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DAVIDSONIAN SEMANTIC HOLISM AS META-THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

On Gabriel Levy, *Beyond Heaven and Earth* (2022)

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Overview

Beyond Heaven and Earth: A Cognitive Theory of Religion (2022 – hereafter *BHE*) makes a case for consilience between humanistic and scientific approaches to the study of religion.¹ Chapter 1 introduces Levy’s framework, which brings Davidson’s ideas into dialogue with the cognitive science of religion (CSR). Chapter 2 discusses religious language as a type of narrative, associated with fiction: this places Mickey Mouse, Santa Claus, spirits, and gods in the same cognitive category. In Chapter 3, Levy argues that there is a continuum between the human ability to interpret language and the ability of human beings and other animals to interpret information in their natural environments. The other three chapters look at examples from his perspective: the *Sefer Yitzirah*, an ancient or early medieval Jewish text that describes the cosmos as structured by language; contemporary cults of celebrity; and interpersonal intimacy.

The book’s title needs unpacking – why “beyond” heaven and earth (Schilbrack 2023: 100)? The phrase appears only twice in the book: in the preface and

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in the last line. Levy initially tells a story about his research on the effects of tsunamis on religious practices in Papua New Guinea. He describes the night sky, or ‘the heavens,’ as a type of “natural information” of special interest to people there. He was struck by the thought that “religion partly concerns this type of heavenly information, just as it concerns earthly tsunamis. But the information religions contain in narrative media is not simply heavenly or earthly; it is beyond heaven and earth” (xi). He ends the book with this: “Religion grows out of the universe, but in order to make sense of it we have to recognize the paradox that it is both mental and material, or perhaps neither, but certainly beyond heaven and earth” (188).

The metaphor is unclear and open-ended, but it evokes *BHE*’s strategy of moving past certain conceptual binaries in order to better make sense of religion.² Understanding Levy’s theory involves asking what grounds and guides this strategy. Levy’s push to move beyond these binaries is both pragmatic and meta-theoretical. Pragmatically, one-sided allegiance and resulting polarized debates have hampered the discipline. Arbitrary rejection of these binaries is unproductive. Competing proponents have made important contributions, and room should be found for insights from both sides in a non-competitive environment. This is where Davidson’s philosophy plays a central meta-theoretical role.

The subtitle is also significant. The book’s working title was *Beyond Heaven and Earth: An Anomalous Monist Theory of Religion*. Davidson’s anomalous monism is central to *BHE*. That view sees mental events as identical to, but not describable as, physical events; and this leads Levy to challenge a series of traditional dichotomies, most importantly mind/matter, subject/object, experience/thing, animate/inanimate and scientific/humanistic approaches to studying religion.³ With this dissolution of dichotomies, scholars can stop arguing about which side of these and other binaries is the true home of cognition, religious or non-religious, and about which side of each binary takes precedence over the other. The publisher insisted on replacing “anomalous monist” with “cognitive” in the subtitle, presumably because the familiar term would attract more readers. This change is misleading, to the extent that it suggests that *BHE* is yet another cognitivist-oriented account of religion. Levy works within what he calls the cognitivist paradigm, but he is doing much more than this. He is trying to rethink that paradigm from the ground up. That said, the working title is also misleading: Levy draws on much more than Davidson’s anomalous monism, especially his philosophy of language and theory of meaning. And he has no qualms about shaking up standard paradigms.

BHE emphasizes enactivist approaches within CSR. (Enactivist approaches propose that cognition arises through a dynamic interaction between organisms and environments, emphasizing the role of embodiment and action in the generation of knowledge and experience.) The Davidsonian view of meaning or semantic content – that understanding and communication are grounded in interactions between individuals in a shared world they experience, rather than in representational terms – then informs a novel account of cognitive factors in

the formation of religious ideas and practices. *BHE* draws extensively on Davidson, but it is not a work of exegesis. It leverages some of his views, arguing that some should be altered. Levy points to the potential value of other metaphysical systems, notably Thomas Nagel's neutral monism (2012), but his heart is with Davidson.

