

Naturalism, Normativity, and the Study of Religion

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Abstract: This article repudiates the common view that the study of religion, in order to qualify as academic, must be descriptively neutral and naturalistic rather than normative or prescriptive. Following philosophers like John McDowell, John Cottingham, and Tyler Roberts, I claim that such a methodological stance amounts to viewing humans as determined rather than free agents. On the basis of W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson's analysis of translation, I argue that normativity is ineliminable from humanistic scholarship, which is itself inextricable from religious studies. Robert Pippin and Thomas A. Lewis's readings of Hegel then provide resources to reconcile human freedom and constraint in religion.

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1. Normativity and Naturalism

The disciplinary divide between descriptive and prescriptive methodologies in the study of religion is riven by what Thomas A. Lewis has succinctly indicted as a “crucial background assumption”: namely, that “whereas theologians make *normative* claims, religious studies scholars should refrain from doing so. Rather, scholars in religious studies should distinguish themselves from theologians precisely by striving for some type of distance, neutrality, or objectivity in relation to their subject matter, where this is understood to entail analysis regarding what *is* rather than claims about what *ought* to be” (Lewis 2011, p. 169; emphases added).¹ Against this assumption that religious studies should refrain from normative claims, I will argue that normativity is an ineliminable (even if often implicit or invisible) element of humanistic description; and that, insofar as religious studies claims to study human agents, it inevitably has humanistic dimensions. The presence and soundness of these elements depend only on the ability of scholars to recognize their subjects' humanity in the following minimal sense: that human subjects are (just as the scholars that study them) at once naturally or historically conditioned—such that they admit of objective description—and also free agents, such that they are susceptible to normative intervention. And so even if, as Lewis says, prescriptive normativity is most overt in theology, this is not its only site: it is inextricable from humanistic inquiry, I will argue, which is in turn inextricable from the study of religion.²

Although I will elaborate an understanding of normative prescription that is broader than theology proper, I am not concerned to generalize it to all academic discourse *tout court*. I can clarify my understanding of the descriptive-prescriptive or natural-normative divide by following the philosopher John McDowell in “identifying the *natural*—as indeed [Wilfrid] Sellars sometimes does—with the subject matter of ‘empirical description’; that is, with the subject matter of a mode of discourse that

¹ See also (Lewis 2009, pp. 87–98).

² Although one of the consequences of this line of thought is to undermine the segregation of theology from religious studies on the basis of the presence of a prescriptive methodology, there may, of course, be other good ways to effect such a segregation. In any case, that particular issue and its implications are not my concern here.

is to be contrasted with placing something in the normative framework constituted by the logical space of reasons" (McDowell 1994, p. xiv; emphasis added).³ I assume, then, that to do so much as describe a thing empirically—in the sense that is opposed to prescription—is to analyze it according to natural relations. I furthermore assume McDowell's basically Kantian notion that "to place something in nature on the relevant conception, as contrasted with placing it in the logical space of reasons, is to situate it in the realm of law" (ibid., p. xv)—some might say, in the realm of causal determination that constitutes the objectifiable world⁴. My main polemical target in this paper is the totalization of the natural, ascendant in religious studies, that McDowell calls "bald naturalism": the doctrine that "we can reconstruct the structure of the space of reasons out of conceptual materials that already belong in a natural-scientific depiction of nature" (ibid., p. 73), thereby eliminating any need for normative discourse.⁵ I will argue that insofar as religion is a free human activity—not a purely lawful natural process—its study requires linguistic interpretation, which (as I will further argue) inevitably involves normative dimensions.

McDowell's work exorcises the temptations of bald naturalism by displaying the "unboundedness" of the normative (more precisely, the conceptual) space of reasons in human experience (ibid., p. 24ff). But my own thesis is not, alas, thus summarily fulfilled by simply observing that all academic discourse (and *a fortiori* that of religious studies) is engaged in what Robert Brandom calls "the game of giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 1997, p. 140), and is therefore normative in McDowell's sense; I will focus on the inevitability of normativity only in certain disciplines, admitting (which is indeed the foil required by my argument) that there do exist *bona fide* discourses of nature and scientific law.⁶ Although the people producing these discourses are themselves (one hopes) involved in giving and asking for reasons—no small point to which I will return, since it shows them to be human agents—the technical matters that they discuss might well be devoid of reasons-talk, making reference only to the efficient causes of lawful natural processes (McDowell 1994, p. 70 n.1). That is, while a natural scientist can

³ This follows Sellars ([1956] 1997, p. 76). A relatively recent treatment that finds McDowell particularly useful in thinking about the dialectic between naturalism and normativity weaving throughout modern thought and culture is Akeel Bilgrami's contribution to Macarthur and De Caro's (2010) volume, which addresses the issue in general terms not tethered to the problems of religious studies.

⁴ McDowell himself seems to want to avoid the concept "objective," and also demurs from this conflation of natural law with causality (McDowell 1994, p. 71). But Kant classically defined "nature" as "the sum total of appearances insofar as these are in thoroughgoing connection through an inner principle of causality" (Kant [1781] 1998, p. 466 fn.), and considered the latter an *a priori* concept required to cognize objects with understanding, that is, a condition of the possibility of objective experience (ibid., p. 210). This tethering of objectivity to causal explanation effaces a distinction often made in religious studies between mere description and explanation, a differently drawn fault line that often does duty for the divide between normative and naturalistic approaches to which I'm pointing: "Defenders of this approach argue that scholars of religion should seek to explain religion in terms of its causes and functions and not be satisfied simply with describing or interpreting it" (Roberts 2006, p. 699). Now, one might not wish to accept the conflation of non-normative description with, on the one hand, objectivity (the cognition of objects through concepts of nature), or with, on the other hand, determinism (the notion that naturalistic description amounts to explaining things according to laws, whether causal or otherwise). Insofar as one rejects these Kantian conflations, my counter-critique does not apply; but it is then up to such a methodologist to specify her principles of description and show how they function non-normatively.

