



False But Significant: The Development of Falsity in Religious Cognition in Light of the Holism of the Mental

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Abstract

I elaborate the idea first proposed by Hans Penner that religious language is patently false in a rereading of Donald Davidson's essay, "What Metaphors Mean." I explore a Davidsonian paradigm concerning the semantics of superhuman agents. Religious language is meaningful because it is patently false or trivially true. Patency entails a breakdown at the surface that runs counter to the normative meaning of words. Since no special form of cognition or semantics is necessary to account for religious language, following Nancy Frankenberry's argument about how metaphor and religious language are used, I explore the possibility that false reasoning is a kind of costly signal. Finally I suggest that literacy alters this matrix because it focuses attention on the literal instantiation of sentences in the form of inscriptions, thus exaggerating the role of false reasoning in relation to religion.

Keywords

religion, semantics, Donald Davidson, metaphor, falsity, language, Hans Penner

The solution [to Geach's puzzle] . . . takes seriously the idea that false theories that have been mistakenly believed—what I call myths—give rise to fabricated but genuine entities. These entities include such oddities as . . . the Loch Ness Monster, Santa Claus . . . Such mythical objects are real things, though they are neither material objects nor mental objects ("ideas"). They come into being with the belief in the myth. Indeed, they are created by the mistaken theory's inventor, albeit without the theorist's knowledge. But they do not exist in physical space, and are, in that sense, abstract entities. They are an unavoidable by-product of human fallibility.

—Nathan Salmon, "Mythical Objects"

Why is the truth usually not just un- but *anti*-interesting?

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

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I. Introduction

This essay builds on theories on the semantics of religion to suggest tractable ways to integrate the study of semantics, the branch of linguistics and philosophy concerned with meaning, with cognitive theories of religion. My point of departure is a systems-based understanding of the emergence of religion that sees semantic and material levels in dynamic relation to one another over the course of an individual's development. The essay focuses on the semantic concept of falsity, which I think has not had its due course in the study of religious semantics. In the first part of the essay I lay some of the groundwork for the importance of the notion of falsity for understanding religious language. I suggest an integration of cognitive research on the development of mentalizing concepts with theories from the study of religion about the falsity of religious language. In the next section I provide an example of some relevant research that might help us move toward that integration, in particular, studies about the development of mental state concepts (concepts like belief, desire, and hope) and mental life in general of people who are deaf from birth.

I think these cases may provide a clue for how religious semantics emerges both ontogenetically (developmentally) and phylogenetically (historically). The following section then goes on to apply this research to religion, specifically while taking up the dominant theories and criticisms of semantic approaches to religious language. I argue religious language is meaningful because it is patently false or trivially true. Patency entails a breakdown at the surface of language that runs counter to the normal meaning of words. I also suggest that despite the fact that superhuman agents are imagined and "abstract," their content in religious language is still nevertheless caused in quite normal ways, according to Davidson's notion of triangulation.

After delving into the main theories within this body of literature, the next section suggests some areas within the theory that are in need of elaboration and explanation. Since no special form of cognition or semantics is necessary to account for religious language, following Frankeberry's argument about how metaphor and religious language are used, I explore the possibility that false reasoning can be a kind of costly signal. I suggest that literacy alters this matrix because it focuses attention on the literal instantiation of sentences in the form of inscriptions, thus exaggerating the role of falsity in relation to religion. The final section offers some conclusive thoughts on the themes drawn out throughout the course of the essay.

Whenever analytic philosophers start talking about "truth" many scholars in the study of religion become uncomfortable. There is no such thing as "the" truth, they say, or religion has its own truth. Falsity, by contrast, is a different bird. Humanistic leaning scholars of religion and cognitive scientists of religion

can agree that the attribution of falsity is central to our undertaking; it is the hallmark of skepticism, critical thinking, and the scientific method. Science moves forward primarily through a process of falsification, since it is far easier to judge what is false than what is true. Falsity, in other words, is not merely the opposite of truth, but has its own distinct semantic properties.

Truth conditional semantics, such as that of Donald Davidson, finds that in order to have thought, by which he means human thought, one must be able to attribute the concepts of truth and falsity to sentences. In other words, one must be able to use the concepts of truth and falsity in appropriate conditions. Truth is usually the focus in most discussions of Davidson's theory but falsity is equally as important as truth to thought, if not more so. In saying that the attribution of truth and falsity is necessary for human thought, he did not mean that very young children and animals who do not use the concepts of truth and falsity do not have minds; rather he meant that without the attribution of truth and falsity no sense could be made of one's language having semantic content.

Scholars in the fields of cognitive and developmental psychology made similar points at about the same time Davidson was writing. "Theory of mind," or the ability to read mental states into the behaviors of other agents, was said to be recognized when a person could pass the "false-belief test." More recently a differentiation has been made between implicit and explicit theory of mind, or mentalizing. The former might arise in very young children when they are able to differentiate mental states in practice but are not able to reflect or verbalize such states. The latter, explicit mentalizing, corresponds to the older notion of "theory of mind," a form that is mediated by language. Still, the basic idea remains the same: in order to have robust meta-representations one must be able to differentiate between one's own mental states and those of another. One must be able to hold at least two different mental attributions 'in the head,' a feat that requires not only more rapidly accessible memory (like RAM) than holding one state 'in the head,' but also probably requires grasping the concept of falsity.

In this respect, full-bodied human thought should be thought of as a process of differentiating one's own thoughts from those of others. In order to know what one thinks one must recognize what one does not think. It is not that language gives us the possibility of linking up our minds with others around us, but rather that it gives us the possibility of unlinking, "decoupling" to use a loaded word (Leslie 1987, Boyer 2001), our thoughts from the thoughts of those around us.