Davidson's work was wide ranging and influential. Kathrin Glüer notes that his body of articles is "tightly interwoven and holistic to the point where understanding only gradually dawns upon the whole": it is "arguably the most systematic and coherent vision of the human mind and its relation to the world offered by any philosopher since the great system builders of centuries past" (2011: 6, 4). Levy seeks a comparable level of integration as he extends a certain subset of Davidson's ideas to the study of religion. We will refer to Davidson's views (arguably a system) as Davidsonian semantic holism (DSH), an umbrella term that covers his theory of mind (anomalous monism) and his theory of meaning (known as 'interpretationism').

Here is Levy's key move: if humanist approaches to studying religion take non-representational semantics seriously and naturalist approaches take anomalous monism seriously, they can be reconciled in fruitful ways that sidestep a number of dead-ends, roadblocks, and impasses.⁴ The book traces some of these paths. For Levy, both approaches are essential to any adequate account of religion. He argues that they can work together harmoniously only if we correct certain mistaken presuppositions in each, presuppositions that are rarely recognized. *BHE* first highlights these and makes a case that they are two sides of the same dubious philosophical coin. It then sets out philosophically grounded replacements that lead to reconciliation. *BHE*'s core claim is that the resulting rapprochement between humanist and natural approaches makes new advances possible.

Approaches, ideas, theories

In the first edition of *Contemporary Theories of Religion: A Critical Companion*, Michael Stausberg distinguished theoretical approaches, theoretical ideas, and theories (2009b: 9–11). A scholar takes a theoretical approach when they employ some established theoretical lens to focus in on their specific areas of interest, such as Marxist, feminist, or post-colonialist approaches. These lenses often come from other disciplines, resulting in tangentially cross-disciplinary work. Theoretical ideas are more or less "embryonic theories or standing points for further theorizing" (9). These often leverage particular concepts. They are often test-driven in conferences, articles, and chapters. If such conceptual forays seem productive, they can be developed into full-fledged theories that aim to pass higher evidential and peer-review thresholds. *BHE*, the most developed presentation of Levy's ongoing project, illustrates Stausberg's three-part distinction.

At the first level, Levy explicitly employs cognitive science (CS) as a theoretical lens. This puts him firmly within an increasingly familiar and well-established

paradigm. (At least five of the fifteen chapters in the *Contemporary Theories of Religion* were devoted to CSR [Stausberg 2009a].) Levy is not content to borrow and apply an established form of CS. He critiques what is often called ‘the standard model,’ pointing to aspects of religion that call for significant changes to that model. This moves beyond a cross-disciplinary appropriation to more genuinely inter-disciplinary lines of inquiry. Shabalina suggests that *BHE* is a radical challenge to CSR, “constructing anew the core concepts for the discipline” (2023: 78).

This highlights *BHE*’s strategy: taking CS seriously forces humanistically inclined scholars of religion to reimagine much of their subject matter; but if scientifically inclined scholars of religion want to coherently claim to study religion (rather than something else), they must also reimagine much of their underlying theoretical machinery. As Levy puts it, “Humanist-minded scholars of religion get some important things wrong about the harder sciences, and scholars in the harder sciences get some important things wrong about humanists” (183). (Davidson’s anomalous monism is what cuts both directions on this point.) Levy’s main critique of the standard CS model is not that it fails to live up to its hype or defend itself from critiques (e.g., Engler and Gardiner 2017). Rather, it is philosophically suspect: it stands (and falls) on unstable and unsustainable metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. As Levy wrote while working on *BHE*, “there are implicit, unjustified assumptions about the nature of reality built into methods and theories. At least these should be made explicit” (2020: 260). By engaging with CSR from a Davidsonian perspective, Levy does this by employing and moving between two distinct theoretical approaches.

At the second level, Levy’s earlier work looks at a series of theoretical ideas: e.g., false beliefs as costly signalling; divination and superhuman/counter-intuitive agents; agents and fiction; the humanities and cognition (2012; 2014; 2018; 2020). Over a decade before *BHE*, he argued that “anomalous monism ... provides some insight into understanding the nature of rabbinical hermeneutics and religion,” and he further developed this idea in his earlier book (2010: 167; 2014).

