

the study of religion. The key participants here are Donald Wiebe, who denies the normativity of religious studies, and Russell T. McCutcheon, who argues that religious studies is normative.

These examples are selected for two reasons. First, problematic debates are particularly useful in illustrating the benefits of making implicit reasoning explicit, as these debates tend to feature participants whose arguments are shaped by divergent, unrecognized norms. Second, with respect to these particular disagreements, one—on Wiebe and McCutcheon—reflects the norms of the academy, whereas the other—on the status of homosexuality in the United Methodist Church—reflects the norms of a religious community. The application of a common logic to these two cultures is itself a statement on the lack of a sharp methodological divide between religion and the academy.

The second readership for this paper is broader than the first. It includes religious studies scholars across various subdisciplines who might be interested in this particular demonstration of how normativity might be engaged within their work. This readership is especially broad because the Brandom-Ochs approach is relevant regardless of whether a scholar considers her work primarily descriptive or prescriptive. For descriptivists, making the implicit norms of a given religious community explicit is simply more information available for scholarly description.<sup>1</sup> This does not require evaluation, as it is possible to understand the norms of a community without subscribing to those norms themselves. For prescriptivists, the option to engage in normative evaluation is available when appropriate.<sup>2</sup>

This last point raises the issue of the norms among and between academic disciplines in the study of religion. The Brandom-Ochs pairing entails that normativity per se is pervasive. This pairing also recognizes that different disciplines have different norms even as they share a common identity within the academy.<sup>3</sup> This is to say that discipline-specific norms seek distinct types of understanding.<sup>4</sup> When evaluating religion seems appropriate, it is possible to do so.<sup>5</sup> But it is not always called for. For example, an anthropologist trying to grasp the purpose of a pilgrimage to a temple or a scholar on the Upanishads seeking the ideal translation from the Sanskrit does not also have to state her norms. The norms can stay implicit. Because the Brandom-Ochs pairing provides a logic of making implicit reasoning explicit in a way that is indifferent to any *particular* norm (even as it presupposes normativity per se), the option of making implicit normativity explicit is always available. It is the task of this paper to show how this is the case.

The essay proceeds in the following steps. In section two, it examines types of objections to normativity in religious studies. In section three, it introduces a set of authors—Roberts, Schilbrack, and Lewis—whose work responds to these objections. In section four, it introduces Ochs and Brandom and identifies these thinkers as part of a common tradition. In section five, it examines in turn each of these two thinkers' contributions to the making implicit reasoning explicit. And in section six, it applies Ochs and Brandom with respect to two examples, one drawn from the academy, on Wiebe

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Bucar's article, "Bodies at the Margins: The Case of Transsexuality in Catholic and Shia Ethics" (Bucar 2010) is arguably an example of implicit norms within religious communities treated in a descriptive rather than prescriptive way. For further examples, see the focus issue, edited by Maria Heim and Anne Monius in the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, on the anthropology of moral worlds (Heim and Monius 2014).

<sup>2</sup> It is even possible not merely to evaluate, but actually to help the religious community one is engaging by suggesting relevant responses to bad norms with attention to alternative normative resources within the same community. Ochs's idea of reparative reasoning (about which more below) embodies this, and it is the embodiment of the caretaker position McCutcheon attacks.

<sup>3</sup> That discipline-specific norms seek distinct types of understanding is the reason this paper begins by invoking biblical studies, history, and ethics as different ways of investigating William Blake's "The Everlasting Gospel".

<sup>4</sup> To provide just one example, consider historiography, whose objects of investigation exist within the following parameters: (1) the human past; (2) unique, non-replicable events; (3) topics amenable to the logic of explanation, in that the scholar can establish a logical fit between an agent's beliefs and motives and his or her actions.

<sup>5</sup> I am hesitant to preemptively determine what these cases would be, though some disciplines, like ethics, are certainly more predisposed toward evaluation than others, like philology. This is a point that is made by Thomas A. Lewis, who argues that normativity is most overt in certain subdisciplines, such as ethics, philosophy, and theology, but also that it is to be found in all subdisciplines.

and McCutcheon, the other from a religious context, on the debate over homosexuality and the United Methodist Church.

## 2. Objections to Normativity

The tendency to divide religious studies into descriptive and prescriptive approaches often expresses itself in skepticism about normativity within religious studies. This skepticism exists in at least two forms. One form of skepticism grounds itself in a view of scientific objectivity as the paradigm of the academic study of religion. For example, according to Donald Wiebe, the legitimacy of religious studies as an academic discipline depends on a rigid separation between scientific and normative commitments. Wiebe sharply distinguishes between the scientific approach he extolls, on one hand, and preferential ties to some religious or political perspective, on the other. As Wiebe puts it, “Religious and political goals . . . are replacing the scientific agenda of seeking disinterested knowledge about religion and religions” (Wiebe 2005, p. 8), the implication being that scientific goals are descriptive whereas political-religious goals are normative. As Kevin Schilbrack notes, Wiebe’s position entails a further distinction “between teaching religion and teaching about religion” (Schilbrack 2014, p. 191), a distinction upon which, as Wiebe sees it, the academic study of religion was founded.