Among the many places where Davidson applied his theory was in the domain of literature, specifically with regard to *metaphors*. He tried to distinguish the semantic characteristics of metaphor as distinct from the way people

use metaphors and the effects they have. In Davidson's version of semantics, sentences can either be true or false, though he recognized other semanticists legitimately argued for other applicable truth values such as "neither true nor false." He argued that metaphors were patently false. He thought this was precisely where they get their pragmatic "power." The fact that they were obviously and patently false, he thought, sets off a kind of alarm bell that forces one to attune to other linguistic levels of the metaphor. But as far as the semantic content—or the meaning of the metaphor—is concerned, it could only come from its *falsity*. The metaphor is meaningful precisely because it is false.

More recently, Hans Penner has taken this argument one step further in his study of the semantic content of religious language. Like metaphor, religious language does not mark a special type of language. Penner found that religious language is meaningful precisely because it is patently false.

I think there is an important developmental argument missing from Penner's analysis, since young children are actually not able to appreciate the notion of patent falsity. In this developmental story though, with the help of parents and peers, children begin to attune to certain sentences that stand out as false. Within that class of sentences that are false, some of them are about superhuman or counter-intuitive agents. This is where Penner would like to locate religious language. Religious language is meaningful because it can engage in this truth conditional apparatus. Like metaphors, the way religious language is used, or its pragmatic force, is a different question than its meaning.

These points allow us to reroute the typical critique of the semantic approach to religious language that argues that religion does not involve *beliefs*. People do not really "hold" beliefs, critics say, rather, religion is more about practice. Penner's analysis reverses this trajectory by arguing that religion inescapably involves the attribution of beliefs, or more precisely in this case, the attribution of false truth value to beliefs about superhuman agents. This form of semantic attribution is a purely reflexive and abstract tagging of a particular chunk of language.¹

¹ This view of semantics also applies to more recent theories than Davidson's, such as Brandom's "inferentialism" (1998). Brandom's theory has two basic components. The first is that human interaction is irreducibly normative. The second is that the normativity is inferentially articulated. Brandom proposes a metaphor of "top-down" (2001, 13) score-keeping whereby individuals keep track of both their own and others commitments. One such commitment Brandom calls a *cognitive* commitment, which involves keeping track of what we and others around us regard as true. Whereas standard theories of semantics such as Frege's assume that we have a prior grasp of the concept of truth that we apply in inferential moves, Brandom's theory, "reverses this order of explanation" to suggest that talk about truth is "talk about what is preserved by the good moves" (2012). Once again, we must assume in Brandom's account that we keep score with falsity in an analogous manner, though he gives the concept considerably less attention.

II. Language as Scaffolding: The Case of Nicaraguan Sign Language

Regarding the relationship between falsity and thought, we have some truly remarkable evidence from a study of first generation sign language users in Nicaragua. Researchers discovered an institution in Nicaragua where deaf children were sent and never learned any form of sign language. In the 1970s a nascent form of sign language appears to have been spontaneously invented in the community. As time went on the language followed the typical trajectory of new languages moving from a cumbersome pidgin to a full-blown language. The researchers claim that even today the second cohort of language learners have a richer form of the language than the first generation signers. The researchers use this situation to try to pick apart whether language is necessary for mentalizing to develop or whether it can be based on experience with the world alone.

In 2001, when researchers ran a series of test to determine the grasp of mental-state terms among the students at the school, the first generation of signers produced significantly fewer terms than the second generation, with half showing no grasp of mental state terms at all (by contrast, all groups were able to grasp “desire-state” terms). On false-belief trials, “performance correlated negatively with age.” In other words, the older generation of signers performed far worse than the younger generation. All students who failed the false-belief task also failed to produce mental-state vocabulary (Pyers and Senghas 2009).

When the researchers returned in 2003 to run similar tests, they found that the gap between first and second generation had narrowed. Now all participants were able to produce at least one mental state term and improved substantially in the false-belief task. Why was this the case? The researchers found that starting in 2001 the second-generation students began to socialize at the Deaf Association where the first generation hung out. First-generation signers thus were exposed for the first time to “a form of NSL that was richer than their own and that included the new mental-state words produced by their younger peers” (810). For example, in early NSL (Nicaraguan Sign Language) mimesis was much more common way to communicate, acting out a situation, while in later NSL most of the signs were generated by efficient and parsimonious movements of the hands.

Narratives (and research) like this are hard to come by, in part because of the ethical complications involved in studying human subjects (it is obviously deeply unethical to, say, raise a child in solitary confinement). But this story is a remarkable confluence of developmental, social, and cognitive factors in the emergence of “rich” language. First, we see that it is possible to learn mental

state concepts even late in life. It may be difficult, but all it takes is grasping the concepts. Second, and more importantly, the research tentatively shows that mental state acquisition precedes false-belief understanding: mental state vocabulary is necessary to pass the false-belief test. Third, we also see that the issue is not a simple binary, that you either have mental states or you do not. There is a spectrum of abilities with regard to mental states. Some signers could only use one mental state concept while others were more adept. But this is not to say the mechanisms (or even the timing) associating mental states, false belief, and language are clearly understood.