At the third level – following Stausberg’s tripartite hierarchical distinction – we might expect *BHE* to represent a fully developed theory. In some ways this is the case; in others not. Whether Levy provides a ‘theory’ of religion depends on our definition. Here, we develop an answer that draws on Michael Stausberg’s proposed “four interrelated main questions” that any theory of religion “can be reasonably expected to address” (Stausberg 2009b, 3):

1. the specificity of religion, i.e., what makes religion(s) different from other things;
2. the origin of religion(s), i.e., the preconditions that first obtain in order for religion to exist at all;
3. the function(s) of religion;
4. the structure of religion, i.e., how the various “aspects, dimensions, components, recurrent patterns or building blocks” that are typically mentioned coherently hang together (see Blair 2019).

The specificity of religion

Levy largely adopts Hans Penner's definition that religions are "communally instituted systems of propositional attitudes⁵ and practices related to superhuman agents" (38; Penner 2014). He explicitly agrees that the definition is "not perfect," but it at least "tells you what slice of reality I look at when I imagine religion," and it "does a good job of isolating most of the systems people think of when they think of religion" (38). This apparently prosaic definition is revealed as interesting and complex through the lens of DSH. The same definition oriented his earlier book (2014: 10–11). There, "for more on this definition and the debates," he directed readers to an edited volume of Davidsonian perspectives on the study of religion (2014: 185 n.5; Frankenberry 2002).

To start with, what people say and do – their propositional attitudes and practices – are semantic entities: they are determined and identified by their semantic content; they have meaning. Understanding narrative as a paradigmatic semantic entity, Levy views religion as a particular form of narrative. It differs from non-religious narrative, like science, only by including talk of superhuman agents. Understanding the nature of religion requires understanding the nature of narrative: what sort of meaning constitutes it, how meaning is acquired, interpreted, transmitted, etc.

DSH challenges the generally accepted model of meaning as representation; it has an anti-representational view of meaning. Meaning-as-representation can be understood in at least two ways: (i) that meanings are somehow housed in mental symbolizations (representations), or (ii) the meaning of language is given by what it describes (represents). Levy's anti-representationalism rejects both. Like Davidson, he

does not think the term "belief" refers to a representation in someone's head. ... This is a crucial point to grasp going forward when we consider religion to involve propositional attitudes. Such attitudes should not be understood in representational terms but rather in pragmatic terms. As a pragmatic concept, beliefs are tied to occasions and real patterns ... They are ephemeral, coming and going in the context of communicative situations. They do not refer to representations in the head, but to external behaviors.

(12; see 2014: 3–5)

Meanings, on Levy's and Davidson's view, are housed in those behaviours, in intentional bodily movements that always take place in social contexts that are embedded in a shared external world. We arrive at meanings by interpreting these movements in these situations. Rejecting representational semantics allows *BHE* to sidestep many controversial and thorny problems that arise with attempts to define religion. Under a DSH approach, the meaning of a given term is not given by what it denotes, represents or refers to, but by an open-ended set of web-like relations that reflect (or just are) both how it is used

within a linguistic community and how those uses relate to other words (whose meanings are given in the same way). Defining words should not be seen in terms of setting out sets of necessary and sufficient conditions. There simply is no objective fact nor single right view of the meaning of any term. This applies especially to complex ideas like ‘religion,’ which are networked mainly with aspects of the social world (which is not sharply distinct from the natural one). This does not open the door to relativism: we cannot just conceive of religion any way we want. If that term is going to be used meaningfully within a linguistic community, one person’s web of usages must largely map up with those of others, granted that perfect agreement is never to be found. So, if different scholars or groups of scholars regard themselves as all talking about ‘religion,’ there must be substantial overlap in their usages. A semantic critique that has been raised against standard CSR approaches is that what ‘religion’ means when employed by the cognitive science researchers does not sufficiently resemble what it means when used by humanist scholars, the general public and religious practitioners (Frankenberry 2014; Gardiner and Engler 2016). Levy endorses this critique (66): he sees it as a reason to rethink, not abandon, CSR.