A second form of skepticism about normativity in religious studies objects to the orientation of normativity toward religion rather than the presence of normativity itself. This position holds that the study of religion *is* normative, but also that its norms require that scholars maintain a strict critical distance from their objects of study. A leading proponent of this view, Russell T. McCutcheon, claims that scholars of religion should be “critics” rather than “caretakers” of religion, which precludes scholars from evaluating religious practices or claims on their own terms (McCutcheon 2001). McCutcheon holds that religious studies scholars do not “study religion, the gods, or ultimate concerns”, but rather “use a folk rubric, ‘religion’, as a theoretically grounded, taxonomic marker to isolate or demarcate a portion of the complex, observable behavior of biologically, socially, and historically situated human beings” (McCutcheon 2001, p. 11). For McCutcheon, evaluation of religious practices or beliefs by way of norms internal to religion jeopardizes the critical distance he considers appropriate for scholarship. As McCutcheon puts it, “After all, the premise that makes the human sciences possible in the first place is that human behaviors always originate from within, and derive their culturally embedded meanings from being constrained by historical (i.e., social, political, economic, biological, etc.) entanglements” (McCutcheon 2001, pp. 7–8). McCutcheon’s position entails that the distance between the norms of the academy and those of religion requires excluding the latter from the academic study of religion.

## 3. Responding to Skepticism about Normativity

There are a number of worthwhile commentaries on how to respond to skepticism about normativity within religious studies. Recent examples include Tyler Roberts’s *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism*, Kevin Schilbrack’s *Philosophy and the Study of Religion: A Manifesto*, and Thomas A. Lewis’s *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice Versa*. These works variously suggest that because philosophy of religion engages questions of truth alongside those of value or normativity within religious belief or practice, the discipline is well placed to reflect on the implications of distinguishing description from prescription too rigidly. Yet these authors also argue that in spite of its potential relevance, philosophy of religion is failing to live up to its promise, whether through a lack of clarity about its scope, methods, and aims, an excessive parochialism, or a preferential focus on religious belief at the expense of religious practice.

Roberts argues not only that normativity within religious studies is inescapable, but also that normative religious claims are to be engaged and even celebrated. Rather than insulating religious studies *from* religion, as Wiebe or McCutcheon might have it, Roberts holds that “we might learn something about critical thinking by breaking back through *to* religion” (Roberts 2013, p. 168). Failing to recognize the resources *within* religion to help religious studies scholars become aware

of the academy's own limitations or modes of response to violence is an ethical as well as an academic failure. For Roberts, "it would be a failure to attend to practices and ideas that may offer alternatives to dominating and destructive ideologies, whether religious or not, and it would be a failure to know religion in all its complexity and power" (Roberts 2013, p. 6). In arguing his case, Roberts calls upon scholars to problematize the distinction between "religious" and "secular" in a manner that moves past the necessity of having to be "for" or "against" either the religious or the secular (Roberts 2013, p. 237). Escaping this binary opens new forms of encounter between the scholar of religion and her object of study.

Lewis, for his part, argues that normativity within religious studies is unavoidable, and so the relevant question is whether a given set of arguments can be publicly justified and examined. In offering resources for the examination of arguments, philosophy of religion should "conceive of this process broadly enough to encompass a wide range of justificatory strategies" (Lewis 2015, p. 55). In traversing the range Lewis is calling for, a helpful measure with respect to the present paper is the degree to which reflection on normativity is explicit as opposed to implicit. As Lewis notes, some disciplines, like ethics or philosophy or religion, are "*more likely* to be reflecting explicitly on the justification for their normative claims", whereas such disciplines as history or social sciences "are more likely to focus their energy elsewhere" (Lewis 2015, p. 53). Lewis thus suggests that the difference among the various disciplines that study religion is not so much the presence of normativity per se, but rather the extent to which the normativity is explicit. On this telling, Lewis addresses the debate in terms that speak to the concerns of the skeptics of normativity while suggesting a constructive path for both expanding and clarifying the discipline.

As for Schilbrack, he examines the arguments of the skeptics of normativity while attempting to construct an expansive, irenic role for philosophy of religion. He frames his vision in terms of three distinct-but-compatible goals: "*describing* religious phenomena, which must be done in terms of the agents' understandings; *explaining* those phenomena in terms of their causes; and *evaluating* the reasons that are or can be given for them" (Schilbrack 2014, pp. 179–80). On Schilbrack's account of these three tasks, it is evaluation that typically comes under the harshest critiques. Yet if "evaluative approaches are not part of the academic study of religions, the result will not be that evaluations are not included in the field, but rather that the evaluations already present in religious phenomena will be presented uncritically" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 187). Schilbrack's understanding of evaluation resembles Lewis's points about normativity: it is something that is present whether or not it is explicit, and reflecting on its presence in a self-conscious way is something that can help scholars improve their practices. An upshot of Schilbrack's commentary is that some effort to defend and clarify the task of evaluation within religious studies is therefore needed.

