The Really Hard Problem, Meaning in a Material World—Symposium with Owen Flanagan

BRIDGING SCIENCE AND RELIGION: "THE MORE" AND "THE LESS" IN WILLIAM JAMES AND OWEN FLANAGAN

by Ann Taves

Abstract. There is a kinship between Owen Flanagan's *The Really Hard Problem* and William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that not only can help us to understand Flanagan's book but also can help scholars, particularly scholars of religion, to be attentive to an important development in the realm of the "spiritual but not religious." Specifically, Flanagan's book continues a tradition in philosophy, exemplified by James, that addresses questions of religious or spiritual meaning in terms accessible to a broad audience outside the context of organized religions. Both James and Flanagan are concerned to refute the popular perception that the sciences of the mind pose a threat to meaning and particularly to meaningful processes of human growth and transformation. Where James used the subconscious to bridge between science and religion and persuade his readers of the reality of the More, Flanagan uses a scientifically grounded understanding of transcendence to enchant his readers into believing in Less. Although I think that Flanagan's attempt to link the psychological and sociocultural levels of analysis via the concept of transcendence is scientifically premature, his attempt at a naturalistic spirituality raises questions of definition that scholars of religion need to take seriously.

Keywords: William James; natural spirituality; science and religion; transcendence

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As I prepared to review Owen Flanagan's *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (2007) I initially assumed I would write as a scholar of religion with interests in psychology. It was a logical enough starting point, but one that left me very unclear about what I wanted to say. As a meaning-making animal, I felt personally addressed by the book, but this did not seem like the way I wanted to position myself in relation to the review. So I tried to identify the book's genre, which, while drawing extensively on science, is not exactly science. Nor is it exactly religion or spirituality, although it discusses both extensively and has a somewhat "spiritual" feel. I suspect that Flanagan wants us to consider it an engaged or expansive species of philosophy, but as a scholar of religion that starting point did not suit me, either.

So I turned to his argument, puzzled as to how his "empirical-normative inquiry into the nature, causes, and conditions of human flourishing" (pp. 1–4) was connected with his expansion of the "spaces of meaning" from two to six (pp. 4–16). The more deeply I engaged with his argument, the more it seemed to elude me and the more frustrated I got.

Finally it dawned on me that my frustration was much like the frustration I have felt through years of wrestling with William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* ([1902] 1985). This insight finally provided me with an interpretive lens. As a scholar of religion with interests in psychology who has spent a lot of time with James's *Varieties,* I find a kinship between the two books that not only can help us to understand Flanagan's book but can also help scholars, particularly scholars of religion, to be attentive to an important development in the arena for which we might be considered responsible. Specifically, Flanagan's book continues a tradition in philosophy—exemplified by James—that addresses questions of religious or spiritual meaning in terms accessible to a broad audience outside the context of organized religions. Although I think that Flanagan's attempt to link the psychological and sociocultural levels of analysis via the concept of transcendence is scientifically premature, his attempt at a naturalistic spirituality raises questions of definition that scholars of religion need to take seriously.

Both Flanagan and James wrote the books in question at the invitation of others. James was asked to give the Gifford Lectures on the subject of natural religion at the University of Edinburgh; Flanagan was asked to give the Templeton Research Lectures on the subject of "how things, considered in the broadest possible sense, hang together (if they do) in the broadest possible sense" at the University of Southern California (p. ix).

The question of how things hang together is not precisely the question Flanagan addresses in the book, although he certainly touches on it. Instead, the specific question he seeks to address—the hardest question, in his view—is the question of how "we can make sense and meaning of our lives given that we are material beings living in a material world" (pp. xii–

xiii). Perhaps we should say that he uses the question of meaning to come at the question of how things hang together.

Flanagan admits that friends have wondered why he—as a self-avowed lapsed Roman Catholic with interests in Tibetan Buddhism who attends Unitarian-Universalist services on occasion—wanted to venture into the more expansive and at the same time somewhat more personal territory represented by this book. James scholars have spent a lot of time wondering the same thing about James and the *Varieties*, many of them concluding that he wrote it to work out issues between himself and his Swedenborgian father. Neither author addresses these personal issues directly, but I think it is safe to say that public lectures sponsored by vaguely pro-religious organizations such as the Gifford and Templeton endowments tend to tempt scholars to say what they really think about large questions in ways that are simultaneously faithful to their discipline and accessible to wider audiences. Both *The Really Hard Problem* and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* are that kind of book.

The occasion that prompted the lectures shaped the structure of both books to some degree. Both juxtapose examples and references to research in segments that hang together as lectures but do not always clearly advance a line of argument from one chapter to the next. So, too, they both build from a statement of the problem to discussion of aspects of the problem to a concluding lecture in which we learn much more about what James called their personal "overbeliefs."

