

# HAND IN GLOVE: EVALUATING THE FIT BETWEEN METHOD AND THEOLOGY IN VAN HUYSTEEEN'S INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN UNIQUENESS

by Wesley J. Wildman

*Abstract.* Wentzel van Huyssteen's *Alone in the World?* (2006) presents an interpretation of human uniqueness in the form of a dialogue between classical Christian theological affirmations and cutting-edge scientific understandings of the human and animal worlds. The sheer amount of information from different thinkers and fields that van Huyssteen absorbs and integrates makes this book extraordinary and, indeed, very rich as a work of interdisciplinary theology. The book commands respect and deserves close attention. In this essay I evaluate van Huyssteen's proposal as well as the method he uses to produce it. Special attention is given to the concept of embodiment. Van Huyssteen's concept of embodiment is substantially correct in most respects and largely consistent with the scientific and theological pictures of human nature. In a few respects, however, his interpretation of the bodily character of human life appears to be insufficiently thoroughgoing relative to our best contemporary knowledge of human nature from the natural sciences.

*Keywords:* *Alone in the World?*; embodiment; human uniqueness; Wentzel van Huyssteen

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## APPROACHING HUMAN UNIQUENESS THROUGH TRANSVERSAL DIALOGUE

J. Wentzel van Huyssteen is worried about the civilizational threat of group parochialism and disciplinary arrogance. He appreciates the beauty and integrity of religion and senses its uniquely authoritative claim on human lives but also criticizes its enthusiasms and irrationalities. His experience in

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South Africa at the end of the apartheid era is a touchstone for his resistance to parochial religion that refuses dialogue and legitimates injustice. Similarly, he takes scientific understanding very seriously but often writes against scientific reductionism, which he sees as an equally dangerous, if less violent, form of parochial arrogance. It is because of these problems that van Huyssteen places his trust in dialogue and interdisciplinarity as keys to achieving heightened awareness of the world, respect for others, understanding of one's own perspective, and social justice.

When it comes to organizing dialogical, interdisciplinary inquiries in science and religion, van Huyssteen adopts what he calls the transversal method. He describes this at length in *The Shaping of Rationality* (van Huyssteen 1999). I have analyzed his methodological proposal for interdisciplinary inquiries elsewhere (Wildman 2006a) and do not develop that theme here in great detail. The salient point for my current purposes is that van Huyssteen's method protects disciplinary autonomy while permitting transversal insights to cut across disciplinary boundaries and create new understanding. Theology has its way of proceeding, and so do the sciences, and neither can be eliminated through reduction to the terms of the other. Yet neither are theology and science utterly independent of one another, because the basic resources for any rational activity derive from our character as human beings in the world. So some kind of connection between theology and science ought to be possible.

In the framework of van Huyssteen's method, it is possible that very little emerges from a dialogue over a transversal connection, or that the parties to the conversation disagree more than they agree. We have to allow for that when we acknowledge significant rational autonomy in both theology and science. In the case of the theme of human uniqueness, however, a rich dialogue can develop, because it is a vital topic for both theological reflection and scientific research and theorizing. This is one reason that van Huyssteen chose this theme for the 2004 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, from which *Alone in the World?* derives. In the course of the book's dialogue, the reader overhears theological and scientific voices having their say and witnesses the gradual conversational construction of a sophisticated interpretation of human uniqueness.

The theme of human uniqueness is problematic, as van Huyssteen points out. Science is well suited to discern structural, behavioral, and genetic similarities and differences between human beings and other animals. But the scientific framework of analysis presupposes evolutionary continuity, so *distinctiveness* would be a better word than *uniqueness* for what science can help us understand about human beings relative to the rest of nature. Meanwhile, theology has made strong claims precisely about human uniqueness that derive from traditional beliefs about the spiritual standing of human beings before God. The literary touchstone for these beliefs within Judaism and Christianity is the biblical description of human beings as

made in the image of God (the *imago Dei* of Genesis 1:26). Van Huyssteen does not deal with other religious traditions, but similar claims about human uniqueness are found all over the world. In traditional South Asian religions, for example, a soul must be reincarnated into a human being before it is possible to achieve *moksha*, or liberation from the samsaric cycle of lives. The perplexing difference between science and religion on the very meaningfulness of the idea of human uniqueness expresses the delicate challenge that van Huyssteen faces as he tries to host a rich dialogue in this book.

Van Huyssteen does not propose a punchy theological principle that describes what makes humans unique; this would be to ignore scientific insights about evolutionary continuity. Nor does he simply dismiss the theological commitment to human uniqueness as delusory and speak only of scientifically discernible distinctiveness. His transversal method does not allow him to reject the autonomous value of theology or of science. Rather, he subtly coordinates traditional insights with contemporary scientific knowledge in a theological anthropology that aims to take each dialogue partner seriously. This is an account of human uniqueness that does not contradict scientific understandings of human continuity-based distinctiveness but rather consistently extends the scientific material.