Certain claims follow from these commentaries. First, normativity is pervasive. Second, normativity has the capacity to be self-consciously acknowledged. As Lewis puts it, "normativity should not be avoided but rather self-consciously acknowledged and defended", entailing a "willingness to submit all claims to scrutiny and questioning" (Lewis 2015, p. 8). Schilbrack puts the matter in similar terms in holding that "the criterion for what belongs in the academy is not whether one's inquiries are value-laden—they always will be—but whether those values are open to challenge and critique" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 192). What I take Schilbrack to mean here is that one cannot deny that one has norms, nor can one exclude from the academic study of religion the philosopher who wants to examine them. Third, assumptions—which I take to belong to the category of the implicit—constitute a legitimate, perhaps even vital, area of inquiry for philosophy of religion. Such assumptions include those that enter into even questions of description within religious studies, including "what is or is not real, what can or cannot be known, and what activities are or are not worth pursuing" (Schilbrack 2014, p. 201). In sum, the commentaries of Roberts, Lewis, and Schilbrack suggest the following. First, normativity should be accepted. Second, normative arguments can be publicly debated. And third, assumptions are a vital topic of scholarly attention. Taken together, these claims trace a line that points toward a specific contribution from philosophy of religion in responding

to problematic attempts to divide description and prescription too deeply within religious studies methodologies. It is a task of this essay to map out one such contribution from Brandom and Ochs.

#### 4. Turning toward the Implicit: Brandom and Ochs

Unlike Roberts, Lewis, and Schilbrack, this essay draws specifically from Robert Brandom and Peter Ochs. Brandom provides the intellectual resources needed for distinguishing implicit and explicit while maintaining analytical precision. Ochs self-consciously employs the implicit/explicit distinction in a religious context. The fact that Ochs considers his work as self-consciously theological does not detract from its legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, to recognize within a self-consciously theological project patterns of logic that are similar to the work of Brandom is to affirm the possibility of trespassing the divide between religion and the academy.<sup>7</sup>

In explaining how Ochs and Brandom speak to the debate over normativity within religious studies, it is necessary to set up the following taxonomy. As noted in the introduction, *implicit* is defined as “suggesting or suggested by something present to conscious awareness”, and *explicit* as “present to conscious awareness”. Description is likewise understood as an account of what something *is* and prescription as what something *should be/do*. There is also a clear difference between an *account*, as in prescriptive versus descriptive accounts, and a *form of reasoning*, as in implicit versus explicit

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<sup>6</sup> There is an irony here. Reading Brandom and Ochs together suggests that normativity is pervasive within discursive thought. Yet, through its emphasis on logic, this approach also involves analytical tools that are not normative—though they are vague unless specified in context. By being falsifiable and “neutral”, logic actually speaks to some of the critical, non-normative criteria in studying religion Donald Wiebe is calling for. The Brandom-Ochs approach also accords to a degree with McCutcheon. For instance, if one wishes to argue that the norms of the academy entail that scholars should be critics and not caretakers, there is no reason why this should contradict the claims about implicit normativity shown here. There is, however, *also* no reason to presume that the objects of one’s inquiries—practitioners of religion—are not capable of the same critical reflection.

<sup>7</sup> In spite of their different interests and contexts, Brandom and Ochs share a common association with the pragmatic philosophical tradition. To be clear, invoking pragmatism is not necessary to demonstrate the relevance of implicit reasoning with respect to normativity in religious studies. Yet it is nonetheless helpful to do so. There are two reasons for this. First, invoking pragmatism makes the Brandom-Ochs relationship more coherent in a way that illustrates the possibility and the rewards of trespassing the boundary between religion and the academy. This is in keeping with the following suggestion from Roberts:

We should consider . . . whether as scholars of religion we might learn something valuable by treating certain religious discourses not only as *objects of study* but as potential methodological *resources for* the study of religion and for cultural criticism. (Roberts 2013, p. 20).

Second, examining the pragmatic tradition is an important part of defusing the objection, explored below, that Wittgenstein and Peirce—thinkers on whom Brandom and Ochs respectively draw—are too different for their intellectual posterity to be read alongside one another.

It is true that there are many different versions of pragmatism, and that Ochs and Brandom are undoubtedly divergent figures within that tradition. But both thinkers are self-conscious about pragmatism in their own work and as a tradition. For one, the work of both scholars entails certain commitments associated with pragmatism, including the responsibility of philosophy to social and communal context, as well as what Robert B. Talisse and Scott F. Aikin have called “the three general rubrics of . . . clarity, coordination, and correctness” (Talisse and Aikin 2011, p. 5). Both scholars also invoke a common basic definition for pragmatism. Note the following from Ochs:

My thesis is that pragmatic definition is not a discrete act of judgment or classification, but a *performance of correcting other, inadequate definitions of imprecise things*. Pragmatic reasoning is thus a different sort of reasoning than the kind employed in defining things precisely. It is a corrective activity. (Ochs 1998, pp. 4–5).

And note the following from Brandom:

The more specific strategy by which the classical American pragmatists sought to naturalize the concept of *experience* . . . is what I will call *fundamental pragmatism*. This is the idea that one should understand knowing *that* as a kind of knowing *how* . . . That is, believing *that* things are thus-and-so is to be understood in terms of the practical abilities to *do* something. (Brandom 2011, p. 9).