DSH views meaningfulness in holistic ways: the meaning of each term is a function of its relationship to many other terms, each meaningful in the same holistic way. So, Levy holds that one cannot understand what a religion is – or at least what scholars take to be their subject matter – in isolation from a range of other things, including communities and institutions, propositional attitudes, practices, superhuman agents, and how we conceptualize these things. Centrally, we cannot understand superhuman agency without understanding how it compares to humanness and to agency in general: “My definition of religion thus involves agency and the difference between human and superhuman agency at its core” (38).

Levy oversteps himself here: agency is no more at the “core” of his definition than any of his other concepts. Given his DSH framework, all are deeply intertwined semantically: our understanding of one cannot be pried apart from our understanding of the others, and none is more central than any other except perhaps as an analytic starting point. Levy signals this elsewhere. For example, he gently critiques Nancy Frankenberry’s neo-Tyloreanism for placing reference to the activities of superhuman agents at the centre of religious practice, myth, and institutions (Frankenberry 2014, 196). For Levy, this represents “a paradox of sorts for semantic holistic approaches to religion because it seems to isolate one element,” as opposed to highlighting a networking of semantically related concepts (99). Technically, Levy worries implicitly that Frankenberry’s definition will run afoul of another central Davidsonian thesis: that the content of a belief is tied to its causes. Religious beliefs/myths/institutions cannot be about superhuman agents unless one is willing to say that they are caused by the activities of such things. Few scholars of religion would commit to this. Perhaps recognizing this, Frankenberry shifts to religious phenomena being about commitments to superhuman agents not such agents themselves. There seems little

problem in being committed to non-existent things: no more than in failing to be committed to existing things.

Levy is quite willing to think of religious phenomena as involving participants' relationships to superhuman agents, but he avoids the slide into theological realism in that he regards such agents as fictional beings. In light of DSH semantics, fictional beings are as real as anything else, and humans can have relationships with them, in much the same way that corporations and nation states are fictions, brought about by our narratives about them, but nonetheless having real causal effects. Under DSH, the line between fact and fiction is fuzzy, and largely only of pragmatic value. On the other hand, the line between truth and falsity is not fuzzy, and plays a key theoretical role: following Davidson, Levy holds that the emergence of thought presumes the emergence of awareness of the difference between truth and falsity. On an anti-representational and intersubjective view of meaning, that awareness cannot emerge by recognizing mismatches between beliefs and reality. It can only emerge when intersubjective interpretation trips up or breaks down: i.e., upon realizing that someone else's narrative might be false. Levy identifies the emergence of thought itself with the emergence of religion: "The very first time someone disagreed with someone else, this is when we had religion. The first time someone called 'Bullshit,' religion was born" (29). He also thinks this is when science was born as well: science is as much a form of narrative as religion is (29). This enables the reconciliation of scientific and humanistic approaches. Religious narratives are the result of our ability to fictionalize, and "this ability to make fictions was at particular times and places adaptive and can offer an explanation of religion" (46). This brings together semantic and cognitive constraints.

The origins of religion

The origins of religion is a key theme in *BHE*. For Stausberg, 'origin' is about preconditions required for religions to exist at all, not about historical beginnings. *BHE*'s focus on CSR (with its evolutionary frame) leads him to see these two issues as inseparable.

Standard CSR holds that religion and religious activities are enabled by evolved cognitive processes. A common line is that religious beliefs and practices are a by-product of a more general capacity to formulate beliefs about the world, in order to navigate it more successfully. 'Belief' in such account is invariably seen in representationalist terms: a belief is a representation; true or false depend on the representation's accuracy. Most CSR scholars regard religious beliefs as simply false. For Levy, that approach to studying religion starts off wrong. He argues that religious beliefs and practices are a by-product of the capacity to tell stories, to "fictionalize" (49). He acknowledges the plausibility of arguments by some CSR scholars, like Pyysiäinen and Munz, that the capacity to fictionalize – to tell communal stories that stand "in friction with truth" – is grounded in its value for social cohesion (49). However, he rejects

what he calls the “Pleistocene fallacy”: “the idea that our minds were mostly shaped by that one particular period of time in our evolutionary history” (184). For Levy, this capacity emerges as minds emerge. He sees the common CSR view of cognition – something that emerged at a certain point in history – as the cause of familiar conundrums about how unthinking matter give rise to thinking minds. Many biologists and philosophers see a similar problem in explaining the emergence of life: there seems to be an ontological chasm between even self-replicating proteins and single-celled organisms. For Levy, the fundamental mistake and source of these quandaries is the assumption that there is a criterial and metaphysical line separating the material from the mental or the inanimate from the animate.