The authors summarize the latest theories that attempt to do so: mental state terms may “scaffold learners’ social understanding (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995);” the terms may focus attention in a particular way to previously unseen ways of organizing their social interactions (Gopnik & Meltzoff, 1997); learners may use the terms to start to isolate and name internal processes that can pragmatically predict human action (Olson, 1988). Alternatively, the researchers suggest that, “complex language may be necessary for representing false belief. For example, it may be that the complex syntax that accompanies mental-state and other verbs is a critical representational force (de Villiers & de Villiers, 2000; de Villiers & Pyers, 2002). The sentence ‘Mary thought she saw a ghost’ has a main clause that is true (‘Mary thought’) and an embedded clause that is false (‘she saw a ghost’)” (810).

All of these theories, in one way or another, find that mental state concepts allow their users to offload complex data from working memory and thus in effect to embed more “information” in a particular “thought” at one time (see Clark 2006). This ability to embed thoughts and thus attribute them to someone else (“She thinks/she saw a ghost”) is a necessary prerequisite for completing the false-belief task. But in order to master the usage of such a sentence at least two thoughts have to run in parallel, one about what you think and one about what another thinks, and these have to be kept isolated and decoupled from one another. From this perspective, truth and falsity have more to do with keeping our own thoughts separate from others than they do with some kind of postulated correspondence to the world. The meaning of various grunts or gestures emerges out of that process of discovering one’s own mind, and mental state terms assist (and also direct and constrain) that process of discovery.

It is not that animals, young children, and poor language users do not have thoughts. Rather, they have different types of thoughts that are by definition not as well articulated intersubjectively. A beautiful example of this comes from a NPR “Radiolab” segment, entitled “Words,” on the research above in Nicaragua.² At the conclusion of the piece Susan Schaller tells a story from her

² <http://www.radiolab.org/2010/aug/09/>

book *A Man Without Words* (1991: 181-182). The book is about a “languageless” deaf man, Idelfonso, whom Schaller met when he was 27. The book narrates how Schaller taught Idelfonso sign language and the changes he underwent in the process. Schaller thought he was unique and kept asking what it was like before he had language. Idelfonso describes it as the “dark times” and cannot really explain what it was like.

To try to explain, he finally takes her to see his old friends, who live together in a small apartment, and all of whom are deaf but possess no form of sign language (so he is not so unique after all). He tells them to say something to her. This sets off a story about a bullfight that the men had seen. The story is told through “mime,” with each man successively reenacting the experience, by imitating the participants, the matador and the bull, and adding one particular detail, such as a woman in a dress or someone with glasses. As Schaller notes in the Radiolab interview, “in other words it would take them maybe 45 minutes to say: ‘do you remember the time when we were at the bullfight and this woman did such and such?’ ... It’s like drawing a picture.”³

III. The Falsity of Religion

IIIa. *The Role of Patency*

I have been discussing the confluence of human thought, language, and false belief. It is one step further to take these provisional conclusions from scientific research and apply them to religion. However I think this is precisely what Penner tries to do with his semantics of religion, keeping in mind his very specific and disputed definition of religion as a communal system of propositional attitudes and practices relative to superhuman agents.⁴ I think

³ Deficiency in the ability of those on the autism spectrum to pass false belief tasks, and their general trouble with theory of mind and social cognition, should lead to some interesting forms of religiosity among autistic people. Unfortunately, little research exists on the subject. However, see McCauley (2011, 252-268) for further reference, where he describes some consequences of mind-blindness for religion. He thinks religion is “maturationally natural;” with training, autistic people can learn to use theory of mind concepts by way of what he calls a “thoroughly practiced naturalness” (258) or an “ersatz theory of mind” (259). While I agree that mindreading is maturationally natural, I differ because I think *religion* emerges from what he calls thoroughly practiced naturalness (Levy, Forthcoming).

⁴ Brandom (2001, 12-13) provides a helpful gloss to the notion of propositions, where he writes: “the fundamental form of the conceptual is the *propositional*. . . . to be propositionally contentful is to be able to play the basic inferential roles of both premise and conclusion in inferences. Demarcating the conceptual realm by appeal to inference. . . . entails treating the sort of conceptual content that is expressed by whole declarative sentences as prior in the order of

Penner's point about the semantics of religion must be understood in relation to the psychological literature on language and mental states. If we take Penner and Davidson seriously, one cannot have religion unless one can attribute beliefs (especially false beliefs) to other agents. The psychological literature shows us there is not some magic line someone crosses where one suddenly has thought and language; rather, concepts are built up piecemeal and idiosyncratically.

In their review of the book *Radical Interpretation in Religion*, Gardiner and Engler (2008) offer the only insightful commentary on Penner's theory I have found. They say he commits the error of seeing Davidsonian falsity as an epistemic category rather than a semantic one. In other words, they accuse Penner of falling victim to a correspondence theory of truth when he asserts that religious beliefs are patently false, for Gardiner and Engler rightly assert that "the content of a sentence is not given by a referential understanding of its truth conditions" (189). They suggest "scholars of religion are wasting their time if they think that the truth or falsehood of religious language depends on whether or not there really is some religious reality out there or in here: following Davidson, the truth of religious language is a function of how it is used and interpreted" (190).

I think this is a critique that should be taken seriously. However, perhaps we can offer another reading of Penner's position; his is a very responsible way of theorizing about religion in light of critiques of the so-called "four dogmas of empiricism" (Frankenberry and Penner 1999).⁵ After all, the same critique could be leveled against Davidson himself in the essay Penner draws on, "What Metaphors Mean," where Davidson (1978) argues that metaphors are patently false. Penner (1995) means religious language is patently false in the same way Davidson means metaphors are patently false. So it is not, as Gardner and Engler say, that Penner (and Frankenberry) suggests that "the content of religious language is false" (189) but *patently* false: "What I would want to argue is that the content of religious language is *patently* false" (Penner 1995: 247). *Patency* is obviously a crucial notion for the theory, and I say more on this notion subsequently.

explanation to the sort of content that is expressed by subsentential expressions such as singular terms and predicates (12-13)."