Finally, both scholars are interested in pragmatism as a tradition, which suggests that my own invocation of pragmatism is at least partially consistent with the scholarly interests of the authors themselves. Brandom is the author of *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, and Ochs the author of *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture*, which understands the tradition in relation to its founding figure.

forms of reasoning. Accounts are explicit. Scholars of religion are in the business of generating accounts, and since these accounts are presented as papers, articles, or books, they are clearly explicit. For any explicit account generated, there are multiple implicit forms of reasoning, and these traverse the descriptive/prescriptive divide. That is, whether an account—inherently explicit—is prescriptive or descriptive, there are implicit forms of reasoning. These implicit forms of reasoning are both factual—in that it is factual that the forms of reasoning are implied—and value-laden, and they are accessible to analysis, at which point they have become explicit. The explicit and implicit are not binary opposites so much as they tend toward complementarity.

In exploring these distinctions with respect to Brandom and Ochs, there are two necessary caveats. First, this paper does not set out primarily to disprove or debunk those who wish to impose boundaries between descriptive and prescriptive accounts. Rather, its prime target is the over-extension of the prescriptive/descriptive distinction as a dualism or as a metaphysical dichotomy. On this point, a helpful definition can be found in Brandom, who holds that “a distinction becomes a dualism when its components are distinguished in terms that make their characteristic relations to one another ultimately unintelligible” (Brandom 1994, p. 615). Hilary Putnam has made a similar claim, arguing that “one difference between an ordinary distinction and a metaphysical dichotomy” is that “ordinary distinctions have ranges of application, and we are not surprised if they do not always apply” (Putnam 2002, p. 11). Putnam argues that the separation of facts and values “is, at bottom, not a *distinction* but a *thesis*” (Putnam 2002, p. 19).

The second caveat is that Ochs and Brandom do diverge on an important point: their intellectual inheritance regarding theories of meaning and reference. Brandom draws more from Ludwig Wittgenstein whereas Ochs draws more from C.S. Peirce. Although Wittgenstein and Peirce have left divergent legacies within contemporary philosophy, these thinkers do share a common affinity for rejecting the distinction between prescription and description.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, from Wittgenstein’s critique of descriptivism in the *Philosophical Investigations*, which sought to shift philosophical attention to concrete contexts of language use, to Peirce’s categorical equation of intelligibility with purpose, both thinkers offer strong arguments as to why a sharp dualism between description and prescription is simply untenable. When taken alongside Ochs’s and Brandom’s common appreciation for implicit/explicit as a methodologically useful distinction, the basic commonality between Peirce and Wittgenstein with respect to prescription/description warrants their enlistment toward a common purpose.

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<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein and Peirce has each left an enormous legacy regarding the relationship between meaning and reference, with Peirce credited as an independent cofounder of modern semiotics (along with Ferdinand de Saussure) and Wittgenstein possessing a vast legacy in the fields of logic, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language, among other disciplines. Yet Wittgenstein and Peirce differ in that Peirce sought to build a philosophical architectonic to encompass all forms of inquiry within a common framework, dismissing efforts to delineate in advance what can and cannot be investigated, whereas Wittgenstein offered a theory of reference that explored “family resemblances”, in which members of a given set share in certain overlapping traits rather than any single common quality that can be easily classified within a larger taxonomy. Wittgenstein and Peirce, in other words, are not philosophical allies.

Yet with respect to the present effort to read Ochs and Brandom together on implicit reasoning, they do not have to be allies. The simple reason for this is that, where it counts most, Brandom reads Wittgenstein in a way that is in harmony with the pragmatic tradition. For example, in his book *Between Saying and Doing* (Brandom 2008), Brandom argues that pragmatism remains most relevant if we understand pragmatics as providing special resources for extending and expanding the semantic analysis from concern with relations among meanings to encompass relations between meaning and use. Brandom argues for a methodological pluralism and integrative approach to discourse that is in fact more consistent with Ochs (and Peirce) than it is with Wittgenstein. As he puts it: “Rejecting scientism of the methodological monistic sort does not entail giving up the possibility of systematic philosophical theorizing about discursive practice” (Brandom 2008, p. 210). Instead of abandoning wholesale any sense in which language can refer beyond itself to an objective world, Brandom criticizes a more specific target: monistic exclusivism. As he puts it, “what is objectionable about the methodologically monistic form of scientism is its exclusivity” (Brandom 2008, p. 211). Because of these moves, Brandom and Ochs thus appear to be closer to each other on meaning and reference than their forebears in Peirce and Wittgenstein.

## 5. Robert Brandom's Analytic Pragmatism

To take each thinker in turn, Robert Brandom's work is instructive for offering a constructive vision for how the implicit/explicit distinction can circumvent the problems of too rigidly separating prescription from description. In *Making It Explicit*, Brandom traces the social conditions of discursive practices in a way that unites semantics and pragmatics. Brandom's dual interests in exploring normativity and the process by which implicit reasoning can be made explicit are of particular interest. As Brandom puts it in the book's preface:

The practices that confer propositional and other sorts of conceptual content implicitly contain norms concerning how it is *correct* to use expressions, under which circumstances it is *appropriate* to perform various speech acts, and what the *appropriate* consequences of such performances are (Brandom 1994, p. xiii).

For Brandom, making something explicit is at the heart of discursivity as expression:

One of the central tenets of the account of linguistic practice put forward here is that the characteristic *authority* on which the role of assertions in communication depends is intelligible only against the background of a correlative *responsibility* to vindicate one's entitlement to the commitments (assertional, inferential, and referential) implicit in an idiom without gainsaying the possibility of entitlement to a different one (Brandom 1994, p. xii).