The central theoretical framework for van Huyssteen's theological anthropology is the bodily character of human life, which has a host of dimensions of meaning. He recognizes that some theological traditions have tended to underestimate the importance of embodiment, contenting themselves with what he describes, in a lovely turn of phrase, as "esoteric and exotically baroque abstractions," when formulating the meaning of the *imago Dei* (p. 113). To his credit, he is dissatisfied with these theological abstractions and sees significant resources within Christian theological anthropology for articulating human uniqueness in terms of embodiment. The physical orientation of the natural sciences and the social focus of the human sciences likewise support embodiment as a fruitful category for making sense of human life. So it ought to be a fruitful framework for a dialogue over human uniqueness.

Within the embodiment framework, van Huyssteen situates much that the sciences have to say about the continuity of human beings with the rest of nature, coordinated across scientific subspecialties. He emphasizes cognitive evolution (chap. 2), paleoanthropology (chap. 4), and the human capacity for language and symbolization (chap. 5). Along the way, and especially toward the end of the book, he uses ancient cave art to conjure a sense for the way that the scientific material's account of human distinctiveness-in-continuity opens up to, indeed begs for, interpretation in terms of the spiritual dimensions of life—an interpretation that science itself cannot easily provide. It is here that theology finds a natural place within the picture; its affirmation of the uniqueness of human beings completes

without contradicting the scientific account of human beings, providing that we render the theological material in terms of the embodiment framework (the task of chap. 3).

I consider van Huyssteen's overall interpretation of human beings to be largely consistent both with the scientific material and with what was always most right about the traditional theological picture of human nature. He correctly points out that our ability to respond to our world religiously depends on the symbolic, imaginative, and cognitively fluid aspects of our embodied minds and that these features of human being emerge from nature itself through the evolutionary process. This embodiment framework is the proper conceptual world for rethinking human uniqueness in terms of the *imago Dei*, as expressed and constrained by the natural sciences.

Relative to certain Christian subtraditions that have hesitated to take embodiment seriously, perhaps especially van Huyssteen's own Reformed tradition, the use of embodiment to frame dialogue between theology and the sciences on the theme of human uniqueness may seem to be a radical move. Theologians from such subtraditions may feel themselves challenged by *Alone in the World?* to embrace a more bodily understanding of the *imago Dei* and human uniqueness. Yet, relative to other theological traditions in which embodiment has been taken for granted for some time, especially feminist and naturalist theologies (with which I more strongly identify), van Huyssteen's approach to embodiment seems restrained, perhaps even reluctant. Despite my admiration for the book's exhibition of vast and artful integration, therefore, I argue that van Huyssteen underestimates the importance of embodiment and that this materially impacts the theological anthropology of *Alone in the World?*

Furthermore, I have concluded that there are important connections between the content of the theological anthropology and the transversal method. The general persuasiveness of the interpretation of human uniqueness that emerges from the book speaks well of the method van Huyssteen uses to produce it. But the weaknesses to which I have just alluded also reflect on the method. Van Huyssteen's idea of transversality contrasts in very particular ways with alternative metaphors for interdisciplinarity inquiry in science and religion, such as "traction"—that is, inferential contact that allows for the two disciplines to challenge and correct one another. Transversality first protects independent domains of experience (life worlds) and reasoning (language games) before considering domain overlaps. It stresses flashes of insight that create understanding while deemphasizing the obligation to weigh plausibility systematically. And the method defends the right of a party to the dialogue to withdraw when the moment of transversal connection has passed, which inevitably accentuates confirming connections rather than disconfirming ones. These features of the method are amply evident in *Alone in the World?* but do not always benefit the resulting theological anthropology.

## A RESTRAINED INTERPRETATION OF HUMAN EMBODIMENT

I present evidence for my contentions about van Huyssteen's restrained interpretation of human embodiment under seven themes in this section. In most cases I also argue that the transversal method allows and even encourages—especially in the sense of doing too little to discourage—a less than properly radical interpretation of embodiment within van Huyssteen's theological anthropology.