⁵ Consider, for example, Donald Wiebe's persistent calls for religious studies to make itself more "scientific," by which he means "mediated through intersubjectively testable sets of statements, whether at the descriptive level of history, ethnography, and phenomenology, or at the explanatory level of law-like generalizations and theory . . . [T]he language of the scholar of religion, like that of students of the social sciences, must be no more 'self-involving' than the languages of physics, chemistry, and the other natural sciences" (Wiebe 2006, p. 691). Scientific theories of religion must, on his view, locate themselves "within what might be called an 'integrated causal model' of the sciences and, consequently, will be 'reductionistic' in that they will attempt to explain 'the supernatural' naturalistically. All explanatory and theoretical accounts of religion within the Religious Studies framework, therefore, will have to fall within the same conceptual causal framework used to explain all other elements and aspects of the natural and social worlds" (ibid., p. 692).

⁶ This is one way in which my own effort here does not merely recapitulate nineteenth-century neo-Kantian debates about normativity. (One thinks particularly of the so-called *Wertphilosophie* or "philosophy of value" of the Baden school; see Beiser 2009 and Woodford 2017.) There is much to learn from those wide-ranging discussions; but I restrict the scope of my inquiry to particular kinds of discourse, and in so doing, also aim to make my point without relying much on the systematic metaphysical trappings of German idealism. With this disciplinary restriction, my thesis might be seen as parallel to Dilthey's famous view of the importance of *Verstehen* (understanding) in the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences), but again proceeding from hermeneutical premises that are more current in Anglophone analytical philosophy.

always be asked questions of the form, “Why does X occur?” (in which case she might produce a theoretical reason for X happening) or “Why do you believe Z to obtain?” (in which case she might produce an evidentiary reason to accept Z as true), reasons will generally not serve as terms in her theory or evidence. Reasons, we might say, are terms in the meta-language of scientific proceedings to talk *about* theories and their evidence; but reasons are not terms *within* the languages of the theories themselves. In this paper, by contrast, I attempt to put before us a class of discourse that cannot be purged of reference to the reasons that free agents have for their beliefs and actions. Such discourse would plausibly fall under the rubric “humanistic,” and I will argue that this normative humanistic discourse cannot be expurgated from the study of religion.

2. The Interpretation of Humans

If McDowell’s endgame is to breach the apparent barrier between the natural and the normative, my project here may be viewed as an application and amplification of his insight within the field of religious studies. Consider John Cottingham’s recent call for a “more humane approach” to the philosophy of religion, one that morally involves the philosopher’s own personal commitments: Cottingham proceeds from the claim that although the success of science has inspired naturalistic philosophical approaches emulating it, “neutralist” stances that bracket personal prescriptive commitments are “unstable” in philosophy generally, and especially so in the philosophy of religion (Cottingham 2014, p. 4), in the sense that they cannot be maintained with consistency. I will argue that this critique applies as well beyond the philosophy of religion to religious studies in general.

Before explaining why that should be, I want first to clarify that the claim as I understand it is not of some absolute priority of the normative to the descriptive, but rather of their interrelation. And so we can also endorse the move most resolutely made by modern social scientists and historians from normative doctrine toward interest in actual historical religion as embodied and lived. Indeed, what Cottingham calls his “more humane approach” to the philosophy of religion is based largely on recognition of the importance of these human dimensions in their full-blooded context of culture and praxis, which recognition recommends that “we need to do more than analyse and dissect the truth claims involved [in religious belief]: we need to make a serious attempt to understand the context of culture and praxis that gives life to those claims” (ibid., p. 11). Cottingham thus emphasizes *mathesis* and *askesis*—i.e., formation and discipline, respectively—recalling the French classicist Pierre Hadot’s lately popular formulation of “philosophy as a way of life,” in which doctrinal belief forms only part: Spiritual exercises are thus brought to the fore⁷, opening a potential conversation with thinkers influential in more social scientific quarters such as Foucault with his notion of “technologies of the self”⁸. From this methodological perspective, interpretation and evaluation of religious thought needs the thick description of concrete life and social formations that social scientists and historians are trained to do.

But by the very same token, understanding religious life also requires evaluation of religious thought beyond a naturalistically value-free account of material processes. Cottingham argues that a posture of value-free academic neutrality actually compromises access to certain kinds of evidence important for robust scholarship on religion. Precisely because human cognition is imbricated within concrete contexts and forms of life—such that belief is tied up with faith and praxis, assent is tied up with institutional commitment and social identity, reason is tied up with feeling and habituation, and so on—description purged of evaluation will fail in its portrayals of religious discourse or

⁷ In Cottingham’s words, “To be religious is not just to espouse certain doctrines; it is to follow a certain way of life and to take up certain commitments,” a project of “formation” (Cottingham 2014, p. 149) or “spiritual praxis” (Cottingham 2014, p. 151).

⁸ Reflecting on his early work in his late essay titled “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault says that he “was concerned not only with the acts that were permitted and forbidden but with the feelings represented, the thoughts, the desires one might experience, the drives to seek within the self any hidden feeling, any movement of the soul, any desire disguised under illusory forms” (Foucault 1988, p. 14). That is, Foucault’s data outstripped explicit doctrine to include the affective, volitional, and practical.

practice. This, I will shortly argue, is because belief in religious doctrines is in a mutually constitutive relationship with the forms of life that give them their meaning.⁹ The point is not utterly to insulate religious thought from examination by non-adherents, but only to widen the field of data under consideration. As Cottingham says, “our human cognitive situation is far more fluid than is implied by ‘flat’ scientific or crudely empiricist models. It is a complex interplay between commitment and withdrawal, affirmation and doubt, yielding and resisting” (ibid., p. 23). On this recognition, a full description of religious phenomena involves not only reading doctrinal formulations, but also understanding how they relate to embodied praxis—and on the other side, not only documenting practices, but also taking into account how agents sometimes ambivalently navigate the claims that the practices and doctrines make upon them. In order to begin to do this, I will now argue, it is incumbent upon the scholar to confront religious utterances and behaviors from a stance that involves more than baldly naturalistic terms abstracted from the normative claims religion might make upon herself.