These are technical passages that need unpacking. First, Brandom sees normativity as suffused throughout the process of interpretation, encompassing authority, responsibility, and entitlement. Second, in the relationship among authority, responsibility, and entitlement, it is the *implicit* that grounds responsibility and authority. In other words, normativity and the implicit are linked. As Brandom put it in his book *Perspectives on Pragmatism*, "norms that are explicit in the form of rules are intelligible only against a background of norms that are implicit in practices" (Brandom 2011, p. 69). Third, Brandom's claim that entitlement to implicit commitments need not gainsay those of other commitments suggests an appreciation of the logic of vagueness. This point about vagueness is exciting enough to merit further elaboration.

At the risk of overstating the matter, I see methodological richness in Brandom's implicit recognition of vagueness. Although vagueness is typically understood pejoratively as suggesting a lack of clarity, it is possible to define vagueness, logically, as form in which a given vague term has the capacity to be specified in an indefinite number of ways without exhausting its meaning. The significance of vagueness is something that has been recognized within philosophy of religion, particularly among thinkers influenced by C.S. Peirce.<sup>9</sup> As Peirce argued, in the logic of vagueness, the law of non-contradiction—a law of classical logic that holds that two contradictory propositions cannot both be true at the same time—does not apply (Peirce 1935, p. 355). As Peirce also put it, "A sign is objectively *vague*, in so far as, leaving its interpretation more or less indeterminate, it reserves for some other possible sign or experience the function of completing the determination" (Peirce 1935, p. 355). With respect to the relationship between vagueness and implicit reasoning, there are at least two possible permutations. A proposition can be vague in an explicit way—e.g., a fortune cookie that reads, "Your life is about to change dramatically"—in which case the specification remains implicit in the form of contradictory possible forms for dramatic life-change in the future. A proposition can also be *specific* in an explicit way, yet itself be the specification of a vague, implicit background assumption.

In the case of Brandom's reference to commitments "implicit in an idiom without gainsaying the possibility of entitlement to a different one", Brandom speaks to vagueness in a manner that bears on the ability to examine questions of justification, speaking therefore to the criterion set up by

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<sup>9</sup> Examples of scholars of religion influenced by Peirce concerning the logic of vagueness include Ochs, Mark Randall James, Michael Raposa, and Robert C. Neville.

Schilbrack and especially Lewis. In particular, Brandom's reference to multiple implicit commitments entails an epistemology of vagueness that is both precise and pluralistic. For if the act of making reasoning explicit can also be an act of specifying the vague, and if, within vague reasoning, the law of non-contradiction does not apply, then one can understand scholarly accounts in religious studies as viably trespassing across the prescriptive/descriptive distinction at little cost to clarity.

Explicit accounts, by contrast, are specific and subject to the law of non-contradiction. This is essential to the process of description in religious studies—e.g., I am studying *this* religious practice, not *that* one, or *this* set of beliefs, not *those*. And yet since such accounts are understood to be explicit specifications of forms of reasoning that are implicit, vague, and ultimately normative—for the scholars themselves, as well as for their objects of study—then scholars also possess an opportunity to examine explicit accounts with respect to an inexhaustible multiplicity of normative frameworks, doing so without preemptively gainsaying any particular set of alternatives.

If the phrase “inexhaustible multiplicity of normative frameworks” appears to inject an unsavory element of arbitrariness into the process of inquiry, it bears pointing out that, in some ways, vagueness actually *restricts* the freedom of the scholar. As Mark Randall James put it in reference to Ochs, “a vague sign *restricts* the interpreter's freedom because even if it is true, a vague sign does not determine the consequences of its truth sufficiently for action in particular circumstances” (James 2016, p. 3). What is important here is that vagueness leaves a kind of *normed* freedom to the interpreter—she is free to wait, or inquire, but to do so subject to norms related to the object of inquiry. This speaks to the sense in which implicit normativity can be investigated in spite of its being ubiquitous.

Another helpful distinction that Brandom offers is that of the implicit as either *antecedent* or *subsequent* to the explicit. Brandom refers to the terms of this distinction as “language entry”, which is antecedent to expression and perceptual, and “language exit”, which is subsequent to expression and active (Brandom 1994, pp. 335–36). Brandom's distinction between antecedents and subsequents is helpful in that, though both antecedents and subsequents are implicit from the point of view of the explicit proposition, the former informs the effort of finding out the implicit thoughts behind an explicit text, whereas the latter bears on the implicit actions entailed by an explicit text.

Regarding logical antecedents in particular, Brandom's taxonomy speaks to the concerns about epistemic justification raised by Lewis and Schilbrack. As Schilbrack has put it, “The truth of a claim is logically independent of its source. But the *justification* of a claim is not independent of its source” (Schilbrack 2014, p. 202). If “source” is understood as logically antecedent, the relevance of Brandom's work to broader questions about engaging normativity within religious studies is clear. This is because Brandom identifies logical antecedents with implicit assumptions that precede “speech entry”. If “source” as Schilbrack understands it and antecedents as Brandom understands them are related, then Brandom's explanation of how to make implicit antecedent assumptions explicit bears on explicating the source of a claim. Having been made explicit, such a source can be interrogated as to whether (and, if so, how) it appropriately justifies the claim that has stemmed from it.

