Only Words Apart? Talking About "The World" in Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

In his well-known critique of conceptual relativism, Donald Davidson declared that we are not worlds but "only words apart." His interpretive principle of charity asserts that the transcendental condition of disagreement is agreement. Pragmatist philosophers of religion have relied upon the principle of charity to argue against a framework theory of religion. They use the notion of a scale of observationality to illustrate where broad-scale agreement lies and place disagreement (and specifically convictional difference qualifying as "religious") at the higher reaches, considering it interpretively parasitic. In this article, I problematize the ontological premises of construing difference in this way (specifically insofar as they betray traces of positivism) and the uses of ethnography to substantiate it. I draw on the work of contemporary anthropologists who identify with the so-called ontological turn in ethnography to help think differently about difference—about what it means to be "only words apart."

Keywords

So what sounded at first like a thrilling discovery—that truth is relative to a conceptual scheme—has not so far been shown to be anything more than the pedestrian and familiar fact that the truth of a sentence is relative to (among other things) the language to which it

> belongs. Instead of living in different worlds, Kuhn's scientists may
> […] be only words apart.
>
> DONALD DAVIDSON, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme*[1]

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Pragmatist philosophers of religion have for some time now drawn upon ethnographic work to demonstrate the way theoretical disagreement supervenes upon a world of public objects and events. They do so for good reasons, too. Following the work of Donald Davidson, these scholars share the conviction that the pragmatic precondition for meaningful disagreement is broad-scale agreement. Ethnographic examples serve to demonstrate the broadscale agreement at work in any recognition of difference.

Implicit agreement about a shared world, which Davidson formalizes as his interpretive principle of charity, is the transcendental condition for the intelligibility of disagreements; one must assume that an interlocutor holds mostly true beliefs about the world, even though it remains a pragmatic question just what those mostly true beliefs are (i.e., what counts as the world of mundane observation and experience). The transcendentality of charity rules out, in theory, the right to deciding the pragmatic question in advance. It can be difficult as a scholar, however, to recognize when the pragmatic question has come too late; when one has decided what "the world" is like in advance of pragmatic questions. The way we articulate a transcendental condition or when we ask the pragmatic question matters a great deal to the different sorts of answers that get to show up. I argue that this question often does, in part, get decided in advance—and thinking with proponents of the ontological turn can help us to see how.

Particularly when it occurs in philosophy of religion, preempting the pragmatic question of "the world" can limit our working definitions of religious difference to mere theoretical glosses upon an otherwise agreed upon ordinary world. For the philosophers I engage here, beliefs are defined as "religious" precisely insofar as they are more "theoretical" and therefore supervene upon more concrete beliefs about the shared or public world of ordinary objects and events. These philosophers appeal to ethnographic data to demonstrate the ubiquity of agreement at this more "concrete" level. However, by examining the anthropological debates about the ontological turn, I will show the ways

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1 Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association,* 1974, Vol. 47 (1973–1974), pp. 5–20: 11.

in which the work some philosophers of religion want ethnography to do—namely, as reporting concrete agreements about "the world" as universally observed—has been problematized in the 21st century.

Thinking with the ontological turn reminds us to remain critical of *whose* ordinariness we might be universalizing. Remaining critical in this way means acknowledging that a better empiricism might require us to allow encounters with difference to challenge the basic vocabulary on which we rely to articulate broad-scale agreement. More to the point, my purpose is to challenge pragmatist philosophers of religion after Davidson to assess the residual positivism that occupies a role in practice that it is denied in principle. I demonstrate how thinking with anthropologists of the ontological turn (henceforth OTers) helps us to recognize assumptions about "the world," assumptions that are problematic insofar as they prevent pragmatic naturalism from taking new forms in response to postcolonial critique.

For all its potential shortcomings, the ontological turn in anthropology poses a constructive challenge to pragmatists to rethink what it might mean to be "only words apart" after representationalism. Especially when we are theorizing religion, it is important to meet this challenge by reimagining measures of difference beyond residually-representationalist and positivist distinctions between the world as observed and the world as interpreted—not, to be clear, by reducing the latter to the former, but by reworking prior assumptions about the relationship between words and worlds.

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I will begin by examining a handful of examples from the last two decades in which pragmatist philosophers of religion after Davidson have appealed to ethnography, particularly in their efforts to challenge conceptual relativism. These efforts were badly needed, pragmatically warranted, and largely successful. However, the cost of discrediting conceptual relativism (by way of Davidson's critique of scheme-content dualism, or the very idea of conceptual frameworks) was a distraction from the notion of "the world" they were seeking to defend. I argue that it is to this notion that pragmatist philosophers of religion ought now to turn in order to remain committed to the pragmatic question.

In 1999, Nancy Frankenberry wrote that, even after disposing of scheme-content dualism, "philosophy of religion has yet to theorize diversity of belief in any way that does not lead either to the absolutizing of some one convictional set above all others or to the relativizing of the notion of truth

altogether".[2] The qualifier to Frankenberry's statement is that such failures to theorize convictional difference persists even after having dropped "with Terry Godlove anything as dramatic as the idea that Methodists and Muslims, Taoists and doubters live in different worlds" and therefore "any representation of other cultures, religions, or moralities as self-contained, incommensurate, ideological schemes which can only be understood from inside".[3] There are certainly senses in which affirmations of multiple "worlds" can be dramatic. There are also senses in which they are not. This is a point I will demonstrate later. My focus now is how Frankenberry (with Hans Penner), Godlove, as well as Kevin Schilbrack go about disposing of this "dramatic" idea and what they affirm in the process.