This is the key feature in his endorsement of anomalous monism. This theory of mind sweeps away many distinctions that have proven problematic for theorizing religion. Commitment to the idea that mind emerges from non-mind requires commitment to a radical distinction between them, and this is precisely what anomalous monism rejects.⁶ Once we give up that commitment, the door is open to pushing the origins of religion – in both Stausberg’s sense and the historical sense – back far before the Pleistocene. Being semantically constituted forms of narrative, religions are found wherever and whenever minds and information are found; and, on Levy’s reading of anomalous monism, minds are found wherever and whenever there is matter. This takes us back to the origins of the universe. (And it is a reminder that *BHE*’s conceptual re-vision calls on readers – for the sake of argument – to bracket assumption about the meanings of terms they are familiar with.) Borrowing from the research of such people as physicist Max Tegmark, *BHE* suggests that there is information whenever and wherever there is order and disorder. Levy talks about ‘natural information’ as a (non-recursive) form of communication, as the semantic primordial soup from which other forms are made possible: e.g., propositional and narrative, hence religious. Just as there is no point in the entire history of the universe where either mind or information emerge, there is no non-arbitrary point that can be identified as the origin of religion.

Of course, this is not to say that there has always been religion. While the line between religion and non-religion is nebulous according to *BHE*, and the basic stuff from which religions are made has always been there, nonetheless particular religious beliefs and practices are historically situated. A scholar of the history of a particular religious tradition will rightly start somewhere; but other scholars can legitimately look earlier. The history of Christianity need not start with Jesus: the social conditions that he was born into can serve as earlier explanatory factors. This is also not to say that no line of any sort can be drawn between mental and non-mental things/events/processes, only that all lines are arbitrary, temporary, and provisional. Drawing these lines says more about scholarly interests than it does about how the world is arranged.

The function of religion

The function of religion is an offshoot of the function of narrative, and narratives are semantically constituted systems of propositional attitudes. For DSH, 'theory of meaning' is just a convenient placeholder for a rigorous investigation into the preconditions of all intentional behaviour. According to Davidson, we act: we do not just have moving bodies. We act for reasons, and those reasons are the causes of our bodily movements. Narratives are public ways in which those reasons are forged and expressed.

DHS dissolves any hard line between literal and non-literal meaning, between factual and fictive language, and between fact and fiction more generally. We do not have one sort of model of meaning for factual language (what philosophers of language usually call assertion or truth-telling) and another for figurative or fictional language ('poetic,' 'expressive' or 'evaluative' etc.). Rather, there is a single semantics for anything that can carry semantic content. All narrative is constituted and understood in the same way: religions are forms of story-telling (explicit in myth, more implicit in ritual), and story-telling is tantamount to the entirety of language-use.

On this view, humanistic and scientific approaches come with built-in two-way consilience. Both science and religion involve story-telling, but the former is usually seen as 'factual' and the latter as 'fictional.' For Levy, this is an unsustainable distinction. Turning to the science/humanities divide in the study of religion, the typical scholarly story has been that scientific narratives aim at revealing the genuine causes of religious phenomena (explanation), whereas humanistic narratives aim at understanding them (interpretation). This distinction too is swept away by DSH: understanding semantic content, the goal of interpretation, requires making sense of behaviour, the goal of explanation. Levy's book takes us from the dissolution itself to implications, especially for what such a meta-theoretically re-oriented study of religion would look like.