1. *Radical Embodiment and the Ideology of the "Cognitively Normal."* The human species embraces wide variations in cognitive abilities, especially in relation to language abilities, sociality, and intelligence. From a biohistorical point of view, however, all human beings are even more deeply related to one another, so there is no basis for decisive cognitively based separations among us. We are they, no matter who "they" are, how they think, whether they can talk or reason, or how they experience emotion. If our Paleolithic ancestors are us, as van Huyssteen forcefully argues, certainly autistics, schizophrenics, and the mentally retarded are us. Variations in states of consciousness that take us from waking into dreaming, and from ordinary cognition into psychosis and hallucination, are a feature of the neural equipment of human beings and thus part of the human condition. Sleep deprivation, extreme stress, and psychotropic substances can induce hallucinations in most people, but some human beings spontaneously produce such states without specific provocation. Human societies typically demonize or partition off individuals who experience psychotic cognitions or whose psychotically affected behavior disturbs social harmony. Likewise, most human beings shun persons with atypical language or with unusual patterns of sociality. The ideology of the cognitively normal legitimates these social patterns, sustains negative value judgments against unusual cognition and behavior, and justifies sometimes brutal treatment of cognitively strange or socially unusual human beings.

Van Huyssteen notes that there are different styles of cognition among human beings. Indeed, his central argument involves rejecting coarsely abstract generalizations about human beings and attaching flesh-and-blood experiences to the meaning of the *imago Dei*. Moreover, he notes that the human brain from the Upper Paleolithic until today supports a wide range of states of consciousness and uses this fact to make sense of some of the cave art he discusses (pp. 241–51, 254–56). And in approving David Lewis-Williams's shamanistic interpretation of some cave art, van Huyssteen links religion and religious experience to altered states of consciousness, including the hallucinatory states that occur in some individuals and potentially in most human beings. It is important to note how rare this is among theologians. Often enough, theologians have been at the forefront of defending the ideology of the cognitively normal by attacking both mystical

experience and emotional enthusiasm in corporate worship. Van Huyssteen moves beyond the typically unthinking rejection of this aspect of embodied human life and makes altered states of consciousness part of his explanation of the origins of religion.

Despite this promising trajectory, however, van Huyssteen's theological anthropology does not fully come to terms with the consequences of calling into question the ideology of the cognitively normal. A properly embodied approach to variations of human cognition recognizes that psychosis, sociality, and language vary tremendously in the human population and even within a single person at different times, stages, and circumstances of life. This has potentially socially explosive consequences, of which I mention just two, neither of which is well developed in *Alone in the World?*

First, this approach blurs the line between the cognitively normal and abnormal, invites the possibility that nonstandard cognitions may be informative even when most people discount them, and calls for value judgments not only relative to but also within the domain of the cognitively normal. Educational theory, social policy planning, health care, and crime prevention require that we make value judgments about unusual cognitions. And ordinary compassion demands that we support the "culture of caring" for the cognitively abnormal, when necessary. But justifying socially necessary judgments and preventing the culture of caring from condescendingly reinforcing the ideology of the cognitively normal are genuinely difficult social goals. The continuities in human cognition prevent us from establishing a sharp distinction between normal and abnormal cognitions, so we are forced to make the socially necessary value judgments right across the entire range of human cognition, including into the domain of so-called cognitively normal human beings.

This opens up potentially dramatic social possibilities. Society may treat genius less as an exception to the norm and more as a task of detection and cultivation. Society may prize high-functioning autistics as wondrous gifts because of their potential genius characteristics. Psychosis might be regarded as affording opportunities for insight into the nature of reality that ordinary cognition cannot produce. Cognitively abnormal human beings would be diagnosed quickly, they would be protected from harm and misunderstanding, and their gifts would be identified and nurtured. Society might regard the occurrence of manic depression, so common among artists and writers, as hitting the genetic-cultural jackpot. Perhaps most dramatically of all, society would regard ordinary stupidity and thoughtlessness in the "normal" population as genetically based problems to be addressed through education, concentration, and care of the afflicted. This has profound implications for theological anthropology, which so often has contented itself with vast generalizations about human cognition and unreflectively reinforced the ideology of cognitive normalcy. Van Huyssteen gets close to opening up these implications but stops just short.

Second, this radically embodied approach to human cognition suggests that there may be adaptive value in cognitive variations within the species, which potentially transforms our understanding of the evolution of human cognition and the origins of religion. Van Huyssteen mentions shamanic activities as relevant to the religious quest for transcendence, but he does not mention the other side of the shamanic coin, namely, the role that dissociative states, perhaps triggered in others by shamans, may have played in the adaptiveness of religion. The cultivation of inbuilt capacities for dissociation and hypnotic states are key factors in psychosomatic healing in our time and likely have been far into the evolutionary past of the human lineage. This defines a niche context within which so-called abnormal cognition may have been directly adaptive, which is a key hypothesis of ritual healing theory (see, for example, McClenon 2002). More generally, the adaptiveness of nonlinguistic cognitive capacities challenges and complicates van Huyssteen's repetition of the widespread claim that language is a key (if not *the* key) characteristic of human uniqueness. Language is important, of course. But cannot autistic and mentally retarded humans with little or no language ability still be gifted artists and appreciate symbols? Cognitive scientists may be misled about the evolution of human intelligence when they extrapolate backward from so-called cognitively normal modern humans. They may overlook the special adaptive possibilities in certain contexts of "abnormal" cognition. They may fail to see that symbolic forms of understanding (art, music, dance) may precede language by millions of years. They may minimize the possibility that what we today would call cognitively abnormal human beings established genetic resources in cognition that could be co-opted for language when vocal tract physiology made it possible. A deeper awareness of embodiment in *Alone in the World?* would open up all of these issues in ways that could profoundly affect van Huyssteen's theological anthropology, including by decentralizing language as the key to human uniqueness.