Brandom's distinction between antecedents and subsequents is consistent with the pragmatic tradition's methodological commitments. Indeed, one finds a claim similar to Brandom's in the work of C.S. Peirce. As Peirce once put it, “The elements of every concept enter into logical thought at the gate of perception and make their exit at the gate of purposive action; and whatever cannot show its passports at both those two gates is to be arrested as unauthorized by reason” (Peirce 1935, p. 134). One must take care, however, not to overdraw Brandom's distinction between speech entry and speech exit. It is not always necessary—or even possible—to distinguish whether the implicit normativity that informs an explicit expression is prior or subsequent to it. Yet Brandom's speech entry/exit distinction is nonetheless helpful for the possibilities it offers in separating multiple implicit norms of entitlement (for speech entry) from multiple forms of vindication (for speech exit). This distinction also provides a link to the investigation of causality that is indispensable to social scientific studies of religion. As Schilbrack notes, “as we philosophers of religion shift our attention from questions of truth to include those of justification (and from issues of perception that are central to an individualist epistemology

to the issues of trustworthiness and credibility that are central to a social epistemology), I judge that we will come to see the assessment of religious claims as necessarily in conversation with the causal explanations provided by the social sciences" (Schilbrack 2014, pp. 202–3). Among its other promising entailments, Brandom's work makes this link explicit.

## 6. Peter Ochs's Scriptural Reasoning

For its part, Peter Ochs's work instructively demonstrates how the implicit/explicit distinction can be applied with respect to religion. As noted, Ochs is a leading figure within Scriptural Reasoning, a postliberal interfaith dialogue movement encompassing Christian, Jewish, and Muslim texts. Even though Ochs tends to be reticent about extending his work beyond its hermeneutical base in scriptural communities, his method of what Nicholas Adams has called "reparative reasoning" (Adams 2008, pp. 447–57) is potentially amenable to applications beyond postliberal theology, including the study of religion. The term "reparative" in Ochs's work can be understood in relation to the disciplines in which Ochs operates. As Adams puts it:

One of the most arresting fruits of Ochs' method arises from the conjunction of scientific inquiry, historical investigation and ethnographic description. Ochs *qua* scientific inquirer fashions hypotheses, in response to real doubts, until new beliefs are established and taken as axioms which guide habits. Ochs *qua* historian investigates his own rabbinic tradition's interpretations of scripture as pragmatic responses to real doubts, issuing in new beliefs taken as axioms which guide habits, within that tradition. Ochs *qua* ethnographer attends to others' practices, which he takes to be responses to real doubts, and reconstructs the ways in which those others establish new beliefs which are taken as axioms, within those other traditions, which guide habits. (Adams 2008, p. 450).

There are two areas that are most helpful within Ochs's work with regard to the implicit/explicit distinction and religious studies: (1) the sense in which the interpretation of religious texts is shaped by implicit habits of reasoning intelligible with respect to community-specific, temporally-thick trajectories of historical reception; (2) the capacity of logic to disclose contexts in which the inherent vagueness of language can be specified in experience.

Since the present appropriation of Ochs's project varies in its aims from those of Ochs himself, it is worth unpacking his method of inquiry as he himself characterizes it. In *Peirce, Pragmatism, and the Logic of Scripture* (Ochs 1998), Ochs describes the implicit/explicit distinction as a means to repair problems of interpretation for specific communities. The first step in his method—after resolving to respond to a specific problem—is to "collect explicit texts as collections of particular arguments", understanding that each argument entails a set of implicit arguments (Ochs 1998, p. 24). The presumption is that some of these implicit arguments must include logical contraries of another *explicit* argument, and vice versa. Such is the initial diagnosis of a problem. The next step in Ochs's method involves "raising various hypotheses about the references of the text", which suggests bringing implicit arguments to the surface as a means of tracing out the fissures—as well as the relevant readerships and purposes—for the arguments of the explicit text (Ochs 1998, p. 26). Having generated some possible candidates for the source of a problem from among the implicit arguments, Ochs's method proceeds to call for distinguishing "between the explicit . . . text and the implicit text of which it is a sign" (Ochs 1998, p. 32). The final step is "to explicate the implicit text, transforming it from indefinite sign of some problem in some world to a general sign that recommends to an interpreter methods of solving that problem" (Ochs 1998, p. 33). Following from these steps, all that remains is the performance, that is, the subsequent action on the part of an interpreter that enacts her commitment to interpreting a general sign in lived experience.

Ochs's method overlaps with that of Brandom, whose work likewise suggests the implicit as the domain of vagueness and normativity. Yet in Ochs's case the link between normativity and implicit reasoning is expressed in different terms. For example, Ochs characterizes Scriptural Reasoning as

operating by way of the dialectic between diagrammatic and corrective functions. To diagram is to locate within an interpretive framework. This is a move that entails both explanation and description. To correct is to respond to some problem that motivates an inquiry—and inquiry, for Ochs, is always a response to a problem—in a manner that prescribes a pathway for amelioration. Ochs holds that “the diagrammatic-and-corrective reading one uses to repair pragmatic writing is the same reading one uses to prove its validity” (Ochs 1998, p. 277). He also argues that one’s inquiries, “from out of the vague continuum of common sense . . . reify selective legislations that address some particular dialogue between theoretical resources and practical needs” (Ochs 1998, p. 268).