Levy's approach to the function of religion should not be understood in terms of functional explanations. Hans Penner did much to expose the problems of thinking that religion can be explained in functional terms (1971). Frankenberry and Levy follow him. Levy suggests that much of CSR remains tied to functionalist explanations. For Justin Barrett (2007) – with his hypothesized hyper-active agency detection device (HADD) – religion reflects our cognitive disposition to attribute agency to non-human things. This disposition would have had clear evolutionary advantages for humans during the Pleistocene: better to run away from a stick on the path than to be bitten by a poisonous snake. This kind of explanatory model of function is a legacy of the emergence assumption: if religion emerged from non-religion, there had to be a functional reason that explains why it did then and there. But, if that is a misunderstanding of the origin of religion, then this approach is fundamentally misguided. Explaining religion, says Levy, must give central emphasis to semantic content, not to disjointed causal antecedents. What ultimately explains people's engaging

in religious practices is their entertaining propositional attitudes that include talk of superhuman agents, and the only way we can determine that someone entertains such attitudes is by interpreting their religious practices. As *BHE* notes, “If this sounds circular, that is because it is” (40). The fact that particular religious practices can function to promote in-group identities is one thing, the fact that enacting those identities gives the content of those practices is quite another. It is possible that religions might have such functions in certain contexts, but religions should be seen within an overall semantic framework that allows for functions of many different sorts. This undermines the narrowly ‘explanatory’ view, which makes functions antecedent to behaviour.

The structure of religion

If religion is a type of narrative, then it shares the structure of all other forms of narrative. For DSH, all are holistically semantically constituted things that get their meaningfulness through a process of interpretation. Given the holistic nature of meaning, the meaningfulness of any one bit cannot be understood independently of the meaningfulness of other bits. This requires interpreters to track many things that all converge on positions from which, in principle, the total behaviour of intentional beings – i.e., agents – can be understood and explained. According to Levy, we express our understandings and explanations by telling historically and culturally contingent stories that are comparable, but often in tension. Whenever our stories include talk of superhuman agents – where it is only the superhumanness, not the agency, which differs from non-religious narratives – then we can call them religious. Religious narratives can take very differing forms, and some may not look religious at first, but they are all semantically constituted in the same way.

Criticisms

This section notes and goes beyond criticisms presented in published reviews. A first critique involves Levy’s foundational use of Penner’s definition of religion as a system of propositional attitudes that include talk of superhuman agents. Standard critiques of the very project of defining religion apply, including the view that definitions always serve ideological interests. Others will object to reference to superhuman agents, noting how fuzzy that concept may be, or pointing to religions without such talk. We argue elsewhere that definitions understood under a Davidsonian account of meaning can avoid most, perhaps all, of these objections (Engler and Gardiner 2024).

Second, it could be argued that *BHE*’s central reliance on DSH is a weak point. As Shabalina notes, understanding Levy’s views “requires significant philosophical background, and engaging in CSR would require profound philosophical competence” (2023: 78). That might make it a hard sell for some scholars. In addition, Davidson’s views, while deeply respected and influential

in philosophy, are contested. If we reject the philosophical base, we undermine Levy's theory of religion. Moser (2023) hints at this, being sceptical of a non-representationalist rendering of the concepts of truth and objectivity. However, all philosophical views are contested. The size of the critical literature on Davidson reveals the importance and influence of his views. Serious criticism along these lines would have to engage the philosophical literature directly, making a case for an alternative semantic perspective.

A third and thornier problem seems to arise from the way that Levy leverages Davidson's anomalous monism. Levy offers DSH as an underlying metaphysics and theory of meaning that will allow a consilience between scientific and humanistic approaches to studying religion, and this is to take place in an enactivist-oriented cognitive science of religion. But can it?

Davidson aimed to dissolve an ontological difference between mental states and brain states. He holds that every mental state can be equated to a brain state, but he does not hold that every brain state can be equated to a mental state. We need to draw a distinction between the mental and the physical only insofar as this enables us to understand and explain human behaviour. The anomalous relationship between mental states and brain states entails that no amount of knowledge of brain states will ever serve as an account of which behaviour is being performed or why. The only sorts of things that can identify and explain a behaviour are propositional attitudes: mental states are propositional attitudes that are holistically inseparable from intentional behaviour. That is, mental states are semantically constituted.