The most direct way to see this ineliminability of normativity from the description of religious phenomena is to consider what is involved in translation or interpretation. Straight away, of course, some would object to setting interpretation as the relevant goal at all; perhaps what we are after in religious studies ought instead to be explanation.¹⁰ The crucial thing to recognize here is that, insofar as we regard our data as intentional action and speech at all—as opposed to mere movement and noise—we are already engaged in interpretation.¹¹ In the words of the philosopher of language whose analysis I will presently exploit: “All understanding of the speech of another involves radical interpretation” (Davidson 2001, p. 125). And this interpretation in turn implicates normativity: McDowell, in his own idiom, says that “our understanding of one another [is] something that must involve ‘space of reasons’ intelligibility” (McDowell 1994, p. 72).

Now, Willard Quine and Donald Davidson have influentially argued that in any attempt at interpretation, we must begin by supposing that we agree on a great many matters with the people we are studying.¹² We might assume some agreements only provisionally or hypothetically: for example,

⁹ John Clayton put this point nicely with regard to classical arguments for the existence of God: “If theistic arguments no longer make sense to so many of us today, this may be because we no longer find it possible to participate fully in the forms of life in which they were once so firmly embedded It is not because they make no sense to us that we no longer participate, but because we do not participate, they no longer make sense” (Clayton 2006, p. 177).

¹⁰ Note that this demand for explanation need not come with very hefty metaphysical assumptions, such as materialism or physicalism; but it remains a general hallmark of naturalists who seek to eliminate normativity from their accounts of human discursivity. Hilary Putnam observes that “even when hard naturalists eschew the demand that reference and representation talk be reduced to physical vocabulary, they feel the need to *explain* reference and representation in terms of ‘causal relations’” (Putnam 2016, p. 23). Charles Taylor has inveighed against this methodological tendency to forsake interpretation in explanations of human phenomena, which he attributes to the regnant empiricism of modern science, in his classic article “Interpretation and the Sciences of Man”. His argument, deployed mostly to think about political science, is rather different from the one I now attempt; so I do not draw from it in this paper. It bears noting, however, that his central insight of the indispensability of hermeneutics and (as I will characterize part of what is at issue below) the first-personal standpoint is entirely convergent with my own thesis; and, most *a propos* this point of my argument, he points out that where the human sciences are concerned, the demand for explanation itself often entails the demand for interpretation (rather than excluding it): “It may not just be that to understand a certain explanation one has to sharpen one’s intuitions, it may be that one has to change one’s orientation—if not in adopting another orientation, at least in living one’s own in a way which allows for greater comprehension of others. Thus, in the sciences of man insofar as they are hermeneutical there can be a valid response to ‘I don’t understand’ which takes the form, not only ‘develop your intuitions,’ but more radically ‘change yourself.’ This puts an end to any aspiration to a value-free or ‘ideology-free’ science of man. A study of the science of man is inseparable from an examination of the options between which men must choose” (Taylor 1971, pp. 47–48).

¹¹ Even someone such as Russell McCutcheon, espousing a scholarly methodology quite contrary to the approach for which I am arguing, views “all scholarship as necessarily involved in acts of translation and redescription” (McCutcheon 2006, pp. 720–21). We can take McCutcheon’s point that *mere* description, in the sense that is opposed to translation and redescription, fails of scholarly edification inasmuch as it (to the extent that it involves no redescription) can only be repetition, mimicry, or ventriloquism. But this does not leave naturalistic explanation as the only viable form of redescription. Rather, if (as McCutcheon says) all scholarship is involved in translation, then it must also necessarily be involved in interpretation.

¹² This is N.L. Wilson’s “principle of charity” that Quine invokes in his methodology of “radical translation”: “The maxim of translation underlying all this is that assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language The common sense behind the maxim is that one’s interlocutor’s silliness, beyond a certain point, is less likely than bad translation” (Quine 1960, p. 60). Donald Davidson extends this approach to what he calls “radical interpretation,” which is an application of Quine’s model to interpretation even within a single language. For Davidson, the principle

I do not believe that the sun is a god; but if I did, then I should call it by the name of a sun-god while chanting and offering it objects; and this might be the only way of making sense of the religious behavior and language of a particular sun-worshipper. Even if we ultimately cannot believe certain things, then, such disagreements can only be picked out against a background of massive agreement about other related matters: for example, that is a sun; this is an object; and I should make offerings to gods that I revere (if any such there be).¹³ Untethered from some such rudiments of a shared conceptual world, our interpretation would have no place to begin, since anything could mean anything at all. As Davidson says, “Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters” (Davidson 1984, p. 197). Of course, we can concede to naturalists that all the evidence we have for such concepts and beliefs is empirically observable—specifically, behavioral, either verbal or otherwise, in the context of intercourse with environmental circumstances (Davidson 2001, p. 133).¹⁴ But we must furthermore assume many underlying beliefs and at least entertain them as true in order to construe that behavior as the intentional action of conscious human agents, which is what it is to view something as practice or discourse at all rather than mere sound and fury signifying nothing.¹⁵

is then to “interpret in a way that optimizes agreement,” which countenances “the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning” by “assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right. What justifies the procedure is the fact that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement. Applied to language, this principle reads: the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject (whether or not through a medium of interpretation), the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree about them If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything” (Davidson 2001, p. 137).