While discussing in what sense a post-Davidsonian pragmatist can legitimately talk of religions as "conceptual frameworks," Godlove invokes a structural model of belief that distinguishes between "theoretical" and "concrete" levels of semantic content. This pragmatic distinction depends on the conception of a "scale of observationality".[4] He writes: "[I]t seems obvious to me" that "religious discourse is highly theoretical, and that what tempts us to see the contrast, even incommensurability, between alternative religious conceptual frameworks" falls within the "higher reaches".[5]

To demonstrate the highly theoretical nature of religious discourse, Godlove provides an ethnographic example of how largescale agreement obtains at "the more observational level" in contrast to "theoretical divergence."[6] He cites Kenelm Burridge's 1969 ethnography of the Tangu people of New Guinea, explaining how Burridge reports that the Tangu practice a form of ancestor worship and "consider it possible that all the particulars in their environment [...] may be possessed of, or inhabited by, inner identities or guardian beings described as *puoker* [...]."[7] According to Godlove, we can only recognize the convictional diversity of the Tangu (here the belief in *puoker*-mischief) against the background of agreement "over such otherwise mundane subject matters as the apparent nature of toes, rocks, and pain."[8] I do not disagree with the Davidsonian point that broader agreement is the precondition of

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2   Frankenberry 1999, 526.
3   Ibid.
4   Godlove 1999, 465. By calling it a "pragmatic" distinction, I acknowledge that Godlove is making an analytic distinction that does not amount to an ontological dualism. A pragmatic distinction is, in fact, intended to avoid such a thing.
5   Ibid.
6   Ibid., 466.
7   Ibid., 467.
8   Ibid.

disagreement, a point which follows upon the fact of being able to recognize another as a language user in the first place.

Godlove takes this point to rule out the possibility of "assigning the Tangu an alien conceptual framework" and I agree with him completely.[9] But what authorizes us to decide the bounds of that agreement? What authorizes us to call something "mundane subject matters"?

Taking for granted what constitutes the mundane and therefore the lower levels on the scale of observationality is something classical ethnographers did as a matter of course. They would report, like E. B. Tylor, upon the "animism" or, like E. E. Evans-Pritchard, upon the "seemingly irrational beliefs" of natives. For Tylor, animism was the projection of souls onto otherwise (mundane) inanimate objects. Even though Evans-Pritchard understood himself to be attempting to validate Azande rationality, he nevertheless presented their rational conceptual schemes as "based on false premises," meaning "mystical" instead of "scientific" ones (Evans-Pritchard's terms).[10] What Evans-Pritchard took as the context of doubt was the world "as science observes it." His original text reads: "Azande observe the action of the poison oracle just as we observe it, but their observations are always subordinated to their beliefs and are incorporated into their beliefs and made to explain them and justify them."[11] The implicit presumption here is that "as we observe it" is not also "subordinated to" and "incorporated into" any "beliefs" and "notions"; that is, on the presumption that the social scientist doesn't "observe" through an "idiom" (is not enculturated) in the same way the Zande does (or is). Scientistic understandings of "the scientist" have been sufficiently challenged in the last half-century, most notably, perhaps, under the banner of Science Studies. But they have also been thoroughly challenged within anthropology itself, something I will illustrate in the next section.[12] First I will further explore ways of speaking about the social scientist in terms of their ability to report upon the theoretical divergences of natives as supplements to otherwise mundane points of agreement.

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9   Ibid.

10   Stephan Palmié, "Unhinged: On Ethnographic Games of Doubt and Certainty" in *Social Anthropology* (2022) 30.1: 74–90, 75.

11   Evans-Pritchard 1937, 319. He continues, "The Zande is immersed in a sea of mystical notions, and if he speaks about the poison oracle he must speak in a mystical idiom."

12   Perhaps, insofar as Science Studies (or Science and Technology Studies, more recently) is an anthropology of the scientists, this is redundant, but many would not locate ss/sts within any one discipline.

In 2014, Frankenberry described herself as a "Neo-Tylorian" to signal her commitment to seeing "belief in superhuman agency" as the distinctive feature by which the scholar of religion can delimit their object of study.[13] I take the "neo-" of Frankenberry's neo-Tylorianism to indicate her Davidsonian externalism about beliefs. The "Tylorianism" names the conviction that the "religious" (like the proto-religious "animist") is interpretively parasitic upon Godlove's epistemically-prior world. By identifying with Tylor, she aligns herself with what she calls the "social-scientific" side of the definitional debate in contrast to the "Tillichian" side. Frankenberry says that "social-scientific approaches to the modern academic study of religion line up with rough consensus, beginning with E. B. Tylor" on the idea that "religion has to do with superhuman agents."[14]