Despite van Huyssteen's attempt to escape the formulaic abstractions of traditional theological interpretations of human uniqueness in terms of the *imago Dei*, he repeats one of their fundamental mistakes when he speaks about human uniqueness and the *imago Dei* as one thing, as if there were not vast variations among human beings. Acknowledging that cognitive variations reflect the *imago Dei* invites and demands a theologically potent interpretation of human beings whose cognition does not achieve what we think of today as a minimally adequate level, and also of so-called cognitively normal human beings who are stupid or suffer from character defects. Merely proposing that some cave art reflects shamanic exploration of altered states of consciousness does not go far enough to open up these perspectives within theological anthropology. The transversal method does not draw van Huyssteen further into this vital territory, because it is better



sued to prompting mutually interesting dialogue than to provoking systematic integration of all perspectives with a claim in the discussion.

2. *Radical Embodiment Demands a More Intense Approach to Sociality.* Neuropsychologists working with primates and social psychologists working with human populations have uncovered compelling evidence that human identity is forged socially. This is a key aspect of bodily human life. The obvious commonsense version of this claim masks its striking implications. Sociality was crucial for driving the evolutionary process toward what we call modern humans. Sociality is essential for the formation of a brain that we can recognize as human even among modern humans. When human babies are born, their genetically engineered brains are incomplete in numerous ways, and they require sensory and social experiences to complete the neural connections. Human experience is ineluctably social, as witnessed especially by the facts that attachment responses seem hard-wired and that mirror neuron ensembles are primed for social engagement.

The social dimension of human embodiment is underdeveloped in *Alone in the World?* For example, van Huyssteen interprets ritual chiefly as a means of seeking the transcendent. He approves of Robert Jenson's parsing of human embodiment in terms of human beings as praying animals (p. 146) and throughout the book stresses ritual as a distinctively human and symbolic means of cultivating transcendence. But ritual is also socially framed repetition that soothes through focusing cognitive attention, controls through shared cognitive states, binds through costly signaling, and triggers psychosomatic healing through promoting dissociative states. This means that ritual-promoting activities such as religion can have enormous significance for the development of human nature through processes of gene-culture coevolution—the basis of ritual healing theory. Modern Western humans seeking the transcendent within the restrained rituals of suburban lifestyles may offer some insight into the social embodiment of early hominids, but it is equally valuable to look at ritual activities that involve handling snakes, walking on coals, self-flagellation, body modification, entheogen-induced altered states of consciousness, chanting, and dancing to rhythmic music all through the night. The minimization of these socially charged forms of ritual activity in van Huyssteen's argument, and especially the neglect of dimensions of significance other than transcendence seeking, distorts the picture of human nature, both past and present.

A clear expression of this problem is the subordination of morality in the book's account of the evolution of religion. The strong consensus within the sociology of religion from the time of Emile Durkheim until today is that morality is the tie that binds human groups together. The details vary among different theorists, but the role of morality in the interpretation of the sociality of human beings has been central for a long time. Thus, any adequate account of the evolutionary origins of religion must emphasize



morality. In all, it seems that a fully developed appreciation of the social aspects of human embodiment would materially affect van Huyssteen's theological anthropology and his account of human uniqueness. The transversal method offers little resistance to oversimplifying the theological implications of embodied sociality because the method is built around flashes of transversal insight rather than systematic evaluation of all relevant theoretical perspectives.