- 13 In one of his polemics against the humanistic study of religion, therefore, Russell McCutcheon is both right and wrong to say that “despite the proclaimed empathy for their subjects of study, like everyone else [humanistic scholars] have no choice but to deploy concepts and interests alien to their object of study, it is just that they seem to assume that their language and their interests are coterminous with reality” (McCutcheon 2006, p. 745). Since all study involves translation, the concepts employed are *both* alien and *also* faithful to their object if at all they are successful translations. On Davidson’s analysis of translation, therefore, this is just what allows us “unimpeded access” to our objects of study, in McCutcheon’s slightly sarcastic phrase (*ibid.*): The unironic conclusion of Davidson’s influential argument is that the interpretive considerations that show conceptual relativism to be incoherent are the same ones that “re-establish unmediated touch” (Davidson 1984, p. 198) with reality.
- 14 See also Quine (1960, chp. 2). As Terry Godlove says in his Davidsonian polemic against materialism in religious studies, “Shoulder to shoulder with the new materialists, the radical interpreter also embraces the causal, material circumstances of speech and action; indeed, the argument from natural history requires her to weave them into the very fabric of meaning” (Godlove 2002, p. 20). Note that what Godlove is responding to here is not to be conflated with a newer “new materialism” that has arisen in very recent years, as exemplified in Rieger and Waggoner (2016) volume. This newest materialism attributes agency to material objects—but inasmuch as it imagines agency without intentionality (p. 5), it does not make contact with my notion of interpretation of agents. (See the note immediately below.) I also should hasten to acknowledge that Quine was himself famously naturalistic, even what might be called behavioristic or scientific; and that Davidson for his part thinks reasons are causes of action, which would appear to collapse my characterization of the normative into the natural, as McDowell’s so-called bald naturalism would have it. It helps my case that McDowell attacks the reading of Davidsonian interpretation as holding apart the “outside” view of the field linguist, which is descriptive and has a causal structure, from the “inside” view of the “native” or the “earnest seeker after truth,” which is normative (McDowell 1994, p. 147), and he concludes that “Davidson’s vulnerability to the dualism is a defect; it is out of line with his better thinking on interpretation” (p. 153). But in any event, it is not clear to me that Davidson’s basic view of reasons as causes threatens the picture I’m painting, because in effecting this unification Davidson does not deny that reasons give us *special* kinds of causal explanations—namely, he says, “laws are involved essentially in ordinary causal explanations, but not in rationalizations” (Davidson 1963, p. 697); and “it is an error to think no explanation has been given until a law has been produced” (p. 698). In contrast to the law-like explanations of the usual natural causes—and most to my point in this paper—Davidson says, “A reason rationalizes an action only if it leads us to see something the agent saw, or thought he saw, in his action” (p. 685), thus preserving the first-personal nature of normativity to which I will soon come. And so a reason-cum-cause does not abandon intentionality and agency, which remains central to Davidson’s account: He asks rhetorically, “Why on earth should a cause turn an action into a mere happening and a person into a helpless victim?” (p. 700). It seems that for Davidson, too, causes of human action still occupy the normative space of reasons, and are only intelligible as such.
- 15 I cannot here defend the admittedly crucial claim that to describe behavior as non-intentional is to evacuate meaning from description of that behavior. Such an argument would begin with Elizabeth Anscombe’s definitive treatment of the issue, by which “to call an action intentional is to say it is intentional under some description that we give (or could give) of it” (Anscombe 1963, p. 29) and that “it is the agent’s knowledge of what he is doing that gives the descriptions under which what is going on is the execution of an intention” (p. 87). An agent’s own belief is thus ineliminable from meaningful description of her action qua intentional. Dan Arnold usefully works through this notion of intentionality vis-à-vis naturalism as pertaining to both classical Indian and contemporary Anglophone debates in the philosophy of

To describe humans as agents is thus to interpret them; and radical interpretation, while assuming at the outset that we know very little about the people we study, only works by the (patently normative) prescription of truth claims.¹⁶ As Davidson says, our methodology takes truth as basic and extracts an account of interpretation (Davidson 2001, p. 134),

holding belief constant as far as possible while solving for meaning. This is accomplished by assigning truth conditions to alien sentences that make native speakers right when plausibly possible, according, of course, to our own view of what is right. What justifies the procedure is that disagreement and agreement alike are intelligible only against a background of massive agreement. Applied to language, this principle reads: the more sentences we conspire to accept or reject . . . the better we understand the rest, whether or not we agree about them (ibid., p. 137; emphasis added).

Talk of truth and right belief are the classic marks of epistemic normativity, the prescription of thought that counts as knowledge. And even if one should dispute the normativity of epistemology (as do those who would naturalize it), the act of translation presents a further normative dimension with the necessity of ascribing “our own view of what is right” (per the phrase italicized above) to our interlocutor. Merely to distinguish what someone’s speech can and can’t mean requires some assumption and evaluation of their beliefs by our own standards of truth. We cannot read minds or perform divination; we can only guess what someone could plausibly believe based on what they say and do, with the criteria of fit ultimately being whether we can imagine ourselves saying and doing similar things in similar circumstances under the sway of similar beliefs.

mind, concluding that if “‘naturalizing’ intentionality consists in advancing essentially causal explanations of the contentful character of thought,” then “the facts that we can *mean* something by any of our claims, and that we can find ourselves persuaded of their *truth*—facts that are necessary conditions of any account’s making sense—are essentially irreducible to causally describable functional states” (Arnold 2012, p. 237). This is the sort of conclusion that underwrites my appeal to the dependence of interpretation upon attributions of intentional action. See also (Schilbrack 2014, pp. 180ff), and his contribution to the volume *The Question of Methodological Naturalism*.