Ochs’s diagrammatic-corrective continuum maps onto Brandom’s antecedent/subsequent distinction regarding implicit reasoning. The “vague continuum of common sense” can be understood as antecedent to an explicit iteration, whereas the performance that is the proof of a pragmatic reading can be understood as at least partially subsequent to it. To be sure, Ochs does discuss implicit reasoning in a different voice than Brandom. Ochs, for instance, highlights both implicit performances that follow from and implicit rules of reasoning that precede—and, in some sense, determine—explicit ones, whereas Brandom tends to discuss the implicit in the form of norms that govern practices (Brandom 2011, p. 69). Ochs’s normative goals also differ from those of scholars from across most of the disciplines that comprise religious studies, whether these may be putatively descriptive (e.g., sociology, anthropology) or prescriptive (e.g., ethics, theology). Yet the notion of implicit forms of reasoning is capacious enough to include both implicit arguments entailed by explicit ones (Ochs) and also patterns of action in continuity with explicit expressions (Brandom). Both visions are anti-dualist, anti-foundationalist, and thoroughly pragmatic.

## 7. Two Examples

What do these observations entail for religious studies? For one thing, the implicit/explicit distinction provides a means to root out unexamined biases when they have become problematic, combatting what Jonathan E. Brockopp calls “incidental normativity”, which “occurs when our frames of reference seem obvious, causing us to overlook alternative interpretive possibilities” (Brockopp 2016, p. 28). It is worth substantiating this point by offering a sketch of how the implicit/explicit distinction can facilitate inquiry. Consider two examples—one drawn from a religious context and the other from an academic one. Both examples are thoroughly normative. The first example concerns a recent debate over the place of homosexuality in the United Methodist Church. The issue of homosexuality in the church has divided Methodists since as far back as its General Conference of 1972, with recent decades witnessing the formation of such rival groups as the Confessing Movement, which opposes recognition of gays and lesbians in the church, and the Reconciling Ministries Network, which favors it. At the 2012 United Methodist General Conference in Tampa, reformers among both clergy and laity unsuccessfully lobbied to have the Church’s Book of Discipline amended to remove statements that prohibit clergy from performing same-sex marriages and condemn homosexual acts.

In spite of professions of unity from both sides, Methodists might find themselves agreeing with Ethan C. Nobles that no compromise on this issue is ultimately available, and that United Methodists are headed for a split akin to that which affected the Presbyterian Church in 2011 (Nobles 2012). The following passage comes from the official declaration of the 2005 Confessing Movement Conference, which opposes accommodation of homosexuality in the Methodist Church:

Genuine unity in the church is not secured by religious sentiment, sincere piety, tight property clauses, or appeals to institutional authority and loyalty . . . Genuine unity, as a precious gift of the Holy Spirit, is rooted in the gospel of Jesus Christ, witnessed to in the Holy Scripture, summarized in the ecumenical creeds, celebrated in worship and sacraments, demonstrated in common mission, articulated in our teaching, lived out in love, and contended for by the faithful. (Confessing Movement Conference 2005).

A contrasting view comes from the New England delegation to the 2012 General Conference, on behalf of the Reconciling Ministries Network. The Reconciling Ministries Network supports recognizing gay members of the church:

We will not be saved by our bishops, our polity, our structure, our metrics, our theology, our doctrine, our social principles . . . Our strength and our unity lie in our identity as a spiritual movement, grounded in the grace of God and linked by common practices of personal and social holiness. Nothing more, nothing less. ([New England Delegation to the United Methodist 2012](#)).

In spite of the explicitly opposing views, these two statements share a common grammar, revealing several implicit commonalities. Both arguments employ implicit rules of reasoning that shape the respective arguments into binary oppositions, each of which hinges upon contrasting definitions of unity. In the case of the Confessing Movement, the binary embedded in this passage is between two definitions of unity, and the authors of this passage clearly intend for the reader to understand that unity based on “the gospel of Jesus Christ” and a “common mission” is superior to that based on “tight property clauses” or “appeals to institutional authority”. In the case of the Reconciling Ministries Network, the binary also bears on the question of unity in the Church, offering a choice between unity based on ecclesiastical structures and unity based on “the grace of God” and “personal and social holiness”. In the case of the shared implicit binary, this is “unity means favored position on homosexuality in the Church, disunity means opposing position on homosexuality in the Church”. Neither argument explicitly recognizes more than one framework of interpretation by which the issue of homosexuality and the Methodist Church can be examined.

As a second example of facilitating inquiry through attention to implicit reasoning, take the implicit assumptions that shape the arguments of Donald Wiebe and Russell McCutcheon regarding the exclusion of at least certain forms of normativity from academic religious studies. Note the following statement from Wiebe:

I see [science and religion] as divergent or incommensurable modes of thought. The scientist would not, that is, talk of holy things but only of the cultural postulation . . . And the scientist would, moreover, consider it entirely appropriate to put to scrutiny claims about, and to analyze behaviour in relation to, such culturally postulated realities. ([Wiebe 1992](#), p. 66).