Yet, if both books were shaped to some degree by the occasion, they also arose organically from the authors' preceding preoccupations. Flanagan has been attending to questions of body, mind, and meaning for much of his career. *Consciousness Reconsidered* (1992) articulated a naturalistic understanding of consciousness. *Self Expressions: Mind, Morals, and the Meaning of Life* (1996) initiated his reflections on questions of morality and meaning in the absence of God. *Dreaming Souls* (2000) argued that even though dreams are an evolutionary side effect of sleep, we nonetheless can and do use them to discover meaning. Flanagan took up the problems addressed in the current work most directly in *The Problem of the Soul* (2002) where he criticized the concepts of a nonphysical mind, free will, and a permanent, abiding, and immutable self or soul (p. xi). Indeed, in that book, he called for a "synthetic scientifically inspired philosophy" to replace a perennial philosophy built on the ontological dualisms he rejected. Such a philosophy, he indicated, needed to "encourage ethics and the quests for meaning, enlightenment, even perfection" (2002, 7).

In the current work, this more robust synthetic scientifically inspired philosophy has been rebaptized as "eudaimonistic scientia," or eudaimonics for short. *Eudaimonia* means "flourishing," something that Aristotle said all humans seek, and eudaimonics as Flanagan conceives it is "systematic theorizing about the nature, cause, and constituents of human flourishing" (p. 16).

There is a tension in both books between the general picture each wants to create of how things hang together or work in a more general theoretical sense that can be tested scientifically and their own personal perspective. In Flanagan's book the tension is between eudaimonics as the systematic study of human flourishing, which may, for example, discover more evidence to suggest that a certain amount of illusion (or delusion) of the sort he discusses in chapter 4 helps people to flourish, and persuading people that meaning is possible in a material world. Flanagan tries to do both simultaneously, expressing the hope that the picture he sketches will be both "naturalistic and enchanting" (p. xiii).

There also are remarkable parallels between Flanagan's central question about meaning in a material world and James's central question, although James doesn't state his as forthrightly as Flanagan does. As I have argued elsewhere (Taves 2008), James's underlying question can be paraphrased as whether there is something More—something beyond or seemingly beyond the self—that aids in the process of self-transformation and can be expressed in terms acceptable to both religious believers and scientists. Flanagan too is interested in self-transformation. He assumes that human nature is an ethically mixed bag and stands in need of transformation of a kind that promotes human flourishing. Like James, he wants to talk about self-transformation in terms acceptable to science (congruent with Darwinian science and scientific materialism) and compelling to believers. Both James and Flanagan are concerned to refute the popular perception that the sciences of the mind pose a threat to meaning and particularly to meaningful processes of human growth and transformation. By highlighting research on the subconscious, research that scientists could interpret as generating impressions that felt *as if* they arose from beyond the self and believers could interpret as *actually* arising from beyond the self, James hoped to entice both scientists and religious believers into an appreciation of "the More." In a parallel fashion, Flanagan wants to talk about flourishing in terms amenable to scientists and at the same time meaningful to believers. Indeed, he wants to cast psychological research on flourishing in terms sufficiently compelling to believers that they will willingly abandon "the More" for what we might call "the Less." In short, while James wanted to "bewitch" his readers into believing in More (as his colleague James Leuba put it [1904, 337]), Flanagan wants to enchant his readers into believing in Less.

In laying out their agendas, both make similar intellectual moves to allay the anticipated fears of their audiences. Immediately upon explaining that he planned to take a psychological approach to religious experience, James felt compelled to launch into his now famous aside on the distinction between fact and value in order to assuage his listeners' fears of "medical materialism," that is, the deflation of meaning associated with attributing organic causation to a religious state of mind. Flanagan's expansion of the

"space of meaning" from two to six is, among other things, an alternative route to the same end inserted for much the same purpose at much the same point in his lectures. Where we in the modern West often cast the problem of meaning in terms of the apparent alternatives supplied by science and religion, Flanagan reframes the alleged conflict and redirects our attention away from it by pointing out that there are multiple spaces of meaning. He focuses on six: art, science, technology, ethics, politics, and spirituality (p. 7). Reframing meaning in this way allows us to pinpoint conflicts between spaces of meaning more precisely and to recognize that not all conflicts between spaces of meaning fall under the heading of religion and science and not all engagements between religion and science are conflictual (pp. 8–9). Identification of various spheres of meaning also allows us to recognize that not all spheres of meaning are invested in the same kinds of meaning. Science may be in hot pursuit of truth, but art cares about beauty and ethics about goodness. Meaning can arise in any of these spheres; the causal explanations of science are not the only things that are meaningful. Using another means of relativizing the power of causal explanations, Flanagan, like James, tries to allay his readers' fear that the sciences of the mind threaten to "reduce," that is, explain away, everything that people find meaningful.