- ¹⁶ For those who want it, here is a more elaborate technical summary of Davidson’s theory of radical interpretation (as presented in his essays “Radical Interpretation” (Davidson 2001, pp. 130ff) and “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme”): In order to begin interpreting the speech of a person whom we do not at all understand at the outset, we observe her (verbal and bodily) behavior in the context of her circumstances, and start to form some hypotheses about what her utterances refer to in their environment. When we have a good hypothesis about the meaning (*p*) of a sentence (*s*), we can put it in the following form (of a Tarskian T-schema): *s* is true if and only if *p*. This closely reflects the observational methodology by which we generated our hypotheses, by describing the relevant circumstances (*p*) under which a given sentence (*s*) is believed to be true. The interpretive methodology therefore assumes that we can effectively guess at a speaker’s beliefs, and also that we can capture the circumstances relevant to the utterance—which is to say that we have ventured good hypotheses of meaning. If we turn out entirely unable to formulate any fruitful hypotheses, ones that would account for a speaker’s behavior, we would start to wonder whether she actually had any language at all. But if we are able to generate coherent guesses about her meanings, we are then *ipso facto* conceptualizing those meanings for ourselves, i.e., understanding them in terms of our own concepts. A condition of interpretation, then, is that our conceptual scheme is (at least partially) commensurable with the speaker. Tarski’s T-schema, then, reflects the charity that Quine and Davidson, as we have seen in note 13, maintain is forced upon us when translating: We must assume that a speaker has some true beliefs in order to guess at her meanings. If we couldn’t assume that much, we would never be able to begin to form hypotheses about what she means to say, because it would be useless to tether only false beliefs to environing facts that we observe and assume to be true. As Davidson says, “The methodological advice to interpret in a way that optimizes agreement should not be conceived as resting on a charitable assumption about human intelligence that might turn out to be false. If we cannot find a way to interpret the utterances and other behaviour of a creature as revealing a set of beliefs largely consistent and true by our own standards, we have no reason to count that creature as rational, as having beliefs, or as saying anything” (Davidson 2001, p. 137). So total untranslatability is not an option if we can recognize someone as speaking at all; we must, then, assume a shared world of things and facts and (what amounts to the same) substantially similar concepts and beliefs about them in order to (so much as) start translating. There can of course be local disagreements, but these can only be localized against the background of the massive agreement that we are assuming and have (hopefully) begun to formulate successfully. There might even be partial failures of translatability, particular concepts that are quite untranslatable; but since our translation methodology interrelates meaning and belief, there is no telling but that these mismatches of meaning might actually be disagreements of opinion. That is because there is no formal difference between failing to formulate a good hypothesis about meaning of some utterance or other, and failing to identify a belief held by the speaker to substitute for “*s*” in a predictive T-sentence (in which “*p*” is a fact that we take ourselves to know). These reflections thus display macroscopically what the T-schema shows microscopically: that we can only so much as make another person intelligible to us as a language user (even as a user of our own language) to the extent that we assume that her beliefs agree to a large extent with ours.

Furthermore, I argue, the evaluation involved in such humanism is not only that of epistemic normativity, concerning what is taken to be true and false; it is normative in the fullest sense, since it requires imagining oneself in another's shoes, measuring the other's behavior by one's own and one's own by the other's. The only data supplied by the other are her actions, both verbal and physical; unable to divine her beliefs, we are bound to interpret her behavior in context according to our own standards of appropriate behavior in such contexts. To understand the other, then, one considers not only what must be true and what one ought to believe, but also how one ought to act—which is to say that the normativity involved in interpretation is not only epistemic but also broadly ethical. Quine and Davidson do not (as far as I know) make this explicit, but I think it is entailed by their analysis of translation: Since all of the data available for interpretation of others are ultimately behavioral, we must not only attribute beliefs to our interlocutors but must furthermore hypothesize what difference their beliefs would make for their actions—and initially the only source for such hypotheses is the relationship between our own beliefs and actions. In short, in order to make another's behavior intelligible, I am bound to imagine *how I should behave if* I considered certain things true.

I submit this inevitability of imaginative entry into another's thought and life as the strongest grounding for Cottingham's "humane or humanistic turn" in the study of religion, which he gives as "a model of understanding that insists that we need to some extent to try to enter into a form of life before we presume to dissect and judge it" (Cottingham 2014, p. 171). On my analysis, such humanistic understanding does not require the adoption of another's identity as one's own (an absurdity in any event), or a conversion of the religious outsider to an adherent; rather, the condition of making another human agent's behavior intelligible is imagining another's thought in tandem with cognizance of one's own. This is not an exercise in mind-reading, of course, nor is the other's mind imagined to float free of their embodied action. The whole point is that to understand another requires examining as much as possible of what they say together with what they do in the context of their material and social environment—which is why scientific study of material culture and social formations remains important—in comparison with one's own expectations about how to behave and speak in such situations. This normative imbrication of the first-personal with the third-personal qualifies such descriptive-interpretive activity as humanistic in a general, classical sense: In Robert Pippin's telling, the humanistic tradition at least since Rousseau has been preoccupied with such normative questions¹⁷ of both the epistemic and the ethical sort, all of which "are irreducibly 'first-personal' questions, and these questions are practically unavoidable and necessarily linked to the social practice of giving and demanding reasons" (Pippin 2009, p. 38).¹⁸ To interpret humans—understood as free intentional agents rather than automata—in a scholarly mode just is to engage in humanistic study, which involves the comparison of one's object of study with one's own perspective in order to make sense of the other.