*3. Radical Embodiment and Limits on Cultural Flexibility and Religious Ideals.* The twists and turns in the ongoing nature-versus-nurture debate reflect how seriously scientists are taking radical embodiment. Theologians have tended to lag far behind. Admittedly this may be wise at times, given the pace of change in the sciences, but theologians need to come to terms with the emerging cross-cultural picture of human life. Lately, social constructivists (the pro-nurture folk) have been taking it on the chin as neuroscientists, social psychologists, and cultural anthropologists have been piecing together a biological basis for the recurrence across cultures of certain characteristics. These include natural categorizations in concepts and language; social organization, social behaviors, moral intuitions; and cognitive operations such as reasoning strategies (sometimes universally mistaken) and interpretation of sensations. This shift toward the nature side of the nature-nurture debate rebalances the scales, which tilted toward social constructivism after the collapse of social Darwinism many decades ago. Taking embodiment with appropriate seriousness requires that we recognize the extent to which we may have a great deal in common with people in quite different cultural settings, due to the sheer fact of being embodied in our particular planetary ecology.

Limits on flexibility in human nature as seen from cultural anthropology occur at two levels. On one level, structural universals derive from problems that all cultures must solve to exist and survive. Such problems are associated with family or kinship groups, status differences, division of labor, property control, and religious belief or practice. On the other level, cultural universals are culturally specific solutions to structurally universal challenges, such as particular family or kinship structures, communication gestures, economic arrangements, and languages. Human cultures are not determined by structural universals, but cultures explore a landscape of possibilities within the constraints set by structural universals. In fact, the reality of gene-culture evolution implies that cultures can even alter the landscape of structural possibilities to some degree. There is similar evidence of limits on cultural flexibility in many other disciplines, from cognitive science to social psychology.

To acknowledge limits on cultural flexibility is neither political despair nor moral pessimism. It does not necessarily express an ideology driven by a philosophy of history that posits futility of human effort. Nor is it

succumbing to genetic determinism. Rather, this acknowledgment is based on new discoveries about the genetically programmed dimensions of bodily human life. Theologians need to come to terms with the fact that there may be deep limitations on the realization of religious ideals. This has important implications for assessing the realism of religious ideals pertaining to individual holiness and social transformation, and for strategizing about how to organize human political life and how to implement religious ideals in a realistic form of social organization. For example, what would it mean to say that the genetic heritage of human beings is now largely fixed because it is dominated by cultural evolution? What if this places permanent limits on how good human beings can be, how well they can learn, how intelligent they can be? What if the cognitive canals that bound the mercurial flow of cultural and religious expression can only be breached through genetic engineering? Can (or must) religious traditions embrace this?

Van Huyssteen is sensitive to suggestions that genes limit religion (see p. 92, for example). But he tends to label such possibilities as reductionist and says they infringe on the proper domain of religion. This inevitably suggests a less than properly radical view of embodiment. *Alone in the World?* minimizes such questions by incorrectly treating the framework that leads to them as necessarily reductionist in its approach to religion. Even if some scientists do take a reductionist approach to religion because of the existence of genetic constraints on religious and moral expression, the data and theories themselves still deserve careful, nonreductive theological treatment. At this point, the transversal method seems so concerned to protect the autonomous perspectives of the parties to the dialogue that there is a rush to dismiss valid insights as reductionist when in fact they are crucial for a complete understanding of the subject matter.

4. *Radical Embodiment and the Cognitive Autonomy of Religion.* Van Huyssteen insists that the naturalness of religion grounds its rationality. This gentle but persistent claim addresses a deep worry among theologians. The worry derives from the following objection, which scientists such as Richard Dawkins (2006) famously express: The naturalness of religion as a set of evolved traits means that we are *determined* to have religious beliefs, and so the cognitive claims of religious belief are delusory and cannot be taken seriously. Van Huyssteen's basic reply is that the evolved character of religious belief means that it must be adapted to reality, and thus the naturalness of religion actually is evidence for the rationality of religious belief and the credibility of its cognitive claims (see pp. 75–106). He avoids absurdly oversimplified and patently false versions of this claim, as if the content of specifically Christian beliefs could be subject to selection pressures so as to make adaptive a tendency to hold them. But this basic reply pervades the book and demands scrutiny.

I think that a properly radical view of human embodiment entails that things are more complex than van Huyssteen's reply suggests. Fully acknowledging embodiment requires paying attention to the way cognition actually works in our bodies. On this topic, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience are the key disciplinary partners for theological anthropology. A vital distinction is between *adaptations* and various types and degrees of evolutionary *side-effects* (exaptations, spandrels, and functionless byproducts).<sup>1</sup> Evolutionary side-effects are features of organisms that arise not as a result of selection but as unselected consequences of adapted traits. Some evolutionary side-effects prove to be functional, others not; some are subsequently exposed to selection pressure, others are never so exposed. Evolution has produced many more side-effects than adaptations. This means that features important to distinctive human identity may never have been selected as adaptations.