Together with Hans Penner, Frankenberry critiques Clifford Geertz for treating religions as conceptual schemes. They argue that Geertz's theory of symbolism and religion has a "major philosophical weakness"; namely, "its presumption of a dualism between symbolic models and a 'world' ready to be symbolized."[15] Geertz is guilty, they think, of underwriting the late-twentieth century prominence of this "framework theory of religion" that perpetuates "the most common form of relativism" in religious studies.[16] According to the framework theory, religions serve as "schemes" or "worldviews" that organize reality, the world, nature, or experience.[17] They take Geertz to be working with the disqualified "myth of the Given," which is supposed to provide the content side of the untenable scheme-content dualism.[18] "The most problematic ingredient in this presupposition" of a scheme-independent "given," they write, "is the requirement of something that ... must be neutral and common and inchoate."[19] As Davidsonian philosophers of language, Frankenberry and

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13 Frankenberry 2014, 195. For more on the history of the term "Neo-Tylorian" in social anthropology, see Robin Horton (1968). The term described the view that religious beliefs are explanatory and therefore cognitive, without Tylor's attendant view that they were also evolutionary.

14 Ibid.

15 Frankenberry and Penner 1999, 239.

16 Ibid., 238.

17 Ibid., 239.

18 Ibid., 240–41.

19 Ibid., 241.

Penner *do* affirm a common world, just not one that is prelinguistic.[20] In a footnote, they acknowledge "an innocent version of 'scheme' and 'content' which can be employed nondualistically as a simple distinction between *what* is represented and *how* it is represented" but do not take Geertz to rely on this version.[21]

In response to this critique, Kevin Schilbrack defends Geertz by suggesting we read him "as a social scientist" rather than as a philosopher.[22] He argues that Geertz makes legitimate use of the term "represent" in depicting how religions are "models of reality," writing: "Clearly there is an everyday and fully acceptable sense in which we speak of symbolic representations or models of reality." For example, "It makes perfect sense to say that a blue line on [a] map 'corresponds' to this highway or that the construction workers 'follow' [...] the blueprint."[23] In a footnote of his own, Schilbrack says that such everyday examples are problematic for Frankenberry and Penner, for whom one cannot say that a blueprint "matches the actual house."[24]

On Schilbrack's reading, Geertz's examples belie the framework model that other formulations of his theory might seem to imply. "For instance," Schilbrack points out, "the Azande who interprets the collapse of a granary as the result of witchcraft does not give order to an otherwise formless experience but rather (or 'merely') orients herself to well-formed objects and events already in the world." He explains, "The religious symbols do not give her the concepts of 'granary' or 'falling,' but they tell her what to think and do about it; they add a layer of interpretation to an already interpreted situation."[25] In agreement with Frankenberry and Penner about the impossibility of a "neutral" common world, Schilbrack affirms a common interpreted world as the condition of mutual recognition as language users.

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20 Frankenberry has repeatedly rejected characterization of such linguistic pragmatism as a form of idealism; she calls it an "overwrought misinterpretation" that "is regularly repeated ... without repetition ever doing the work of argumentation" (Frankenberry 2022, 94). The fact that she has to resist such accusations of idealism is notable; I will seek to shed some light on why when exploring similar accusations suffered by anthropologists of the ontological turn.

21 Frankenberry and Penner 1999, 241 ftn. 22.

22 Schilbrack 2005, 445.

23 Ibid., 443.

24 Schilbrack 2005, 444 ftn. 12. It is unclear to me how to reconcile this footnote about the acceptability of scheme-content *non*dualism and Schilbrack's footnote about their rejection of his "legitimate" "everyday" variety of representationalism. I am inclined to say there is more agreement about "legitimate" forms of representation-talk than there is about whether Geertz employs it.

25 Schilbrack 2005, 444–45.

He appeals to Godlove's distinction between "epistemic" and "interpretive" priority to explain how "concrete" agreement coexists with "theoretical" disagreement.[26] Lower on the scale of observationality is where we find concepts like "granary" and "falling" (as well as "toes" and "pain"), while distinctively religious concepts occupy the so-called higher reaches. While religious concepts might have interpretive priority—for instance, in telling the Zande "what to think and do about" an event—they cannot have epistemic priority insofar as she must first recognize the event itself. Religious concepts, in short, do not "organize" their world but only "add a layer of interpretation" to the already (implicitly, pragmatically) agreed upon ("otherwise mundane") objects and events that make up the ordinary world.

On my reading, Schilbrack thinks that Geertz shares this assumption of something like Godlove's "scale of observationality" according to which we can distinguish "concrete" beliefs from "theoretical" ones. "When Geertz is read in *this* way," by which he means "as a social scientist and not a philosopher," he cannot be seen to attribute significant epistemological work to religious symbols, only (extra) interpretative work.[27]

Like Godlove, Schilbrack appeals to anthropology (and specifically ethnography) to challenge relativism. What they both assume in doing so is that to be read "as a social scientist" (in Schilbrack's words) is to be able to "report" (in Godlove's word) on the "glosses" (Geertz's word)—glosses that we recognize as such only against the background of agreement about the ordinary elements of reality we can call objects and events. This can be read as suggesting that social scientists work safely (or, at the very least, *more* safely) in the realm of legitimate or nondualist forms of representationalism, while philosophers run the risk of failing to recognize such legitimate forms in their efforts to combat the framework model of religion. Religions can still "provide models of reality" according to Schilbrack precisely insofar as these models supervene interpretively upon epistemically prior concepts about the world.[28]