⁵ These dogmas were criticized by Quine, Davidson, and Sellars. They are: 1) the analytic-synthetic division, or the distinction between "truths of reason" and "truths of fact;" 2) the principle of reductive verification, the idea that statements can be verified on an individual basis of correspondence with the world; 3) the scheme-content dualism, or the idea that we can distinguish language (schemes) from experience (content); 4) the myth of the Given, or the idea that any pre-theoretical given provides the ground for knowledge (see Levy 2010, 193-194).

To keep things relatively contained for the moment, I want to juxtapose Davidson's essay "What Metaphors Mean," with Penner and Frankenberry's points about the falsity of religious language, Gardner and Engler's criticism, and the psychological studies about falsity noted previously (also Davidson 2001). I think what all of this ultimately shows is that human beings must differentiate between true and false in order to have thoughts; we all attribute falsity to some set of beliefs; religion is a byproduct of our propensity to attribute falsity to some beliefs. That is, we have the possibility of religion when we enter the intersubjective "community of minds," when we recognize false beliefs in other people, and they begin to recognize them in us (Jensen 2004). Similarly when the first anthropologists began to live with and talk to "primitive" people, the beliefs they called "religion" (or "magic") were the ones that stood out in precisely this way (Obeyesekere 1997).

Penner and Frankenberry both refer to Davidson's idea that "generally it is only when a sentence is taken to be false that we accept it as metaphor and start to hunt out the hidden implication. It is probably for this reason that most metaphorical sentences are *patently* false, just as all similes are trivially true" (Davidson 1984: 258). Let's break this down. First, clearly in his use of the words "generally" and "most" Davidson thinks there can be exceptions to this theory. Second, the order of operation is: falsity, acceptance of metaphor, hunt. The falsity is patent, it seems, in the sense that it is automatic, default, unreflective.

This order of operation is clearly reminiscent for Penner of anthropologists in the field on the hunt for "religion." His main purpose in this essay and related ones is to dispel the idea that the hunt could lead to another level of propositional content, or meaning, other than the literal level. Religion traffics in the falsity/hunt program. Colonial anthropology and Romanticism were built on the "hunt." While Penner accepts the falsity, he does not accept the hunt. The hunt was based on the idea that the holder of false beliefs was irrational or did not mean what he said, thus removing his or her agency. In this sense Penner's approach is actually anti-Colonial: it returns agency to the rational, albeit mistaken, "primitive." Penner does not wish to project some version of himself into the "primitive," and thus fall victim to a scheme-content dualism (by constructing some imaginary scheme for the native and imagining that scheme somehow has something to do with how his words make sense; Davidson 2001: 41-43; see also Child 1994). As Davidson puts it: "what matters is not actual falsehood but that the sentence be *taken* as false" (1978: 42, italics added).

Though Penner would never endorse my language, he and Davidson are radically "subjectivist," in a good sense. The attribution of beliefs can only be

subjective, despite the fact that from an intersubjective or third person perspective we share most of our beliefs and they are true. Though the term might best be abandoned, I mean subjective in Davidson's sense of how I relate to my own propositional attitudes, how I know what I think and feel. For Penner, religious language is false, and that is how he understands it.⁶

From Penner's holistic (anti-atomistic) perspective, he must say that the concept of a superhuman agent is derived from the falsity of the *sentence*. In other words, the patent falsity comes first, and this allows Penner to understand the use of the term for the superhuman agent.⁷ For Penner the holistic argument should be stronger even than that: the content of the superhuman agent term is derived from its use in rituals and narratives. Thus I think Gardner and Engler are wrong to accuse him of a correspondence theory of truth, even though one could easily draw that assumption.

Gardner and Engler (2008) are equally wrong that holistic semantics, or perhaps more broadly, a Davidsonian program in the study of religion "cannot simply be seen as a theory to be applied to religious data" (187), though this may depend on what they mean by "simply." I think they are right that such a program should lead us to review what we think religion and data are, and that there are much broader implications for the theory of interpretation in general. But such a program should not prohibit us from theorizing about religion (see Penner 2009).⁸

Penner (and Frankenberry) have a deflationary concept of truth. They think it is a basic primitive, meaning a concept used to explain other concepts, but which cannot itself be explained by other concepts; they thus fully recognize "the folly of offering any definition, explanation, or property of truth" (Frankenberry 2002, 177 n. 16). If their concept of truth is deflationary, *so is their concept of falsity*; so nowhere do Penner or Frankenberry explain why or what causes religious language to be patently false. Neither apparently does the falsity prevent one from gaining insight through religious myths, for

⁶ Davidson tends to see intersubjectivity as the basis for subjectivity, though Godlove disputes this. I think for Davidson the process of learning how to communicate is mixed up; intersubjectivity is primary and relates to subjective development non-linearly (see especially Davidson 2001).

⁷ This is rather similar to the idea that in a ritual the superhuman agent concept emerges, in some sense, with a (patent?) breakdown in the normative structure of action (Sørensen 2007).

⁸ The authors do point to an interesting paradox. Penner's approach suggests that there is no difference between religious language and language in general. At the same time, scholars want to analyze distinguishing features of religion insofar as it gives us an object of study. So, on the one hand, a Davidsonian program threatens our subject matter. On the other hand, the answer is right there: clearly Davidson thinks metaphors operate a little differently than other types of language, so there is room for difference even if we are still talking about natural language (see also Gardner and Engler 2010).