Nor should it be thought that privileging the first-personal perspective of the interpreter traps scholars in a solipsistic world or commits us to cultural imperialism. Given those bad options, bald naturalism does indeed seem a palatable third way. Although Quine and Davidson do not (as far as I know) make this explicit either, I would urge that any imputation of one's own concepts to another ought to involve a potential for self-correction in the face of the other's concepts: By entertaining foreign claims and practices in the context of their envioning circumstances and in comparison with one's own, one might well come to see how the latter are inadequate for coping with life and

¹⁷ This remains true of the humanistic disciplines of the modern university, not at all limited (or even centering upon) religious studies. Ann Taves narrates the development of disciplinary boundaries in the last century thus: "As scientific disciplines promoted themselves as 'value-free,' however, the humanities (led by literary studies) emerged in the 1920s as the promoter of values and subjectivity in formal opposition to the value-free, objective sciences" (Taves 2011, p. 297). Indeed, she notes that "the process of disciplinary formation" itself "was shot through with valuations" (ibid., p. 302).

¹⁸ This is thus the disciplinary application of Peter Strawson's thesis in "Freedom and Resentment" (Strawson 1974), where he contrasts "objective" with "participant" attitudes toward others' actions and maintains that it is not humanly possible to inhabit the former entirely and never the latter.

even begin to change them. As Thomas A. Lewis says in his recent defense of normativity and self-criticism in religious studies, “Holding normative commitments should not be confused with an unwillingness to revise them” (Lewis 2015a, p. 160). Not only can we maintain revisability as part of a normative stance, we can also see how it is quite diminished by hard-line naturalistic approaches, since they delimit certain conceptual parameters at the outset (namely, those characterizing what qualifies as natural). This is why Tyler Roberts will “suggest that rather than limiting knowledge to the kinds of causes scholars look for when they move to history (for example, historical context) or nature (for example, genes or cognitive mechanisms), we should include the knowledge that results when the humanist moves from freedom to what I have called ‘response,’ knowledge that is existential as well as cognitive, that is articulated and enacted in critical engagement with the behavior in question” (Roberts 2013, p. 116). Accusations that such approaches fail to achieve the academic distance required by good scholarship should be dispelled by Lewis’s espousal of critical normativity with revisability. As Kevin Schilbrack says, “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). The view of humanistic scholarship that I have laid out requires both normative evaluation and critical response, because to interpret humans as humans just is to be a subject that holds oneself accountable for one’s own thoughts, values, and actions in asking (explicitly or implicitly) what one ought to believe and do in given situations.¹⁹

3. Humanism in Religious Studies

Tyler Roberts forcefully applies Pippin’s notion of humanistic scholarship to the special case of academic religious studies in his book *Encountering Religion* (Roberts 2013, esp. pp. 90ff.). Lest my opposition of naturalism to normativity look like a caricature abstracted from the way any scholar actually proceeds, consider how Roberts astutely reads influential theorists of religion to reveal that one of the decisive fault lines between naturalistic and humanistic approaches in the study of religion is indeed whether human phenomena are analyzed primarily in terms of causal compulsion rather than free agency and responsibility.²⁰ Whereas sound descriptive work is often thought to rely on a view of people as socially and historically determined—echoes of Kant—prescription requires the notion of freedom. When we see the disciplinary divide in this way, it becomes clearer how a scholar located in secular religious studies can resist naturalism: not to favor the *supernatural*, but rather to maintain human agency in the face of baldly naturalistic causal explanation.²¹ Leaving aside the

¹⁹ This understanding of humanism is a good replacement for the notion of “liberal humanism” as an essentialistic, universalizing discourse about the “human condition” that “overcomes the particularities that might otherwise divide” scholars from their subjects (McCutcheon 2006, p. 726). Rather than grand homogenizing claims, all we need for this sort of humanism is the more modest notion of responsible free agency. Indeed, for the purposes of my argument, we can replace the term “human” with “responsible agent”.

²⁰ “Where scientific or social-scientific theory seeks to explain human phenomena in terms of general laws or patterns, humanistic study, while by no means simplistically rejecting generalization (which would be to give up on thought and knowledge altogether), insists on studying human behavior through the concepts of freedom and creativity” (Roberts 2013, p. 115). Some scholars’ “historicist social formation theory entails that concepts such as ‘religious experience,’ ‘religious identity,’ and ‘religious impulses’ are not useful explanatory categories because they obscure the historical and social causes of human behavior. On this view, the human subject is but a function of his or her social and historical context, an ‘artifact’: all our thoughts, feelings, and actions—including those we call ‘religious’—can be explained as always the effect but never the cause of historical change and religious behavior To consider human beings and their experiences and meanings simply as ‘artifacts’ of social formation is to reject the analytic and explanatory usefulness of concepts such as ‘subjectivity,’ ‘freedom,’ and ‘creativity’” (ibid., pp. 58–59).

²¹ In one of his final statements after a lifetime of grappling with these issues, Hilary Putnam said that “the fact that something—perceptual representation or reference or truth or intentionality or reasons—can’t be ‘naturalized’ in the way that ‘physicalists’ demand doesn’t make those things ‘non-natural’ or ‘queer’ or suspiciously close to ‘supernatural.’ It is true that the notion of a reason, for example, is not the subject matter of a special science, but that notion is presupposed by all science as well as by fields like history and politics and criticism (including philosophical criticism) that are not sciences, because in all of them one has to decide what there is *reason* to consider, and ‘elegance’ figures in the *reasons* scientists give for testing certain theories at all. They are not scientific notions, but the activity of science presupposes a *reasonable* command of them. Science depends on what is not fully scientific at every point” (Putnam 2016, pp. 42–43).

many philosophical tomes that have been written to nuance the supposed dilemma of freedom and determinism, I will follow Roberts's suggestion that we think about religion and religious studies instead in terms of "a complex dynamic of dependence and freedom, a freedom made possible in and through certain practices of inheritance, commitment, and inhabitation" (Roberts 2013, p. 106).