Preserving such an epistemically prior "world" is precisely the goal of drawing this distinction. Through an appeal to the level of interpretive priority Godlove says we "can preserve all that wants saving from the framework model," while "relegating the remainder" to the level of epistemic priority.[29] This is how we can "capture the holistic and systematic nature of religious belief" but in a "nonrelativist way"—namely, by making religious belief "interpretively

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26 Ibid., 445.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 448.
29 Godlove 1999, 468.

parasitic upon a world of shared objects and events."[30] I worry that there is another way to read this: We can only preserve our notion of the "common world" if we define divergent beliefs *as* "religious" and make room for them in the superstructure of our naturalist base. My aim here is to draw attention to assumptions our definitions of religion are unduly protecting under the guise of naturalism.[31]

On Godlove's reasoning, the problem with the framework model is that it grants epistemic priority to beliefs that are not low enough on the so-called scale of observationality. The solution he offers is to relegate conceptual frameworks to the level of the "theoretical"; high enough on the scale of observationality to count as supervening. Part of what motivated my paraphrased reading above was the following statement about what such relegation enables the pragmatist philosopher of religion to do: "the fact that alternative religious conceptual frameworks must be largely theoretical in composition means that, unlike the believer who must see at least some truth in all religions, the areligious interpreter stands under no such a priori stricture." He continues, "As his believing counterpart cannot, the heathen hermeneuticist can register his categorical disagreement without fear of thereby misrepresenting himself or misconstruing the other."[32] Use of the identifier "areligious interpreter" implies a freedom from "interpretively parasitic" beliefs. What makes one "areligious" is precisely this freedom from a priori strictures to concede some degree of truth to all such parasitic (read: religious) interpreters.

I do not disagree with the broadly Davidsonian point that "the holism of the mental dictates that the amount of divergent belief must be relatively limited."[33] What I challenge is the tendency to treat as settled where divergences take place.

There is a moment when Godlove enables religious belief to come down from the "higher reaches." He says, "divergence over religious matters" must be "largely theoretical" since "*some* religious beliefs are evidently quite concrete."[34] Exploring this exception might prove more enlightening than the rule. What makes these "evidently quite concrete beliefs" count as "religious" if not their

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30 Ibid., 468, 467.
31 Such are also the concerns of deconstructionists of "religion" like Timothy Fitzgerald and Russell T. McCutcheon. What I am proposing as a remedy here ought not to be equated with their work, at least insofar as one reads that work as effecting closure. In proposing that we think with the ontological turn, I am attempting to show how we can constructively pursue more global and critical forms of pragmatic naturalism.
32 Ibid., 470.
33 Ibid., 467.
34 Ibid.

theoreticity or interpretive parasitism? How could the holist even recognize such beliefs *as* concrete *and* divergent, given the provision that divergence can only have interpretive priority and not "observational" priority? Just the ability to ask such questions informs us of a certain circularity to how we designate the observable—even while the notion of observationality itself is the basis upon which Godlove says we can draw a "noncircular distinction between theoretical and concrete discourse."[35] The point is not that there is no shared basis of agreement, but only that we should be more open to the contestability of what counts as observable.

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In his 1986 essay "The Myth of the Subjective," Davidson distinguishes "conceptual relativism" from "harmless relativism." He describes the latter in a way that resembles Frankenberry's scheme-content nondualism, Schilbrack's "legitimate" representationalism, and Godlove's relegation of conceptual frameworks to interpretive parasitism. Davidson writes, "Minds are many; nature is one. Each of us has one's own perspective in the world, and hence one's own perspective on it." He goes on, "The relations among our positions are intelligible because we can locate each person in a single, common world and a shared time frame."[36] We ought to note Davidson's anti-foundationalism in order to understand what he means by the ability to "locate" another in a common world.

Davidson rejected W. V. Quine's "naturalized epistemology" according to which "there is a definite distinction to be made" between "invariant content" and "variant conceptual trappings," or between "'report and invention, substance and style, [sensory] cues and conceptualization.'"[37] According to Davidson, "Worldview and cues, theory and data: these are the scheme and content of which I have been speaking."[38] Davidson wants to distinguish his understanding of the common world from Quine's notion of what goes on around.

For Davidson, the "world" is not what serves as the ontological context of semantic content, but rather is ingredient to content. To read Davidson this

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35　Ibid., 465.
36　Davidson 1999 [1986], 296.
37　Ibid., 299. Davidson is quoting from Quine's *Word and Object* (MIT Press, 1960).
38　Ibid. He remarks in a footnote that Quine himself explicitly denies being a conceptual relativist (the harmful kind), but insists he is not so innocent.

way is arguably the only way to appreciate how his "world" differs from the cuing-side of Quine's naturalized epistemology. This world, like Davidson's "nature," is necessarily one. This world is not "out there"; it is a transcendental condition and not an entity to which we can point.