Penner's most recent book on the Buddha is a literal translation of many of the myths about the Buddha (2009).

IIIb. *Causation and Correspondence*

Some of Terry Godlove's points are relevant to this discussion. Godlove (1989) was the first to apply Davidson to the study of religion in a systematic form. When accounting for religion, Godlove encourages us to remember the scenario of radical interpretation, or the most basic communicative situation such as that between two speakers who do not speak the same language.⁹ He explains religion in relation to Davidson's notion of ostension. He says, on the one hand, that we must have massively similar and true beliefs in the interpretive situation because "interpretive success rests fundamentally on those 'methodologically most basic cases'" (463). Ostensive situations are special because they allow us to break into what Davidson calls the "meaning-belief cycle," which is simply the idea that meaning and belief-attribution usually come along together. As Godlove further says: "our knowledge of what cause inspires a speaker to assent to a sentence allows us to break out of the meaning-belief cycle... At least with respect to such 'occasion' sentences we can hope to tell when a speaker holds a sentence true without knowing what the speaker means by the sentence; hence their interpretive primitiveness" (463-464). Occasion sentences arrived at through radical, triangulatory, apprenticeship in language are thus crucial for understanding Davidson's theory. Davidson calls these learning contexts "triangular" because they involve a minimum of two agents and a shared world. These occasions are a major part of what gives language semantic content. There is reference, but it is non-linear; it is twisted.

On the other hand, for Godlove, religious discourse works differently. He argues that religious discourse belongs to a theoretical and abstract level and thus is not under the strict world ordering demands of those methodologically basic cases of ostension. However, despite the fact that any speaker's developmental acquisition of language must be based on ostensibly 'basic' cases, I do not think Davidson supposes *any* beliefs hold interpretive primitiveness. This was his most decisive break with Quine. There is no such thing as foundational beliefs. But the distinction that Godlove draws is still important. Two beings with radically different beliefs, when imagined in the radical interpretive situation will not begin conversing by making appeal to anything abstract; Godlove was right as far as this is concerned. They will begin by attributing

⁹ For an illustrative example, see the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Darmok," (season 5, episode 2) originally aired September 30, 1991.

beliefs to one another about the visible world around them at a particular time. If these beings differed so radically in their beliefs about the ostended world, interpretation would never get off the ground. The question is, would the interpreters ever attribute anything close to a religious belief? Similarly, at what point can we talk about Idelfonso having religion, religious language and beliefs?

Religious beliefs have some properties that make us think that the objects or events that caused (historically or otherwise) them were not in the world or that their referents are fictional. I will approach this later in the essay. For now, I will say that this whole way of approaching language based on starting with the meaning of the parts, we have seen, is flawed. It leads us into eventual burdensome correspondence.

Godlove may give some cover to the developmental picture I am trying to paint. For Davidson, the semantic content comes unproblematically from correspondence with the world, albeit this is a form of *triangular* correspondence, while at the same time recognizing that nothing in the world makes a sentence true. The developmental history, whereby an individual learns the right circumstances to use words and in turn gives words and sentences whatever semantic content they have is also crucial for understanding the semantics of superhuman agents. Attributing, as Penner does, falsity to religious language—language that is “related” to superhuman agents—does not necessarily commit fallacies about reference, as Gardner and Engler accuse.

Gardiner and Engler’s argument thus, “wrongly equates a truth-conditional theory of meaning with a naïve correspondence theory of meaning. That is to say, it conflates semantics with representational realism, an epistemic position. The authors can very well criticize the correspondence theory of meaning without lashing it to a truth-conditional theory of meaning.”¹⁰ Instead, we recognize the semantic content of religious language in the same triangular fashion as noted above, through interacting linguistically with objects and agents in the world. Superhuman agents *do* have a reference: their use in myths and rituals, and other representations in various forms of media. Such superhuman agent terms derive their content from their use in sentences with truth conditions. Thus, despite what Gardiner and Engler say, there are perfectly legitimate ways of studying the semantics of superhuman agents.

As we saw the idea that religious language is patently false could easily slip into an endorsement of a correspondence theory of truth. Penner does not say what makes religious language patently false. How could he? If nothing in the

¹⁰ Nancy Frankenberry, Personal Correspondence, August 20, 2011. For Davidson’s first arguments about the fallacies of most correspondence theories of truth, see Davidson (1969). Rejection of such theories presents serious challenges for cognitivism and reductionism.

world makes a sentence true, it should follow that nothing in the world makes a sentence false.¹¹ I think we can fill in some of the details about Penner's argument by going back to Davidson's essay "What Metaphors Mean" for a closer look. In doing so we must remember Penner is not arguing that all religious language is metaphorical; he is rather borrowing Davidson's argument about metaphor and applying it to a particular sub-section of propositional attitudes.

IV. The Use of Falsity

One of the main arguments Davidson makes is that there are no secondary layers of meaning with regard to metaphors; that no special theory of semantics or language is necessary to account for them. This argument is obviously what appealed to Penner, because he wishes to make the same case about religious language: that no special theory of semantics, language, or symbolism is necessary to account for it. Since there is no secondary level of religious meaning or hidden message behind the literal meaning, religious language, like metaphor, cannot be paraphrased.