Roberts's suggestion is well in line with how McDowell proposes we make sense of the human condition with respect to the space of nature and the normative space of reasons. McDowell urges us to recognize that humans are not only animals, creatures of nature, but also have a normative "second nature" imparted through languages and traditions, upbringing and *Bildung* (McDowell 1994, pp. 87ff). This last term is, of course, borrowed from nineteenth-century German philosophy; and, after Aristotle, it is Hegel that McDowell sees as proposing the best reconciliation of the nature-normativity dichotomy—although, not being a Hegel scholar himself, he defers the details of the solution to scholars like Pippin (McDowell 1994, p. 111). I will now follow the suggestions of Roberts and McDowell to see how recent Hegel scholarship (especially that of Pippin and Lewis) can be used to think about religious behavior as reconciling freedom and determination, thereby incorporating normativity into description of religion.

4. The Hegelian Synthesis of Freedom and Conditioning in Religion

To start with, Pippin's Kantian reading of Hegel strongly brings out the relationship between freedom and normativity: On this reading, the very possibility of objective rationality rests on the self-constitution of concepts free of determination by nature. That is, for Pippin's Kant and Hegel both, to have knowledge of objects is to be in the possession of concepts that are prescriptively able to determine what a thing is, which is to say, concepts that are epistemically normative.²² Now, I've already made the point that the normativity involved in understanding another is not only epistemic, but also broadly ethical. Similarly, Hegel's notion of self-determination generalizes Kant's language of spontaneity beyond epistemology into the practical sphere (Pippin 1989, p. 153). Like Kant's spontaneity of conceptual understanding—the freedom from external constraint that is tied up with self-consciousness—freedom writ large, for Hegel, is self-conscious self-determination (Lewis 2005, p. 39).

But this self-determination is not arbitrary, even for Kant; and for Hegel, it occurs in accord with the agent's particular constitution, which is itself a result of history and upbringing. This notion of historically conditioned self-determination is then, as Lewis points out, a confluence of causal determination and freedom.²³ We are thus returned from the Kantian a priori realm of pure rational normativity back into the embodied, historical world of social relations, negotiations, and traditions—ostensibly the stuff of social scientific data. Indeed, Hegel had his own anthropology; and while his was a far cry from contemporary social science, it can be seen as a sort of reconciliation of natural history and transcendental philosophy. Lewis usefully mines Hegel's anthropology to show how it might be possible to think freedom and tradition together, building upon what he calls the "nontraditional" reading of Hegel that emphasizes continuities with Kant and minimizes additional idealist assumptions. This reading has been very influential in philosophical circles and Hegel scholarship in recent decades and stands to be a valuable contribution to religious studies, which still tends to assume that Hegel's project was a highly metaphysical, cosmically monistic one (Lewis 2015b, pp. 198–201) offering little comfort to attempts at rapprochement between naturalism and the humanities. The nontraditional Hegel offers a form of naturalism that makes the

²² "Some kind of independent reflective activity (logically and causally independent of what can be directly apprehended), thought's own projection of the structure within which the determinacy of its objects can be fixed, is required in order for thought to have objects (i.e., to be able to make cognitive claims about objects)" (Pippin 1989, p. 201).

²³ "For Hegel, action can be free only when it is determined by the agent's essence Freedom as self-determination also precludes random or arbitrary action, precisely because such action is not determined by the self . . . Here freedom and necessity coincide" (Lewis 2005, p. 38).

human mind central, escaping between the horns of a putative dilemma between the material world and an ideal world transcending it (Lewis 2005, p. 206).²⁴

According to Lewis's reading of Hegel's anthropology, the human first begins to win liberation from immediate physical determination through habits, the cultivated disciplines that allow us to self-regulate in the face of instinctive sensual drives (Lewis 2005, p. 55). Lewis's discussion of habit brings out why religion is especially important for my discussion: Although habit also includes all "ethical aspects of our way of life" and our "concrete existence" generally (ibid., p. 57), Hegel views religion as the "principal bearer of the most significant appropriated habits" (ibid., p. 187).²⁵ But habitual action is, by definition, not very self-conscious action, and so can't count as fully free—we often blame the force of habit for our unthinking, non-intentional actions. How can one become free? It requires a further process of development, reflection, critique, and transformation of *one's habits*.²⁶ And so while full autonomy is in some way freedom from habit, it is also constituted by habit.²⁷ Freedom entails the ability to be critical of one's own habits, which in turn entails having appropriated those habits in the first place, such that they are one's own and help to constitute oneself.²⁸ Religious discourse and practice, as the foremost vehicles of habit and discipline, are therefore simultaneously products of social historical conditioning—and thus subject to naturalistic description as I have conceived of it—as well as constitutive of freedom—and therefore subject to prescription (both as agent and patient, source and target of normative intervention). Put simply, "religion is not mechanically introduced into human beings but lies within them, in their reason and freedom generally" (ibid., p. 307). Albeit historically conditioned, religion admits of engagement within the normative space of reasons, in the Sellars-McDowell idiom.

Although there is some rather arcane Hegelianism that works out the details of this result²⁹, it essentially depends on two very intuitive premises: that we are naturally and historically conditioned, and that we are also free. The only serious question is how to hold these apparently opposing premises together; and I have introduced Hegel to suggest that what might initially look like mutually exclusive or even conceptually contradictory options in this opposition of conditioning to freedom are in fact

²⁴ Nor does this Hegelian solution depend on reading him nontraditionally. Charles Taylor, to whom Lewis points as a paradigmatic exemplar of the traditional metaphysical reading (Lewis 2015b, p. 199), says that Hegel proposes a definitive answer to the problem of "how to unite radical autonomy with the fullness of expressive unity with nature" (Taylor 1975, p. 570). But for those that find this pre-critical Hegel unappealing, it is important to see that the Hegelian rapprochement of freedom and nature can still be made available on the more austere assumptions of the nontraditional reading.