According to Frankenberry, to admit as much when talking about religion would risk "changing the subject."[39] Religion is nothing but "statements and assertions about superhuman agents" and we can only interpret a particular practice or belief "*as* religious" insofar as we can identify them as beliefs in "nonnatural causality."[40] Any definition of religion that excludes such content (e.g., Paul Tillich's) risks changing the subject. She writes, "Davidson allows us to correct the entire tradition of hermeneutical theology by seeing symbolic or metaphorical utterances as having to do with *use* or *force;* as such they are 'patently false,' and always parasitical upon literal semantic meaning."[41] To see religious language as patently false and parasitical upon literal semantic content is, in her words, to "naturalize" religious language.[42] Once naturalized, we can coax those beliefs into the "space of giving-and-asking reason," of "destabilization" and "revision."[43]

Echoing Godlove's distinction between epistemic and interpretive priority, Frankenberry claims we should view religions as "holistic systems" that can be understood not as "failures" of rationality by "invoking a principle of subordination" that makes those systems "parasitical" upon the literal.[44]

As Wayne Proudfoot has recently argued, "Any viable naturalistic account of religion requires historicizing what has previously been naturalized."[45] To "naturalize" is to treat "concepts, beliefs, and practices in a way that assumes them to be naturally given and occludes their social and historical origins and development."[46] We need to historicize what has been naturalized so as to maintain an adequate naturalism. As opposed to natural*ized* accounts, natural*ist* accounts of beliefs and practices appreciate the ways in which they are human products. I argue that among the concepts pragmatic naturalists risk naturalizing are those of concreteness, observability, and ordinariness.

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39   Frankenberry 2014, 197.
40   Ibid., 196.
41   Ibid., 200.
42   Ibid., 202.
43   Ibid., 210.
44   Ibid., 203.
45   Proudfoot 2018, 102.
46   Ibid.

With Proudfoot,[47] I think pragmatist philosophers of religion who draw upon Davidson's principle of charity to combat conceptual relativism ought to remain critical of their own empiricism so as to avoid letting such concepts become dogmas of an ossified naturalism which has decided what objects and events ground the scale of observationality. While I do not think pragmatists need the help of genealogical critique (their own commitments already warrant such reflexivity), that critique is valuable for having provoked a certain crisis of conscience among anthropologists since the mid-20th century. We should note that the OT is a constructive response to what some proponents have called the "crisis of representation" incited by post-colonial criticism.

By himself appealing to genealogical critique, Proudfoot is appealing to the social sciences. But he has an image of a different sort of social scientist in mind; namely, the sort that has thoroughly engaged with this disciplinary crisis of conscience. My purpose in pointing this out is to suggest that the "social scientist" to which Godlove, Frankenberry, and Schilbrack appeal—the one that distinguishes "nature" from "culture"—is a contested figure within the social sciences themselves. Proudfoot knows this. In what follows, I offer a more in-depth analysis of the way this image has been contested, particularly in the last twenty years.

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The ontological turn among anthropologists has been an attempt to respond to their discipline's colonialist origins without despairing of the possibility of more responsible forms of understanding. There are multiple ways of explaining what it means to take this turn. Theorists as diverse as Graham Harman, Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, and Martin Holbraad all identify with the turn to ontology. The variety of OTers with whom I engage here follow Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's "perspectivism." Without taking the discussion too far afield, it is crucial to note that Viveiros de Castro describes

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47 In addition, of course, to Friedrich Nietzsche, Proudfoot mentions Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990). For exemplary work in religious studies, he cites: Michel de Certeau's *The Mystic Fable* (1992); Caroline Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987); Patricia Daley's *Promised Bodies* (2013); Robert Sharf's "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience" (1995); Bernard Faure's *The Rhetoric of Immediacy* (1991); Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth* (1999); and Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions* (2005). I would add to this list Brent Nongbri's *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (2013).

his perspectivist approach as "at right angles" with the oppositions between relativism and universalism.[48]

This group of OTers includes Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen who, unlike Ingold, Latour, or speculative realists, resist unifying theories (even revisionary ones) insofar as such theories "pre-empt an ethnographically defined understanding of what constitutes a thing".[49] Instead of a theory of multiplicity, they want "a methodology that might generate a multiplicity of theories."[50] Holbraad, Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro see the turn to ontology as a radicalization of anthropology's call for reflexivity "to the point of reversal"—a reversal that "'turns' the negative procedure of deconstruction into a positive procedure for re-construction."[51] This turn, they insist, does not require positive ontological commitments; if it did, then it would have failed to properly turn on itself.[52]

The distinctive feature of this ontological turn is an enduring attempt to avoid so-called metaphysical foundationalism—"whether substantive or methodological, normative or pluralistic."[53] Like Deleuze, they propose "a radical constructivism" according to which discourse has effects "not because it 'over-determines reality,' but because no ontological distinction between 'discourse' and 'reality' pertains in the first place."[54] Concepts effects things because they are things. Unlike regular constructivists[55] who follow Michel Foucault in working from the assumption that there is some unfurnished world out there, radical constructivists undermine the very distinction between construction and reality.