Engler and Gardiner (2009) criticize the argument about the "semantics" of religion in *Rethinking Religion* by Lawson and Mccauley for precisely this reason. They say Lawson and Mccauley want to "have it both ways," in the sense that they claim religious language operates with the same semantics as language in general *and* that religious language has its own particular "self-referential" form of semantics. It seems many theorists who are concerned with superhuman agents tend to run into this problem because we want to postulate that religious language is different and thus stake out some academic territory at the same time as we want to maintain a holistic frame that is necessary for a semantic theory to work.¹²

¹¹ One clue about what makes metaphors "novel" or "surprising" is what Davidson calls a "built in aesthetic feature" (38). Elsewhere he says the "absurdity or contradiction in a metaphorical sentence guarantees we won't believe it and invites us, under proper circumstances, to take the sentence metaphorically" (42). Regardless, some aesthetic candidate like absurdity or contradiction appear to be a good indication of patent falsity, or at least patency.

¹² Though they do not endorse it, Engler and Gardner (2009) note that some "standard examples of reflexivity" in philosophy are "trivial truths" like "This sentence has five words" (32). This point may have parallels with my addendum to Penner's argument about Davidson. As should be clear, the most recent semantic theories (see the Salmon quotation in the epigraph) have no problem (or little problem) solving Geach's puzzle about how seeming non-referring terms can mean anything. In the paradigm offered here, religious language means according to standard truth conditional semantics, in its patent falsity (and trivial truths).

The second important argument Davidson makes about metaphors is to analytically differentiate their meaning from their use (semantics and pragmatics). Similarly, Penner wants to do the same with regard to religious language.¹³ However, Penner did not mention three aspects of Davidson's argument I think are in need of elaboration. First, for Davidson, metaphors are "usually" patently false (1978, 43), but they are also sometimes "trivially true." Second, as Frankenberg astutely shows in her commentary on the same essay, metaphors provoke us to "see" things we might otherwise not see. Davidson even goes far as to say there may be such a thing as "metaphorical truth," he simply denies it applies to *sentences* (33). Third, none of the theorists in question appear to pay very much attention to the medium involved in most metaphorical and religious language under analysis: writing.

Let's take these points in order: it would appear that the semantics of metaphor has less to do with metaphors being false, than with them having "patent" truth conditions, either true or false. In this analysis a lot appears to ride on the notion of patency, on the literal semantic layer being automatically obvious. As other scholars such as Searle (1979) have written, metaphor seems to be part of broader linguistic phenomena where language breaks down.

For Davidson, though he agrees with Searle that language breaks down in some sense, the patency of metaphor has more to do with its *openness*. He thinks similes are "trivially true," but it is clear he also intends this to apply to metaphor, for "a metaphor *says* only what it shows on its face—usually a patent falsehood or an absurd truth" (43). He also says "patent falsity is the usual case with metaphor, but on occasion patent truth will do as well," using the examples "business is business" and "no man is an island" (42). I think similarly that religious language is either patently false *or* absurdly true (honor your father and mother), and thus endlessly indeterminate. Like metaphor then, religious language promotes an endless "spelling out" of what it "makes us notice" (see p. 46, note 16). Since there is no end to what religious language may make us see, or say in further metaphors, then there is no settled way to pick out "better" or "worse" metaphors. Interpretations of religious language are as creative (and chaotic) as the limits of theologians' imaginations.

¹³ This point runs counter to Gardner and Engler's (2008) claim that Penner (and Frankenberg) are out to show that "scholars of religion should not separate issues of meaning from those of use" (189). Quite the contrary, this is exactly what Penner wishes to show (despite trying to remain consistent with Davidson's impulses toward pragmatism, or the idea that reasoning is ultimately a form of *doing*): "I depend on the distinction between what words mean and what they are used to do. I think metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use" (Davidson 1978, 33). The more pertinent question for Penner is whether the interpretation of religion requires *both* semantics and pragmatics.

Davidson argues that there is no pragmatic line between a metaphor and some forms of gibberish. Any statement can be taken as pragmatically insightful, as causing one to postulate endless meanings. Davidson and Penner's point is that understanding starts at a semantic level where one recognizes that the "information" the speaker or writer means to convey is coming through a novel use of words, that they are intentionally breaking down standards. Falsity is a signal of that intention. Thus Davidson distinguished between metaphors and lies, though they are related, because when one lies one usually intends another to believe something one thinks is false. In the case of metaphor, though it is false, the intention to have someone believe the literal meaning is absent.¹⁴

Penner makes the case that we do not understand the role of superhuman agent names in false sentences by building up from the parts. Rather, following what Davidson called the "unity of the proposition," we derive the meaning of the parts from the whole, from the falsity. Davidson was concerned with such unity in his last major work before his death (2005). There he presents another possible option we could use to understand the semantics of religion. He thought there are paradigmatic ostensive sentences where proper names "do name someone or something" (143). In these cases "if we want to postulate entities such as meanings and propositions, we can explain what these entities are only insofar as we can explain how singular terms refer to objects and predicates are true of objects." Singular terms are basically proper names—terms that refer to singular objects or individuals—and we learn the use of proper names in these most basic cases (predicates modify the subject of sentences; in basic cases, think of them as verbs).

But Davidson leaves open the "question whether there are sentences, utterances of which we understand, for example sentences with names that do not name anything, which are neither true nor false" (143). Davidson's approach is thus similar to Karel Lambert's appeal to "free logic" or logics that allow variables to refer to entities whose existence is dubious (see Lambert 1991 and also Salmon 2000).¹⁵

¹⁴ Relevant for our purposes, Davidson writes, "Telling a lie requires not that what you say be false but that you think it false. Since we usually believe true sentences and disbelieve false ones, most lies are falsehoods; but in any particular case this is an accident" (42–43). So, although we usually believe true sentences and disbelieve false sentences, in a particular linguistic context things could go either way; what matters is the intention to deceive. In the same way, with metaphor and religion, in a particular communicative context its falsity is an accident.