Flanagan's book charts new directions relative to his earlier work in his attempt to identify deep structures of flourishing and ways of measuring whether or not we are achieving it. To get at this question, he turns to comparative philosophy and positive psychology in chapters 2 and 4. He finds considerable convergence between his own efforts at comparative philosophy and those of the positive psychologists. He adopts the list of six virtues—justice, humaneness, temperance, wisdom, transcendence, and courage—proposed by positive psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) with the exception of transcendence, arguing that this, while crucial, is not a virtue (pp. 51–52). He returns to the concept of transcendence in the last of his six chapters, where it forms the basis for a naturalistic spirituality that can not only bridge between science and religion but has the potential, given its integrative character, to bridge between all the other spheres of meaning as well.

Transcendence, suitably naturalized, takes the place of James's subconscious in Flanagan's argument. While he rejects Peterson and Seligman's claim that transcendence is a virtue, he agrees that "the fact that something in the vicinity of 'transcendence' is alleged to be universal deserves attention." He suggests that "transcendence is best conceived as a prepotent part of our basic cognitive-affective-conative constitution as human animals that is easily activated across environments. . . . Transcendence so conceived has almost completely to do with such things as the urges to make sense of things and to live meaningfully" (pp. 198–99).

The concept does two important kinds of work for Flanagan. First, as "a prepotent part of our basic cognitive-affective-conative constitution," it serves as (a/the) bridge between the psychological and the spiritual/cultural. As "a part of our basic . . . constitution," it is postulated to be universal; as "a prepotent part . . . easily activated across environments," he assumes that it will take a variety of particular forms in different sociocultural environments. Second, it allows him to decouple religion-as-belief-in-divine-beings from meaning making. His particular target here is "those who behave as if religious beliefs are immune from criticism because of religion's status as the primary mode of meaning-making the world over" (p. 52). Transcendence, understood as a disposition or orientation toward situating oneself meaningfully in the world and connecting to that which is larger and greater than the self, has no necessary link to supernatural beings, theological beliefs, or religious institutions (pp. 198–99).

I agree with him that something in the vicinity of "transcendence" deserves attention as potentially widespread if not universal among humans. I also agree that this something need not be conflated with theism or divine beings. Indeed, I think that research would be enhanced by more refined distinctions—but this is where we need to distinguish between scientific and normative agendas and not let the normative drive the scientific. Scientifically, there is not yet enough convergence among psychologists to construct more than a tentative bridge between the things we think of as religious and/or spiritual and the underlying human universals. Flanagan relies on Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of the moral virtues in chapters 2 and 6 but also reproduces Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph's (2004) classification of moral emotions and the virtues associated with them in chapter 4 (p. 128). This is exciting research and highly relevant for the study of religion and spirituality, but the classifications are not yet sufficiently stabilized to provide a reliable foundation for constructing linkages between the psychological and sociocultural levels. Peterson and Seligman list four "strengths" under the heading of transcendence: appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, and spirituality. These four, which Flanagan reframes as the basis for his elaboration of a naturalized spirituality, overlap in part with Haidt's moral emotions, but the relationship between all these things is not clearly worked out.

Some of the difficulties may reflect differences in starting points and criteria. Peterson and Seligman derive their six moral virtues from comparative philosophy (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, and Seligman 2005), Haidt and Joseph from research on emotions. Emotions have to have certain features to count as emotions, which many of these virtues do not have. Haidt (in Keltner and Haidt 2003) has argued for a family of awe-related emotions, including "elevation," an emotional response to moral goodness or beauty. Flanagan includes elevation and awe in brackets under Peterson and Seligman's heading of "appreciation of beauty and excellence." In more

recent work, Haidt (2007) and others identify five psychological foundations, each with separate evolutionary origin, upon which they believe human cultures construct moral communities: harm, fairness, in-group out-group dynamics, authority, and purity—each of which can be caught up in processes of meaning making.

It strikes me that there is too much religionlike stuff going on at the level of the moral emotions (awe, elevation, purity, disgust, compassion) to ground something like what Flanagan means by transcendence at this level. Rather than grounding it at the level of the moral emotions, it may be that it emerges at a more basic emotional level. Jaak Panksepp and Douglas Watt, focusing on primary rather than moral emotions, identify two basic clusters of emotions: a social-connection cluster and an organism-defense cluster, as well as a "nonspecific 'SEEKING SYSTEM' (Panksepp 1998) acting as a 'gain' system and modulatory control system for all prototype emotional states, driving organisms out there to 'mix it up' with other living things, to find essential emotional and biological supplies" (Watt 2007, 121). Flanagan's notion of transcendence may have its biological roots in something like Panksepp's "seeking system."