The critical point is that, for these anthropologists, the language of "multiple worlds" stands to replace the language of "multiple worldviews" as a logical consequence of committing to this radical constructivism. And it is only through grasping the radicality of this constructivism, they say, that one can understand just how dissimilar the notion of "many worlds" is from the familiar idea of a plurality of worldviews. *Concepts are not representations.* If

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48   See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native: Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds* (Chicago: Hau Books, 2015), 195.

49   Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (eds.), Editors' Introduction in *Thinking through Things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 5.

50   Ibid., 7.

51   Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge UP, 2017), 12.

52   Ibid., 65.

53   Ibid., 68.

54   Henare, et. al. (2007), 13.

55   E.g., Russell T. McCutcheon.

one persists in taking concepts to be representations, they will never be able to take difference seriously because the only way to take it seriously is to do so "*as the starting point* of anthropological analysis."[56] The critique of modernist binaries, to be critical enough, must cut deeper: the "world" that is multiple is not the "world" of worldviews. In fact, we cannot explain the "world" that is multiple by the metaphor of sight at all. These worlds are "*a-visible*"; their modes of disclosure must be altogether different if concepts and things are one. That mode of disclosure is not perception, but conception, so redefined.[57]

These commitments are clearly articulated in the 2007 publication *Thinking through Things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically*, for which Holbraad was an editor.[58] The following illustrates an exchange between Holbraad and a critic of this volume, Webb Keane. This exchange turns upon descriptions of the Azande, which we have already been considering. Keane writes in 2009 that the volume "proposes that we think of ethnographic otherness in terms of multiple ontologies."[59] He continues, "Thus Holbraad reports that Cuban Ifa diviners tell him a certain red powder is power. He argues that in order to take this assertion seriously, we […] must understand that their red powder exists within a radically different ontology from ours. It's not that there is one thing, powder, which diviners interpret in a certain way that differs from ours. Rather, in this alternative world, that's what the powder is."[60] According to Keane, by saying that we must treat Azande assertions like "powder is power" as true in an "alternative world," Holbraad is repeating an "appealing" yet "highly unstable" ethnographic move. The move is appealing insofar as ethnographers have a responsibility towards alterity which distinguishes them from "the Eurocentric self-certainties of nearly all other academic disciplines."[61] It is unstable because it risks at any moment the collapse of the distinction between concepts and material things, so as to "render the very temporality of things incomprehensible, and to confine them within static realities."

Confining things to concepts is what Keane takes Holbraad to be doing when he rejects the traditional anthropological treatment of Azande statements about powder or witches (e.g., Evans-Pritchard) as merely "different interpretations

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56   Henare, et. al. (2007), 12. Emphasis mine.

57   Ibid., 14, 15.

58   Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell (eds.), Editors' Introduction in *Thinking through Things: Theorising artefacts ethnographically* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

59   Keane 2009. This review was posted on a website managed by the anthropology department of University College London.

60   Ibid. In a comment section to this review, Holbraad corrects Keane. The powder is not red, but "more greyish."

61   Ibid.

of a reality the Azande share with those of us who are not Azande."[62] Holbraad replies to Keane by suggesting his worries all "boil down to a charge of undue 'essentialism'."[63] His worry is with the implied representationalism of Keane's critique. For if "things are to be understood as 'exceeding' concepts," says Holbraad, "then one can always raise the (epistemic) question: which concepts 'fit' them best?" Underwriting Keane's worry that Holbraad reduces things to concepts ("onto-locking" them, in Holbraad's terms) is the concomitant assumption that things need to be re-fitted with concepts as they (things) change.

Holbraad spots this assumption as evidence of precisely the sort of epistemological concerns characteristic of traditional anthropology that he and the other contributors seek to move beyond.[64]

5

Each social scientist in this exchange is challenging the other's realism; for Keane, realism means a materialism in which things necessarily escape our concepts, whereas for Holbraad, realism requires a new materialism in which concepts *are* things. The former's conception of realism is more akin to the naturalist epistemology of which Davidson accused Quine, whereas the latter's conception of realism is what I think Davidson's logically entails.

Jeff Malpas has argued a similar point exceedingly well. We misunderstand Davidson's claim about the role of triangulation if we take it as merely an

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62   Ibid. Keane thinks the notion of radically different ontologies does not allow for "things in their very materiality [to] exceed any particular concepts." He thinks this is what Holbraad is doing when, in Keane's word, he confines "the red powder of which Ifa diviners speak" to a "singular ontology in which red powder really 'is' power" (ibid.). The issue for critics of the ontological turn like Keane is with the word "is" and therefore "ontology," which for them is "heavy with philosophical baggage" with "its metaphysical, essentialist, and absolutist connotations." Clearly, if "ontology" is understood in this way, it is difficult to imagine what use it could be to any anthropological project.