¹⁵ It is an open and crucial question whether Davidson's endorsement of such a possibility jeopardizes the argument about the patent falsity of metaphor and all the clarity it gains. Theologians could possibly revive the *mysterium* argument on this basis by claiming their words are "literally neither true nor false."

In a similar fashion, metaphor may work by piecing together parts of sentences that do not normally go together. Metaphor mimics, in some sense, the paradigmatic cases of false sentences. We know how the parts work because of how they have been used in the paradigmatic cases. If we bring Davidson's argument back to the subject of this essay, it appears there is still room for religious semantics to be parasitic in some sense on more basic cases. We know how names are supposed to work in the paradigmatic cases and we build up sentences from the ground up. In the most basic cases, sentences are true or false. We learn how the parts of sentences relate to the wholes on the basis of these basic sentences. Once we understand that relation we can start building sentences out of parts that wind up being neither true nor false, but we can still understand them.

In either case, this breakdown in truth conditions has distinct pragmatic consequences. The physical utterances that instantiate false sentences have "causal" powers. Like a picture, they cause us to see things, to pay attention and notice things we might otherwise not: "a metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact—but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact" (1978, 46).

Are such pictures worth a thousand words? "How many facts or propositions are conveyed by a photograph? None, an infinity, or one great unstatable fact? Bad question. A picture is not worth a thousand words, or any other number. Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture" (47). Just like such pictures where the currency exchange is closed, it is important to point out here that religious language, despite being patently true or false under this Davidsonian umbrella, still can make us "see," still give insight, reveal, and cause conceptual change.

Next, I want to explore the idea that patent truth and falsity is a type of "costly signal." We must be careful here not to confuse our semantic theories of truth and falsity with their use, thus falling victim to the problems of reference of which Penner (perhaps wrongly) and Lawson and McCauley (perhaps rightly) were accused. Or to put it more precisely, once we have worked out the semantics of religion (its patency), perhaps then we can go on to stake the more provisional claim that such beliefs are a type of costly signal (Bulbulia 2004; Martin 2011). Davidson's account of truth is neither a correspondence nor coherence theory, but incorporates elements of both through the mechanism of triangulation. Falsity must then incorporate elements of incoherence and noncorrespondence while operating through the same basic mechanism of triangulation. I postulate that the cost of falsity lies somewhere in this incoherence and noncorrespondence, which are themselves necessary byproducts of triangulation. To be clear, the cost of false belief belongs to the level of use,

so we are outside semantics, but it provides a plausible mechanism for the role of false beliefs in terms of religion. Too many false beliefs and one is deemed a lunatic, but just enough and one is a sage, prophet, or saint.

This argument has interesting parallels with Frankenberry's (2002) Rortian reading of the same material on metaphor. The "strong poets" are those who use metaphor to change language and change the way we think. She endorses Rorty's position that most cultural change, whether religious or scientific, comes in the invention of new metaphors. Falsity, in this sense, is more important for creativity and change than truth. Falsity can break the inertia of coherence and correspondence.

In spite of this argument there are caveats to the idea that costly signaling is an explanation of religion. If false reasoning is a costly signal, it does a better job explaining *solidarity* in general than religion in particular. I remain committed to the idea that religion is not a natural kind but a scholarly invention. It tells us more about ourselves than it does about nature. The problem of falsity, as we saw from Penner, is what motivated early Western scholars to search for the hidden meaning behind such beliefs because they associated falsity with irrationality.

One particularly important medium for religious language, where it is literally a picture, is written language. In this case the words can be seen. The sentence is not instantiated in a sound wave from mouth to ear but in a physical inscription from mind to hand to eye. There is evidence to indicate writing tends to lead to a "literalization" effect, as is apparent in the association between fundamentalism and the requirement for so-called "literal" readings of texts. Like the argument about metaphor, writing focuses attention on metalinguistic levels of discourse, especially by opening up a distinction between literality and paraphrase (see Olson 1988/2001; Levy 2010). This must have strong consequences for religion (Pyssianinen 1999). Like a picture or a bump in the head, a written sentence can have similar effect, provoking an endless search for meaning. Literacy is thus implicated in generating attributions of religion.¹⁶

V. Conclusion: *L'aiuola che ci fa tanto feroci*

Falsity gets a raw deal in scholarship on meaning and semantics. Most books and textbooks on semantics and the philosophy of language have detailed

¹⁶ I think this is partly what leads Wallace Chafe to argue that, "there may be a special compatibility between writing and fiction" (1994, 224).

entries about truth but none on falsity. It is as if we are supposed to figure out what falsity is purely in relation to truth. Of course, the two concepts are locked in relation to one another, but I have been trying to suggest that falsity has its own semantics that is distinct from truth.

On one level saying “primitive” beliefs are false is giving people back their agency and claiming their words actually apply to the world, that they know what they are talking about, or “know what they are doing” (Frankenberry 2002, 173). On another level, though, we can see why people are reticent about accepting their own religious beliefs as false. Falsity does indicate *something* amiss in terms of correspondence with the world.

One conclusion of this essay is that the attribution of truth or falsity can only happen at very specific local levels, in what Davidson called “triangulation.” Sentences are deemed true or false, or trivially true and patently false, or neither true nor false, on a case-by-case basis. For Davidson, our beliefs are massively true (but not in terms of correspondence or coherence *per se*) and they are mostly shared. So—like the strong poet David Foster Wallace says through his character Don Gately (or Gately says through him) in *Infinite Jest*, and noted in my epigraph—it is the falsities, the ambiguities, and indeed the trivialities, where things start to get pragmatically interesting. False or ambiguous beliefs—dispositional mental states—are more useful, evolutionarily (perhaps) and cognitively in terms of the poetic and progressive potentialities they open.