My point is not to try to sort out these disparate albeit overlapping conceptions but simply to say that it is not at all clear where, if at all, a notion of transcendence as defined by Flanagan fits in this picture. This is a crucial point at which I think Flanagan's normative agenda propels him to make premature linkages between psychological and sociocultural levels of analysis. Although the concept of transcendence provides Flanagan with a means of linking the psychological and the spiritual, much as the subconscious did for James, it is not (yet) sufficiently grounded psychologically to function as Flanagan would like. Rather than redefine traditional concepts such as transcendence in an effort to link the psychological and sociocultural levels, I think it would behoove us to elaborate specific formulations, for example, "expansive ways of feeling and thinking that deflate the self by inflating that with which the self partakes," that bridge these levels in more phenomenological detail. We could then continue to explore the empirical connections between formulations, such as the sense of "self-deflation," and research on primary and moral emotions and cognitive processes, on the one hand, and various cultural formulations we may consider religious or spiritual, on the other.

Although in my view Flanagan's synthesis is scientifically premature, I think it should be taken most seriously as a spiritual formulation by those who study the territory we roughly designate by the terms *religion* and *spirituality*. As Flanagan argues, and as the naturalized spirituality he proposes demonstrates, spirituality as practiced today does not necessarily entail belief in supernatural or spiritual beings. The cognitive science of religion, which also has been forging links between the sciences of mind and the

sociocultural realm, has defined religion almost exclusively in terms of culturally postulated superhuman agents. Clearly, there are behaviors, which we might call religious or spiritual, that do not involve spiritual beings. The question is how to characterize them. My own inclination would be to situate what we think of as religions or spiritualities in the context of larger processes of meaning making and valuation and then distinguish theoretically, if not always practically, between religions or spiritualities that are oriented toward postulated supernatural or spiritual beings and those that are oriented toward postulated absolute values, such as Good, Truth, Beauty, Reality, and so forth. If our goal is empirical rather than normative, we cannot simply discount the widespread, if not universal, human belief in spiritual beings as a way of making meaning. Scientifically, we need to explore the relationship between belief in spiritual beings—even the assertive belief that Flanagan decries—and belief in more abstract absolutes, such as Good, Truth, and Beauty, in relation to human flourishing. It is at this point that Flanagan's normative desire to replace assertive theism with expressive theism gets in the way of a more open scientific agenda.

Flanagan's normative agenda raises other issues as well. Like many others in a post-9/11 world, Flanagan assumes that "assertive theism" is "epistemically problematic and socially and politically dangerous" (p. 194). He even goes so far as to provide a set of rules that theists should follow so as to avoid making epistemically unwarranted assertions (pp. 195–96). At this point, Flanagan's naturalism gets a bit too assertive for my taste. We need to distinguish between the epistemic problems that Flanagan associates with assertive theism and the alleged social and political dangers it poses. Empirically, it is not at all clear that assertive theism is more socially and politically dangerous than assertive naturalism, as (say) in the case of assertively naturalistic Communist regimes. Nor is it clear that assertive views are always more dangerous than expressive (mythic, symbolic) ones. Yes, radicalism often is fueled by assertive views, but the value of any given form of radicalism often is in the eyes of the beholder. Karl Barth, an assertive theist, stood up to the Nazi regime while more wishy-washy expressive liberals played it safe. Historically, religion was socially and politically "declawed" through political settlements—peace treaties and acts of toleration between warring parties—within and between European states and then constitutional provisions that protected religious liberty. Assertive believers were not required to tone down their beliefs; they simply had to respect the rights of others to hold beliefs that conflicted with their own. We can get along, in other words, even if we hold to positions that Flanagan considers epistemically problematic.

Flanagan's rules for theists strike me as somewhat presumptuous, especially if addressed to academic theists. I think he underestimates the range of ways in which the epistemological problems can be tackled and, thus,

the extent to which it will convince philosophically minded theists. This is not an area in which I have any great expertise, but I suspect that the circles in which he travels (Mind and Life Institute, Tibetan Buddhists, Unitarian-Universalists) and his reaction against his Roman Catholic background leave him less familiar than he might be with the range of ways Christian theologians, to name just one tradition, are attempting to address these issues. If his guidance is aimed toward a more general readership, I expect it will appeal to those already tending toward a naturalistic mindset, those who hope that meaning can be sought without reliance on the supernatural. Will it persuade assertive theists to moderate their views? I doubt it. To that end, we will probably need works that are more poetic, more narrative, more expressive than this one—works that more thoroughly evoke a sense that Less is Enough rather than argue for it.

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