63   Martin Holbraad's reply to Keane from May 5, 2010. See comment section to the original review.

64   Holbraad's response illustrates a curious difference between the way philosophers think of anthropologists and anthropologists think of philosophers. Earlier, when Schilbrack wanted to defend Geertz from the charge of illegitimate representationalism (and so Davidson's conceptual rather than harmless relativism), he said we should read him not as a philosopher but as a social scientist. Reading Geertz "as a social scientist" seems to acquit him of representationalism. Here, when Holbraad is defending his use of "ontology" against accusations of its "philosophical baggage," he is accusing his *anthropological* critic of representationalism, while his critic is in turn accusing him of some sort of idealism.

epistemological thesis. Rather, Malpas argues, triangulation is properly understood as an *ontological* thesis because "it concerns the grounds of possibility of content, or, to put the matter more directly, it concerns the very *being* of content."[65] It is wrong to understand triangulation as a process operating *upon* content because this process in fact generates content.[66] Whether or not this is what Davidson had in mind, Malpas makes a strong case for why it is what he should have had in mind. If content is not just involved but actually established through the process of triangulation between two speakers and the world (qua transcendental condition), and if that content serves as a working answer to the pragmatic question of what the world is like, then it is fair to say that content-qua- "world" permits us to talk about "multiple worlds" (in the pragmatic sense) without abandoning realism. This is precisely the sort of point I take Holbraad to be after when he speaks of multiple ontologies while rejecting relativism. We misunderstand what is multiple, however, if we persist in taking concepts as representations.

In speaking of a material world waiting to be schematized, Holbraad worries, Keane is working with representationalist premises that perpetuate framework theories of cultural difference. On a representationalist account, alterity is just different people ascribing different concepts to the same things, the premise of which is a distinction between concepts and things. But if things are understood as coterminous with concepts, then the representationalist judgment becomes a category mistake. Ultimately, Holbraad suspects the worry about essentialism (or "onto-locking" things in concepts) to be a symptom of metaphysical assumptions about change that get built into the critique. "Definitely," he writes, "if change is to be parsed metaphysically as some version of Aristotelianism, which I take minimally as any analysis that posits change as a shift in the relationship between subject (content, thing) and predicate (form, concept), then we have a problem."[67] Holbraad rejects a substance metaphysics of change modeled on Aristotle's logic of predication, versions of which underwrite the sorts of representationalism pragmatists also want to do without. It is therefore inaccurate for Keane to accuse Holbraad, and the ontological turn more broadly, of denying change in such terms when they make "an explicit virtue of collapsing these kinds of 'Aristotelian' distinctions"—between content and schemes.

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65   Malpas 2011, 263.
66   "[N]o matter whether content is understood in terms of the meaning of sentences, the contents of beliefs, or the intentionality of action" (ibid.).
67   Holbraad 2010.

Holbraad's refusal to ontologically distinguish "things" and "concepts" does not amount to a reduction of the former to the latter. Rather, it amounts to a rejection of a bifurcation of nature in which concepts are universals, things are particulars, and concepts mediate how things appear so that things always escape our conceptualization of them.

The scheme-content dualism upon which representationalism relies is what Davidson found to persist in Quine's "naturalized epistemology" even after he relinquished the other dogmas of empiricism. This dualism derives from an account of concepts and things underwritten by classical empiricism's bifurcation of nature. In "Myth of the Subjective," Davidson remarks: "Kant thought only one scheme was possible, but once the dualism of scheme and content was made explicit, the possibility of alternative schemes was apparent."[68] If we begin from the premise that concepts and things are ontologically distinct, we will not be able to avoid construing difference in representationalist terms. Davidson noted just how sticky representationalist premises can be even among those, like Quine, who reject classical empiricism. Paolo Heywood, another critic, draws upon Quine's concept of a "bloated universe" to describe the ontological turn. A bloated universe is one in which "existence" predicates everything, actual and potential.[69] Heywood is impatient: "At some point or another along the path traced by the 'ontological turn' we will have to start deciding what is, and what is not."[70] He thinks OTers are implicitly committed to a meta-ontology that models a bloated universe. But, according to Pedersen, the ontological turn is a methodological commitment to "thinking in perpetual motion" (a phrase of Holbraad's).[71]

According to Pedersen, the whole point is to never "start deciding what is, and what is not," but critics misunderstand what this means. Talk about multiple worlds is not about reducing cultures to encapsulated realities—this would

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68   Davidson 1999 [1986], 297. That possibility was apparent to Emile Durkheim, whose notion of "collective representations" would come to dominate 20th-century anthropological conceptions of cultural difference. Durkheim's representationalism was heir to Kant in well-documented ways. Viveiros de Castro has noted, "Kant's idea that there exist a priori categories that format experience is something that, whether by means of Durkheim or by [Franz] Boas, transformed itself into a kind of spontaneous epistemology of anthropologists ...". See Viveiros de Castro and Marcio Goldman 2012. Viveiros de Castro states that the challenge of the ontological turn is precisely "to interrupt this reflex, in order to open the possibility of a non-Kantian, or post-Kantian anthropology, which goes beyond 'category' and representation" (426).

69   Paolo Heywood, "Anthropology and What There Is: Reflections on 'Ontology'," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology,* Spring 2012, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 143–151: 148.

70   Ibid., 146.

71   See Holbraad 2012, 264–265.

be "epistemologically and politically dubious".[72] Rather, talk about multiple worlds serves to keep unsettled the pragmatic question about what the world is in the first place. Unsettled does not mean that at any given point there cannot be working agreements; it means that those agreements always depend upon the parties to the conversation and the dynamic, processual nature of triangulation.[73] Crucially, however, the nature of this agreement ought not to be understood as *operating upon* but rather *generative of* content—of worlds.