Davidson uses a parable about a Saturnian coming to earth to explain his theory about metaphors in “What Metaphors Mean” (36). In this story we are asked to imagine trying to teach a visitor from Saturn “to use the word ‘floor.’” You want to teach him how to apply the word correctly in situations he has not been in before.

Applying this same insight to religion broadens the thrust of Penner’s argument. I take away two points away from the story about the Saturnian. The first is that the attribution of falsity and thus metaphor may only take place on a case-by-case basis. There is simply no essential difference between the novel but “correct” use of a word and metaphor; as with most of Davidson’s philosophy, interpretation is radically *local*. The second point to take away is that we learn the meaning of words in our developmental history by observing, in a radically empiricist fashion, their use in sentence. As stated in the first part of this essay, one learns about the relation between language and the world in the course of development. Davidson suggests that you cannot tell the Saturnian how to use a new word like “floor,” but you can *show* him how to use it, through pointing, stamping, repeating, and rewarding. For Davidson, once the Saturnian learns how to use a word in the right circumstances, you could

then go on to *tell* him something new about the world, for example that “*here is a floor.*” Davidson calls the first process learning the meaning and the second learning the use.

Looking down at the earth and feeling inspired as you fly away from it in his spaceship, you now quote to the Saturnarian the “astronautic vision” from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (Paradiso XXII): “the small round floor that makes us passionate” [*sic*] (or as Davidson has it you just say “floor”). For Davidson there is “very little” difference between the Saturnarian taking this as a metaphor, as you intended it, or taking this as a novel turn of phrase meant to “drill in the use of language,” because according to his theory, “a word has a new meaning in a metaphorical context.”

I submit that we should understand the patency I have shown to be part of the semantics of religion with this story in mind. Keeping in mind a holistic definition of religion (such as: a system of propositional attitudes and practices relative to superhuman agents), the key question is: how do we learn the meaning of words for superhuman agents? As Davidson suggested, perhaps we first learn how names in general tend to apply to agents or other aspects of the world. Once we have learned this trick, we can then plug superhuman agents or other fuzzy names into utterances. We learn how to do so in the context of stories and narratives about them. In most religions we also see images of them, or they are animated in other ways (such as in puppet shows or on film). We also hear about people interacting with them, talking to them, seeing them. So even though we might not interact as children with superhuman agents, we might hear that such is possible from a trusted source. Now in this context, as above, there might be “very little” difference between taking such sentences as false and taking them as novel uses of language.

Some similar type of story must explain how we could understand the semantics of religion in any child or new language user like Ildelfanso, the deaf man who was not taught to use sign language until he was 27. In this case, at what point would Ildelfanso recognize religion and at what point would we attribute religious attitudes to him? Like any language, there is of course a word-sign for “God” in sign language (see Figure 1 for the word in American Sign Language, or ASL).

Davidson’s approach to metaphor applied to religious language tells us there is no special cognitive content of religious language beyond the literal meaning. No special theory of language, semantics, or cognition for that matter, is required to deal with it. For scholars of religion, taking more seriously the Davidsonian parallels between religious sentences and metaphorical ones has additional interesting consequences beyond what Penner provides. Davidson’s metaphors “provide a kind of lens or lattice,” making us notice aspects of the



Figure 1. The word for “God” in ASL. © 2004, www.Lifeprint.com. Used by permission.

world we might not have noticed before. When considering the role of the scholar or literary critic in elucidating metaphors, Davidson is clear that “interpretation and elucidation” are in order (47). He goes on:

Many of us need help if we are to see what the author of a metaphor wanted us to see and what a more sensitive or educated reader grasps. The legitimate function of so-called paraphrase is to make the lazy or ignorant reader have a vision like that of the skilled critic. The critic is, so to speak, in benign competition with the metaphor maker. The critic tries to make his own art easier or more transparent in some respects than the original, but at the same time he tries to reproduce in others some of the effects the original had on him. In doing this the critic also, and perhaps by the best method at his command, calls attention to the beauty or aptness, the hidden power, of the metaphor itself (47).

Similarly, the same analogy may again apply to the scholar of religious language. His or her role is to make the lazy or ignorant have visions, to make his own art better than the original while reproducing some of its effects, thus calling attention to the beauty, aptness, and power of religion. Perhaps this is where the analogy fails, unless we add that the scholar of religion is also on the hunt for the situations where this process ultimately breaks down.

The main claim of this essay has been that scholars of religion need to pay more attention to the semantics of falsity. But why have I concluded by returning again to deafness and Davidson’s idea of the slippage between literal language and metaphor? Grasping the concept of falsity is crucial for us to enter worlds of thought and is therefore central to religion; it helps us distinguish our own thoughts from those around us. But as we have seen, such concepts

take time to emerge both ontogenetically and phylogenetically. I have been concerned with the puzzle of how it is possible for such a concept to emerge in light of the holistic nature of semantics and inference. Given the nature of holism, how is it possible to have religious thoughts in the first place? The puzzle applies both to the development of religious concepts in individuals and the evolution or emergence of religious concepts in human history.

Davidson's argument for triangulation provides one possible answer to the puzzle. We have seen how scholars have modified it to try to account for religious language. However, given Davidson's account—stiffly resisting epistemic notions of truth and falsity while at the same time recognizing the crucial role of developmental triangulation in providing content to our most basic thoughts—we must conclude that religious language is not that far from the earth that makes us passionate after all.

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