²⁵ This Hegelian notion of religion retains its power even in modern sociology. For example, according to Peter Berger, "the essence of [Thomas] Luckmann's conception of religion is the capacity of the human organism to transcend its biological nature through the construction of objective, morally binding, all-embracing universes of meaning. Consequently, religion becomes not only *the* social phenomenon (as in Durkheim), but indeed *the* anthropological phenomenon *par excellence*" (Berger 1967, p. 176; emphasis in original). This rather plausible definition makes plain why my argument both centers on religion and also apply to the humanities generally.

²⁶ For Lewis's Hegel, "through its further development spirit can abstract from and reflect upon any of its particular habits. And, if spirit is fully free, it can change these habits as well" (Lewis 2005, p. 57).

²⁷ Therefore, McCutcheon's observation that "much of the time, human beings are completely immersed in their social worlds in rather unreflective ways, with nothing in particular in their heads" (McCutcheon 2006, p. 743) does not evacuate the meaningfulness and therefore interpretability of social discourse and practice. Or rather, the final clause in McCutcheon's articulation, "with nothing in particular in their heads"—which I take to mean having no significant thoughts connected with their behavior, and therefore no meaning to interpret—need not follow from the preceding picture of unreflective immersion. If unreflective immersion means habit, such social formation is not opposed to meaningful behavior; rather, it is (on the Hegelian picture as I understand it) constitutive of what it is for humans to have concepts, anything "in their heads" at all. The force of McCutcheon's polemic depends on highly mentalistic, even solipsistic, pictures of meaning and action.

²⁸ "While we can never be fully free when acting merely out of habit or custom, our constitution by customs or ways of life plays an essential role in Hegel's conception of freedom. Because these norms have a role in constituting us, Hegel believes that acting in complete freedom must involve acting in accord with them. Even if we have reflected upon and become conscious of these norms as the particular traditions of a given society, they still make up much of who we are. To act against them would be to act at least in part against ourselves and thus not entirely freely. Hegel consequently sees following the conventions of one's land not simply as conformism but as 'being true to oneself'" (Lewis 2005, p. 145).

²⁹ I am, of course, necessarily flattening Hegel's "complex, three-tiered anthropology that accounts both for what we inherit from the ethical and religious traditions in which we are raised—through habits—and our ability to criticize and transcend these—through self-consciousness" (Lewis 2005, p. 4).

intelligibly compatible. I've drawn this dilemma into relief for the sake of vividly displaying one of the fault lines in contemporary methodological debates, but my overarching picture of simultaneous freedom and conditioning is not particularly exotic; after all, many of our most enduring social theories of religion—from Weber's and Durkheim's to Peter Berger's (which is supposed to be a synthesis of the first two) and all but the most vulgar Marxisms and Freudianisms—present a picture of this sort. Berger (1967, chp. 1) presupposes a dialectic between the social and material products of (individual and collective) human action and the feedback effects of these products on humans: "The two statements, that society is the product of man and that man is the product of society, are not contradictory" (ibid. p. 3). While some might hear my argument as an attack on social scientific methods, it is not so: The thesis of the ineliminability of normativity from religious studies, tied up with the intuitive suppositions that humans are both free and conditioned, is quite consistent with the mainstream of sociological thinking about religion.

What is crucial to see is that these common suppositions apply to all humans: While religion is a paradigm of habituation, science and philosophy and all cultural activity come within the ambit of habit³⁰. All of these social forms must be historically conditioned; and scholars, at least, need to be able to claim freedom and normativity for their own methodologies and concepts. As McDowell plausibly expresses the Kantian view, "the space of reasons is the realm of freedom" (McDowell 1994, p. 5); and scholars are presumably in the reason-giving business³¹ and thus *ipso facto* free. Now, as we have seen, those who want to purge normativity from the study of religion need to view religious behavior as more automatic than autonomous—since that's the only way to think it describable in terms of natural causality without free agency—even as they assume their own scholarly habit to be more free than determined. Not only does such an asymmetrical anthropology look rather presumptuous, I have argued that it undermines the very possibility of interpretation of language. Fairness aside, sheer consistency and intelligibility demand that human scholars recognize the humanity they share with religious people³²; and such scholarship must inevitably then be allowed humanistic dimensions, which are irreducibly normative ones. The price of value-free scholarship is either our own humanity or else the ability to make intelligible the humanity of the people we study.

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³⁰ Or, perhaps, what Pierre Bourdieu means by "habitus," the "system of dispositions" that is the "product of history," which is in turn "the principle of the transformations and regulated revolutions which neither the extrinsic and instantaneous determinisms of a mechanistic sociology nor the purely internal but equally punctual determination of voluntarist or spontaneist subjectivism are capable of accounting for" (Bourdieu 1977, p. 82).

³¹ This, indeed, is what Lewis proposes as characteristic of rigorous scholarship: The criterion is that scholars be critical, i.e., "willing to provide reasons for any particular claim or position" (Lewis 2015a, p. 58), a criterion that does not preclude normativity.

³² Again, this recognition is not to essentialize humanity or imperialistically universalize all aspects of one culture's own notion of the human. Nor is it a matter of "nurturing solidarity" (McCutcheon 2006, p. 740), or presuming that "inasmuch as they share a common human nature and thus dignity, both scholar and religious participants are involved in a consensual conversation" (ibid., p. 722). Inasmuch as the interpretive work with which I am concerned is largely performed on texts written by people long deceased, the issue of consent often does not arise at all.

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