Levy wants something much more extensive than this. He wants the ontological monism to be universal: minds and matter are always two sides of the same coin. We need not, he argues, postulate a time in which there were no minds, and hence we do not face the problem of understanding when or how minds emerged. The same goes for life: if minds are necessary for life, we need not postulate a time or process at which life emerged from non-living matter. And the same goes for meaning: meaning is to be found wherever there is information, and 'natural information' can be found right at the big bang.

However, Levy provides no real argument for such a universal neutral monism. It is not entailed by DSH (Schilbrack 2023: 101). More problematically, these views may be incompatible. A key plank in DSH is the idea that meaning is what drops out of the process of interpretation, where interpretation requires intersubjective communication between thinking agents placed in a shared environment. Davidson often describes this with the metaphor of triangulation: interpretation requires a triangle with a speaker at one point, an interpreter at another, and an environment shared by them at the third point. Take away any point and you take away the possibility of interpretation, and hence the possibility of meaningfulness. Levy's notion of 'natural information' seems to be that of a self-sufficient carrier of meaningfulness. This seems incompatible with DSH. *BHE* proposes a universal ontological monism that threatens to reduce the interpretive triangle to a single point. Lisa Landoe

Hedrick underlines this in terms of Levy's own distinction between 'non-recursive' communication (natural information) and 'recursive' communication (narrative). It is hard to imagine a single uniform semantic theory that bridges both. Surely it is a category mistake to think of 'natural information' as a form of communication (Hedrick 2023: 3). Its description need not, and likely cannot, use the vocabulary of the mental. Levy's response is that we need to tolerate the paradoxical nature and learn how to imaginatively "jump out of the holistic perspective of meaning to that of the life sciences and a genealogy of natural information" (26). Hedrick thinks that few will be satisfied with this, seeing it as "one impediment to anomalous monism's viability for religious studies" (2023: 3). Kevin Schilbrack says much the same: "I do not think that a solution that is a paradox is actually freeing" (2023: 100).

In sum, while there may be no ontological divide between the mental and the physical, there remains a semantic one. If no vocabulary can bridge that divide, as anomalous monism appears to require, then *BHE* fails to deliver a theoretical, or even meta-theoretical, reconciliation of scientific and humanistic approaches to the study of religion. At best it achieves a Steven Jay Gouldesque non-overlapping magisterium, which is not at all what Levy wants (Moser 2023: 485).

Fourth, to what extent is Levy offering a theory of religion? Is it enough that *BHE* ticks all four boxes on Stausberg's list? A theory of religion should be general purpose: it should offer a theoretical lens with methodological implications that scholars of religion can apply to any specific phenomena in which they take an interest. Levy applies his theory to only three cases: the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the cult of celebrity, and intimacy. More cases would support his approach's pragmatic usefulness. After all, according to *BHE*, this is the only possible support for any theory. As a theory of religion, *BHE*'s seems under-evidenced: Shabalina calls for Levy to add "a clear manual on conducting a scientific study of religion" (2023: 78).

A related critique regards the relevance of *BHE*'s examples. Shagan has trouble seeing how they fit together:

The reasons for these choices are more or less opaque to this reader. ... Is this a 'cognitive theory of religion' as the subtitle promises? To this reviewer it feels more like a philosophical theory of cognition in which religion tags along for the ride.

(Shagan 2023: 434)

Few would dispute that *Sefer Yetzirah* is genuinely religious in character, but it seems cherry-picked to present a story of creation that parallels semantic and metaphysical aspects of DSH. This seems less a case of Levy using DSH to understand *Sefer Yetzirah* than a case of his using a prior interpretation of the text to bolster DSH.

The second case, the cult of celebrity, might strike some as non-religious at worst or weakly analogous to religion at best. His discussion of *The Joe Rogan Experience* is intended to illustrate how “[o]ne gets to the truth through conversation with smart people” under the “implicit monist metaphysics in Rogan-world” (134).⁷ It is an illustration of the complexity of Davidsonian semantic triangulation that “has many aspects similar to religion” (136). His full chapter looking at celebrity cults in the digital world is more on target: modern celebrities do seem strongly analogous to “superhuman agents.” Levy could argue that older theories have not been as effective at exploring new religious movements.