Most theorists believe that the cognitive operations involved in religious belief are side-effects of evolved traits such as pattern-recognition skills (based on face recognition), causal detection and intention-attribution systems (deriving from survival skills), cognitive universals (underlying folk psychology and folk biology), the memorable character of minimally counterintuitive beliefs (aiding the perseverance of religious beliefs), and hypnotizability and dissociation (the bases for colorful religious experiences and psychosomatic placebo healing effects).<sup>2</sup> A helpful analogy is with visual illusions, which demonstrate how adapted traits of vision have byproducts. The byproducts are mostly harmless and amusing, which is why we are fascinated by visual illusions. Magicians use these evolutionary byproducts to fool people with sleight of hand, and charlatans use them to take advantage of their intelligent but cognitively vulnerable victims. In much the same way, the cognitive features of religion may derive significantly from evolutionary side-effects, except that in the case of religion we lack the feedback mechanisms that we use to discern what is really going on in visual illusions.

Van Huyssteen challenges evolutionary epistemologists who accept the Dawkins-style objection to religious belief with an extremely pointed question: "Why should we, so suddenly and only at this point—the development of this metaphysical aspect of our cultural evolution—so completely distrust the phylogenetic memory of our ancestors?" (p. 94) We need to take this question with great seriousness. The tendencies toward religious believing and metaphysical reflecting are deeply rooted in the human brain, and evolutionary theorists normally at least allow for the *possibility* that such phylogenetic memories were once somehow adaptive. Nevertheless, my answer to van Huyssteen's question is clear in light of recent work in evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuroscience: *We only now, as never before, are developing a compelling understanding of the cognitive mechanisms whose side-effects probably produced many of the features of religion, so we*

must revisit our assumptions about the content of religious belief and the reasons we take it to be reliable. Of course, this does not imply that religious belief is mistaken but only that the task of securing the rationality of religious belief and the reliability of the contents of beliefs is much more complex than suggested by van Huyssteen's questionable claim that religious belief is in the final analysis a kind of cognitive adaptation. His restrained approach to human embodiment prevents this answer to his question from getting a fair hearing. And the transversal method offers no resistance because it defers too quickly to the claims of cognitive autonomy advanced by parties to the dialogue.

5. *Connections between Evolutionary Psychology and Religious Epistemology.* The field of evolutionary psychology is vast.<sup>3</sup> Evolutionary psychology has important implications for religious beliefs and behavior because it offers partial explanations of their origins and functions. Evolutionary psychology often is speculative in relation to the original context in which cognitive capacities evolve; there is plenty of room to debate evolutionary niches, hominid behaviors, and selection pressures. There also is opportunity to debate the philosophical and theological implications of the fact that evolutionary psychology is learning to narrate a compelling evolutionary story about human cognitive mechanisms.

This is a topic that van Huyssteen might well have engaged in great detail in search of an interpretation of the cognitive aspects of human uniqueness. In fact, *Alone in the World?* deals with evolutionary epistemology at some length in chapter 2. But the treatment of evolutionary psychology in chapter 5 is brief by comparison, focusing on the work of Pascal Boyer (pp. 261–65). Strikingly, van Huyssteen's style of argument changes dramatically when he comes to Boyer. In relation to other scientific theories, van Huyssteen seeks out as many transversal connections as are relevant and weighs the plausibility of competing accounts. In relation to Boyer's work in evolutionary psychology, by contrast, he switches to a defensive mode of argument, aiming to show merely that Boyer cannot hurt his account of theological rationality. He correctly criticizes Boyer's overblown claim to "explain religion" (pp. 263–64), but he also uses abstractions such as *reductionist* to delegitimize Boyer's ideas (p. 261, for example). Unfortunately, van Huyssteen does not intensively engage the ideas themselves, looking for such philosophical and theological importance as they may have independently of Boyer's line of interpretation.

The defensive approach is expressed in the following conclusion: "both evolutionary psychology and evolutionary epistemology cannot explain, or explain away, the rationality or irrationality of religious belief, nor can they discuss the plausibility or implausibility of the reality claims intrinsic to most lived religions" (p. 264). But this conclusion is highly questionable. Evolutionary psychology cannot *definitively settle* such questions, of

course, but it certainly can help to explain religious belief, and it certainly has a bearing on the plausibility of religious truth claims. Assessing evolutionary psychology's impact on theological interpretations of the rationality of religious belief is an exceptionally complex matter. It cannot be settled merely by following van Huyssteen's strategy of defending the *possibility* that religious reality claims are true, which is obviously the case.

To justify not exploring this transversal connection in depth, van Huyssteen argues that the transversal method allows the theologian to end dialogue when ready; the parties are able to "just go their separate ways once the transversal moment of shared interest has passed" (p. 264). But should not dialogue continue as long as there is traction between evolutionary psychology and theology, even if it is awkward for one of the parties to the dialogue? Van Huyssteen's method allows him to cut the dialogue short when things get tough for theology, switching to defending possibility rather than arguing for plausibility.