6

Worlds are not epistemologies, so to take the multiplicity of worlds seriously does not mean believing in the equal veracity of multiple worldviews. Viveiros de Castro thinks Richard Rorty is right when he declares, "We, Western liberal intellectuals, should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are and that this means that there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously."[74] We *can't* accept "lots of views," which is exactly the problem the OT tries to preempt by replacing worldview-talk and epistemological questions with world-talk and ontological questions. Calling them "views" already predetermines that we cannot take them seriously; "It is enough to call something 'views' so that the not-taking seriously is already justified."[75] Ontologies are not "other visions of the world, but other worlds of vision, other worlds given to vision (as much as to hearing, touch, smell, taste …)".[76] To take seriously other worlds of vision, unlike other visions of the world, is not a matter of belief.[77] The mode of affirmation must be altogether different. It must be a way of thinking rather than determining what to think.

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72 Pedersen 2012.

73 Pedersen points out the settled nature of Heywood's own ontology by appealing to Geertz's critique of "common sense." Geertz writes, "it is an inherent characteristic of common sense thought […] to affirm that its tenets are immediate deliverances of experience not deliberated reflections upon it."[73] As such, the notion of common sense "pretends to reach past illusion to truth, to, as we say, things as they are." Geertz 1975, 17; Pedersen 2012. It is unclear to me by this reference whether that means he is (*pace* Frankenberry and Penner) guilty of representationalism; it is unclear whether there *is* a truth "past illusion" that we simply cannot reach or if such a truth is part of the illusion. In either case, what seems clear to me is that reading Geertz as a social scientist is a more ambiguous affair than one might initially expect.

74 Viveiros de Castro 2012, 427. Quoting from Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29.

75 Viveiros de Castro, "Introduction to Post-Social Anthropology," 427.

76 Ibid., 427, 428.

77 Ibid., 428.

Describing his work on Cuban divination, Holbraad says "the whole point of the 'powder is power' argument" is to yield a "motile" analytic.[78] The basic proposal of his book *Truth in Motion: Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* is that the question of truth in anthropology ought not be understood as a question of representation.[79] When it is understood in this way, the task of anthropology is to represent how different societies represent the world in different ways, either to show how (as in classical anthropology) they diverge from the superior representation of the anthropologist, or to defend the equal validity of anthropological and indigenous representations (as in constructivism). The latter move merely shifts the balance between the two orders of representations it leaves in place from the former.[80] Anthropological truth must be redefined in anti-representationalist terms and this requires relinquishing a concept of "the world" as that from which propositions derive truth-values.[81]

The problem facing classical ethnographers who encountered what they described as "primitive mentalities" or "alternate rationalities" was not, according to Holbraad, a matter of logic but of ontology: "Things that are also people, people that are also gods, gods that are also wafers, twins that are also birds: these are the kinds of contradictory descriptions in which attempts to make sense of others by representing them may land us."[82] To do anthropology beyond representation means being recursive; for Holbraad, this means allowing ethnography to transform analysis rather than the other way around.[83] Recursive analysis entails a notion of meaning as "the kind of thing that moves, quite literally, so as to be transformed."[84] Truth isn't in the pudding—it's in *eating* the pudding.[85] Far from being an anti-realist about truth, Holbraad is trying to put the question of truth back on the anthropological agenda.[86]

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78   Holbraad 2010.
79   Holbraad, *Truth in Motion: Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xvi.
80   Ibid., 46.
81   Ibid., 222.
82   Ibid., xvi.
83   Ibid., xviii.
84   Ibid., xix.
85   Ibid., xx.
86   Ibid., 33.

7

When the problem is defined in terms of "worldviews" it tends to stop there, forking into absolutism or relativism (or Holbraad's "constructivism"). The question is what the anthropological analyst (or the philosopher of religion) does next. What Holbraad does is engage in a process of re-conceptualization that he calls "ontography," which involves asking not what Cuban diviners "think" power is and why they might think this, but *what powder is.* The change this process entails is a change in the intension of the concepts rather than a change in their extension, which would "leave their 'referents' (things) indifferent."[87] It is in this way that I take Holbraad's non-representationalist account of truth as helpful in making sense of what it means to be, as Davidson says, only words apart. If conceptions are not representations but ways of worldmaking, then we can live out multiple worlds in the pragmatic sense without denying oneness in the transcendental sense.

Pragmatist philosophers of religion are committed to the provisional nature of their analytical concepts. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to remain vigilant of fundamental conceptions like the actual, ordinary world. As Frankenberry observes, Davidson's "best contribution to pragmatism and naturalism consists in his reconciliation of two things: the possibility that any particular belief we have may be in error, and the impossibility that all our beliefs about the world might be fundamentally mistaken."[88] Scholars of religion must be conceptually agile enough to question our conceptions of "the world" in the first instance without fear of it amounting to a rejection of "the world" in second. Indeed, doing so may well be indispensable to the task of preserving the pragmatism of our naturalism.

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87   Holbraad 2010.
88   Frankenberry 2018, 236.

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