The third case, intimacy, can be questioned on similar grounds. Levy explicitly presents the case as an analogy; it is “a topic that is perhaps the closest modern analogy to religion in its apparent irrationality” (161).⁸ DSH, Levy remarks, provides a better framework of objectivity, intersubjectivity and objectivity for understanding “both religion and intimacy.” Intimacy is “like” religion in that it involves a lot of “wishful thinking,” “necessary fictions,” and “paradoxes of irrationality” (161). But analogies are just that: different things being compared. Levy’s defence is that at least one of the functions of religious language is to build in-group identities, which is a form that intimacy can take, and that it is best understood along the lines of DSH: “I suggest that approaching religion at this level, at the level of intimacy, is closer to the truth about the meaning and semantics of religion and thus to a science of religion” (162).

In the end, it is unclear whether Levy is presenting a theory of religion as opposed to a meta-theoretical and meta-methodological framework with potential to constrain theories and studies of religion. Given his denial that there is any hard and fast line between religion and non-religion, and that his guiding impulse is to bring about a consilience between scientific and humanistic approaches to studying religion, perhaps this difference makes no difference.

A final critical question is whether *BHE* succeeds in reconciling these approaches in the study of religion. Shagan is sceptical:

Levy’s oft-stated hope that this approach might bring the humanities and sciences into productive conversation is farfetched if it is meant literally. Surely that is not really how academic discourse works, and the mind boggles at the thought of cultural anthropologist Talal Asad and psychology professor Michael Persinger sitting down to discuss anomalous monism over coffee.

(2023: 433)

Time will tell. *BHE* deserves that time.

Notes

- 1 Unqualified page numbers refer to *BHE*. We use single quotes to denote mention and double quotes for direct citations. This chapter draws at points on Gardiner 2023.

- 2 The title's echo of Robert Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* (2005) might reflect the latter's challenge to binaries like sacred/profane and academic analysis/religious experience, through its embedding of religious experience in social and material realities.
- 3 Other dichotomies challenged in *BHE* include fact/fiction, religious/fictional agents, cause/reason, special (e.g. figurative)/literal meaning, religious/non-religious, natural/cultural, thinking/non-thinking organisms, territory/map, objective/subjective, human/animal behaviour and possession/celebrity cults.
- 4 Hoel writes "The defense of a sharp division between sciences and religion is a standard position for many people, but in [*BHE*] Levy strives to break that down" (Hoel 2022: 380). This is a misreading; Levy is not seeking to reconcile science and religion: he is trying to reconcile scientific and humanistic approaches to studying religion. Similarly, Moser criticizes Levy's claim (183) that "science without the humanities is blind" on the grounds that Levy's "agnosticism about religion leaves one wondering why science needs religion at all" (Moser 2023: 60). Levy says neither that science needs religion, nor that religion needs science.
- 5 Propositional attitudes are mental states characterized by a relationship between an individual and the content of a proposition, such as believing, desiring, or fearing that something is the case. The concept is valuable because it underlines that describing mental states involves seeing them in semantic terms.
- 6 That commitment is essentially mind-body dualism, a remarkably deep-seated idea that has proven very hard to shake, despite the fact that virtually every contemporary scholar in the sciences and humanities claims to be a hard anti-Cartesian. Non-dualism takes many forms, e.g., the sort of mind-brain identity theory underscored by some forms of eliminativism: there simply are no mental states/events, just purely neural activity in the brain and central nervous system. Folk-psychology, people like the Churchlands argue, is simply a false psychological theory, tied to the earliest days of our psychological theorizing: it must be firmly rejected by mature science. Levy rightly points out that CSR is *not* such an approach. As we argue, CSR is committed to giving a central role to propositional attitudes in understanding intentional behaviour (Gardiner and Engler 2016).
- 7 Rogan is an American podcast host. He and guests discuss many topics, including science, philosophy, comedy, and politics, on his show "The Joe Rogan Experience." It is one of the most listened-to podcasts in the world. "Roganworld" points to its broad cultural impact.
- 8 Levy does not see irrationality as a distinguishing characteristic of religion in any straightforward sense. He thinks religions are 'false,' i.e., fictional, in the DSH sense that *BHE* develops (see Gardiner 2018).

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