6. *Connections between Biohistorical Anthropology and Divine Nature.* It is interesting to consider the way that *Alone in the World?* engages theologies that are more closely geared to embodiment as the framework for understanding human uniqueness theologically. For example, van Huyssteen discusses Gordon Kaufman's elaboration of human beings as biohistorical creatures, in part because Kaufman's emphasis on biological evolution, radical historicity, and creativity expresses a conception of human bodily reality that supports van Huyssteen's interpretation of human uniqueness.<sup>4</sup> But Kaufman defends a nonpersonal or suprapersonal conception of God as the best way to make sense of the fact that human beings are biohistorical beings, calling this idea of God "serendipitous creativity." This does not sit well with van Huyssteen, who calls Kaufman's proposal about God "problematical" upon introducing it, implicitly refuses to admit it into the realm of theism, and describes it as "a post-Christian and generic, abstract notion of God" (pp. 281–82).

The reader might expect van Huyssteen to engage the details of Kaufman's argument, weighing its plausibility, as he does in some other cases of transversal connections. As with the discussion of Boyer, however, van Huyssteen again switches from discussing plausibility to defending merely the *possibility* of personal theism in relation to both his and Kaufman's theological anthropology (the key argument is on pp. 281–82). Establishing possibility is the easier case to make (of course personal theism is possible), but it does not take up the challenge of Kaufman's ideas, including especially his claim that the biohistorical, embodiment framework is more strongly consonant with the conception of God as creativity than with the idea of God as a personal, active, conscious entity.

Van Huyssteen also attacks Kaufman's proposal on methodological grounds, claiming that Kaufman's argument draws a "covert scientific conclusion" and manifests "a serious interdisciplinary failure" because he

allows that “biological evolution may completely determine what may or may not be achieved on a cultural level” (p. 282). This misrepresents Kaufman’s argument, however. Kaufman does not argue for complete determination of theology by anything, only for plausibility constraints on theology based on the entire scientific worldview. That is not scientism. In fact, it is arguably precisely what successful investigation of a transversal interdisciplinary connection entails. This shows again the defect in the transversal method whereby one party to a dialogue is entitled to withdraw from the discussion when he or she loses interest—and apparently this covers cases where interest vanishes because the dialogue does not comport well with existing theological convictions.

7. *Connections between Embodiment and Sexuality.* Van Huyssteen is well aware of the place of sexuality in human life and human identity. He mentions sexism and heterosexism in passing (pp. 132, 316), but *Alone in the World?* is notable for its relative silence about sex despite its emphasis on embodiment. This is surprising given that scientists have learned a vast amount about sexual desire and sexual behavior in the last couple of decades, showing that sexual feelings and behaviors are biochemically continuous with the rest of nature even while human sexual behavior is incredibly complex and distinctive when compared with that of all other species—and that of other species is in many cases already extremely intricate. In fact, it is arguable that nothing more compactly expresses the meaning of human uniqueness than what human beings do culturally and morally with their embodied sexuality. There is every reason to centralize this theme in any comprehensive interpretation of human beings, including a theological anthropology.

Most theologies stressing embodiment in our time very explicitly treat questions of sexual identity. They take pains to exhibit the profound implications for theological anthropology of a full and rich understanding of human beings as sexual creatures, though they also tend to underplay the complicated scientific material on the subject. Van Huyssteen’s prodigious scientific knowledge puts him in a position to correct this defect in other theological offerings, so it is strange that he neglects the issue. In fact, he limits his substantive discussions of sexuality to the specifically theological question of whether the *imago Dei* must be articulated in terms of the man-woman relationship—a question with a rich history of debate within his own Reformed theological tradition (see pp. 150–54). Is this transversal connection passed over because of the controversial status of the question within some religious communities, including his own? The reader is left guessing. We certainly live at a time when the question of sexual identity, particularly regarding homosexual and transgendered persons, is tearing many religious groups apart. The neglect of these crucial questions in the book is puzzling and suggests that the nonsystematic character of the transversal method is more of a liability than a virtue.

## CONCLUSION

There is always a question of whether weaknesses in an inquiry—what van Huyssteen calls “serious interdisciplinary failures”—derive from the method itself or from the way it is employed. In this case, I think that both factors are relevant.