Here is a corresponding statement from McCutcheon:

An apology for the study of religion in the modern academy that presumes scholars of religion to be empathetic caretakers and naïve, well meaning hermeneuts is doomed from the outset, for it fundamentally confuses a distinction that lies at the base of the human sciences, between theoretically based scholarship on assorted aspects of human behavior and those very behaviors themselves. ([McCutcheon 2001](#), p. 17).

Although Wiebe and McCutcheon’s perspectives differ from one another, the explicit texts here are clearly not antagonistic in anywhere near the same manner as in the debate over the United Methodist Church. Yet in logical terms, it is possible to observe a similar pattern at work at the level of implicit reasoning. As with the statements from the Confessing and Reconciling Movements, Wiebe and McCutcheon are expressing opposing sides of an implicit distinction held in common between the two. In Wiebe’s case, the religious studies scholar is scientific, whereas for McCutcheon the scholar is governed by norms; yet for both views, the ability to evaluate and argue about religion is implicitly verboten. There is a further implication here, which is that since religion cannot be argued about in a scholarly way, then argument about religion belongs to faith, thus upholding a strict faith/reason divide—a point that Lewis has similarly noted ([Lewis 2015](#), p. 45). For both thinkers, scholarly inquiry is either “scientific” (Wiebe) or it is normative (McCutcheon), with the secular academy supplying the appropriate methodological distance from religion in either case.

Having briefly sketched the implicit reasoning that informs and determines the explicit texts for these two examples, it is possible to develop an outline for how the implicit/explicit distinction might be useful to scholars of religion. There are three sequential steps in such an outline: identifying normativity within the explicit text, excavating implicit normativity as antecedent assumptions, and evaluating implicit normativity as subsequent actions or entailments:

(1) *Identifying normativity within the explicit text*

In the case of the debate over homosexuality in the United Method Church, the respective norms are grounded in the term “unity” to support opposing positions on inclusion. In the case of Wiebe, McCutcheon, and the exclusion of certain norms within academic study of religion, the normative thrust points toward scholars embracing scientific norms/critical norms for Wiebe and McCutcheon, respectively.

(2) *Excavating implicit normativity as antecedent assumptions*

The implicit as an antecedent category is intimately bound up with epistemic justification. And on that question, a common pattern applies for both examples: different antecedent assumptions can be traced toward opposing sides of a shared implicit binary distinction. In the Methodism example, these antecedent assumptions are “unity means choosing tradition over contemporary culture in remaining opposed to homosexual congregants” and “unity means choosing contemporary culture over tradition in welcoming homosexual congregants” on the parts of the Confessing Movement and Reconciling Ministries, respectively. In this case, culture/tradition is a shared implicit binary, in that both sides assume that key aspects of United Methodist tradition are incompatible with contemporary culture on the issue of homosexuality. In the Wiebe-McCutcheon example, these antecedent assumptions are “religious studies as scientific precludes the scholar from prescriptive analysis of religious belief and practice” and “religious studies as normative within the modern academy precludes the scholar from prescriptive analysis of religious belief and practice” on the parts of Wiebe and McCutcheon, respectively. In this case, prescriptive analysis of religion/scholarship is a shared implicit binary.

(3) *Evaluating implicit normativity as subsequent actions or entailments*

For Wiebe and McCutcheon, as well as for the participants in the Methodist debate, the implicit entailments of the explicit views are exclusionary. Were one to act on the conclusions that McCutcheon, Wiebe, or the participants in the Methodist debate prescribe, the result would invariably be the exclusion of some subset of a common normative community—whether this community is the academy or the Methodist Church. In these examples, exclusion is by no means merely implicit; in its own distinctive way, each of the above arguments is *explicitly* exclusionary, as well. Yet in each case, such exclusion runs contrary to other aspects within the norms of that community. For example, the norms of welcoming the stranger and loving one’s enemies are particularly claimed by the Methodist tradition. With religious studies, the humanistic ethos of “nothing human is foreign to me” reflects a particular normative commitment. To evaluate implicit normativity as subsequent action is thus also to speculate on the impact of the explicit claims with respect to the respective larger normative communities implicated. As Ochs’s continuity between diagrammatic and corrective reasoning suggests, such evaluation is also the first step in a constructive response.

## 8. Conclusions

Brandom’s distinction between implicit and explicit and Ochs’s critical investigations of binaries can be combined in a highly compelling way. The result presents scholars of religion with a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge comes because undermining a rigid prescription/description distinction likewise undermines a sense in which scholars possess a surefire means to separate facts from values as they investigate the truth of religious claims. The opportunity comes because values are

no longer locked within one's subjective experience, and are potentially open to logical investigation in a way that would have previously been thought impossible. As one inquires into the social practices that attend the passage between the (explicit) description of some observed phenomenon and the (implicit) assessment that deems the description warranted, one finds a fusion between two forms of prescriptive thought: how to think about the phenomenon and what to do in response to it. Likewise, a given normative measure, though possessed of its own norms and responsible to the objects within its contexts, is part of a larger constellation of norms that one may attempt to make explicit—or not—as the interpretive situation demands. In so doing, erstwhile habitual, implicit, and general orders become rendered explicit and brought into conscious analysis.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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