With regard to use of the transversal method, we must acknowledge that nobody can do everything in one book, so it is not fair to expect *Alone in the World?* to cover all relevant transversal connections. Yet van Huyssteen made choices about what to cover and what not to cover, and these choices materially affect the resulting theological anthropology and its view of human uniqueness. As we have seen, he sometimes appeals to his method to explain why he pulls out of a promising dialogical moment, saying that people are free to withdraw when the dialogical moment has passed, but I suspect that the transversal method itself does not determine these choices. Why marginalize or restrain certain transversal connections related to embodiment that threaten to challenge the prevailing theological interpretation? Why shift argumentative strategy at such moments from synthesis of the plausible to defense of the possible? Perhaps undisclosed interests of a valuable theological tradition are overactive in this inquiry. The transversal method, like any dialogical one, demands that the presence and effects of special interests should be acknowledged as a condition of dialogue, but I think it is incompletely done here. This is not a problem with the method per se so much as with the way it is employed.

Regarding the method itself, evidently it is not well suited to drawing attention to creeping bias in the form of selection or neglect of transversal connections to consider. It also seems ill-equipped to diagnose the way special interests affect active plausibility structures, styles of argumentation, and handling of evidence. If the method were more systematic, and depended less exclusively on impressionistic moments of transversal insight, there would be more of a basis for detecting these failures of impartiality. Van Huyssteen’s desire to honor the substantial autonomy of both science and religion is commendable, and every science-theology dialogue needs to absorb this lesson. But the transversal method does this in a way that is more artistic than philosophically rigorous, encouraging the exploration of favored transversal connections while allowing unfavorable ones to pass by unexamined or muted in their effects.

What is the theological viewpoint that is overactive but insufficiently acknowledged in *Alone in the World?* Van Huyssteen honors his Reformed religious community and, despite some tension, he identifies with it, seeks to nurture it, and wants it to flourish. He also is confident that his tradition need not abandon or radically modify its core traditional commitments. (I am not so sanguine.) Reading between the lines, van Huyssteen seems to believe that (1) the core traditional commitments have proved



themselves in many historical and cultural settings, (2) metaphysical arguments for radical change are overblown, (3) there is no compelling scientific argument for radical change, and (4) radical innovation just introduces worse problems. Thus, he remains confident in his theological tradition, basically accepting its core commitments, though mercifully without the rancor and rigidity that some Reformed theologians display. This theological outlook finds in the transversal method an ideally congenial, or compliant, method. The methodological glove stretches to fit the theological hand perfectly. The result is that the more challenging data and theorizing from the sciences are too easily marginalized or passed over silently, after which the theological anthropology need not worry about them—and also does not profit from them.

This hand-in-glove teaming of a robust theological outlook with a compliant method of inquiry limits the potency of what is admittedly an extraordinary book. *Alone in the World?* is ideally framed to address those who are unfamiliar with interpreting theological categories such as the *imago Dei* in terms of scientific approaches to human embodiment and yet who are ready to believe that paying attention to scientific understandings of human nature may not violate the autonomous dignity of theological reflection. Van Huyssteen makes such readers feel comfortable by defending the rational autonomy of theology, by sharply critiquing scientific reductionism, and by making use of science in a way that does not threaten the core of the theological outlook. Meanwhile, readers already deeply committed to embodiment immediately register the book's restrained approach. They may feel that the book does not go far enough, moves too slowly, worries too much about satisfying a silent audience of theologians, and stifles scientific work when it might have awkward implications for an assumed theological viewpoint.

Yet that "external" criticism need not interfere with our admiration for the astonishing effort of learning and integration that the book represents. Nor should it disrupt appreciation for the artfulness of *Alone in the World?* as a work of integrative multidisciplinary theology, especially when read "internally" as a groundbreaking contribution to van Huyssteen's home tradition. Most important, it should not distract us from the vital conclusion of the book about the theological meaning of human uniqueness: "if scientific contributions to understanding the issue of human uniqueness are taken seriously, the theological notion of the *imago Dei* is powerfully revisioned as *emerging from nature itself*" (p. 322), nor from the compelling practical consequence: "the image of God is not found *in* humans, but *is* the human, and for this reason *imago Dei* can be read only as *imitatio Dei*: to be created in God's image means we should act like God, and so attain holiness by caring for others and for the world" (p. 320).

## NOTES

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1. I present an introduction to these ideas aimed at theologians and religionists in “The Significance of the Evolution of Religious Belief and Behavior for Religious Studies and Theology” (Wildman 2006b), a commentary and analysis essay for McNamara 2006.

2. For a compact summary of the case, see Kirkpatrick 2006.

3. The writings of John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have done a great deal to stabilize terminology and concepts within the field of evolutionary cosmology and include excellent overviews; see, in particular, “Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer” (1997). For an introduction well suited to psychologists, see Kennair 2002.

4. The discussion is on pages 279–83, and he refers to Kaufman 2004b. Kaufman’s argument is elaborated most fully in *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (2004a).

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