Zygon and the Future of Religion-and-Science

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A LITERARY TRINITY FOR COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND RELIGION

by John A. Teske

Abstract. The cognitive sciences may be understood to contribute to religion-and-science as a metadisciplinary discussion in ways that can be organized according to the three persons of narrative, encoding the themes of consciousness, relationality, and healing. First-person accounts are likely to be important to the understanding of consciousness, the "hard problem" of subjective experience, and contribute to a neurophenomenology of mind, even though we must be aware of their role in human suffering, their epistemic limits, and their indirect causal role in human behavior and subsequent experience. Second-person discussions are important for understanding the empathic and embodied relationality upon which an externalist account of mind is likely to depend, increasingly uncovered and supported by social neuroscience. Third-person accounts can be better understood in uncovering the us/them distinctions that they encode and healing the dangerous tribalisms that put an interdependent and communal world increasingly at risk.

Keywords: causality; consciousness; embodiment; empathy; externalism; phenomenology; relationality; social neuroscience; subjectivity; tribalism

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Religion-and-science may be best understood not as a public intellectual realm or an emerging discipline but as a metadisciplinary conversation. I think that where the psychological sciences and their cognates should be going in their contributions to this conversation, and perhaps this conversation's contributions to where they are going, are in three areas, which I organize as a literary trinity. (1) The first-person contribution is likely to be in attention to the so-called "hard problem" of the perspectival and subjective aspects of conscious experience, as well as the role of first-person neurophenomenology in a mature science of mind. (2) The second-person contribution is in the greater understanding of human relationality, what is shared between persons rather than located within them, of relational constituents of personhood and personal constituents of relationship, of empathy, connection, and healing, particularly as it is underpinned by our developing understanding of social and social-cognitive neuroscience. (3) The third-person contribution is in the better understanding of the us/them distinctions of tribalism, of the irrational sources of conflict that make it difficult to resolve the destructive tensions in the human community, of the fear and defensiveness so endemic and so poisonous in an era of obvious world interdependency.

Religion-and-Science as a Metadisciplinary Conversation

As my friend, and current president of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science, Ted Laurenson has suggested, it is in their imaginative projections that the religions or mythological systems of the world make it possible to address our "perceptions of separateness" and "the brute facts of individual desire, suffering and death" (2007, 813). We cannot learn what ends to project merely by looking at the factual truth of science. Possibilities are constrained by facts, and the more we know about the facts the more realistic our projection of possibilities may be, but it takes imagination, not science, to invent those possibilities. "Religion is part of our dream of possibilities; its study provides a lens for the observation of many aspects of what the human enterprise is and can be about, of explorations of what it might mean to have different notions of ourselves, and why it might matter if we did" (2007, 814).

Religion, writes Terry Eagleton, "has proved far and away the most powerful, tenacious, universal symbolic form humanity has yet to come up with" (2009, 165), and it asks questions not easily raised in either philosophy or science. It is only from the context of religion-and-science that I have any overview of the horribly fragmented sciences of the spirit or sense of the integrity of persons, especially from the viewpoint of diverse and overlapping disciplines. Don't get me wrong—there certainly is plenty of interesting, relevant, and important empirical as well as theoretical work to be done in the human sciences. Nevertheless, in the splintering of these disciplines into specialties and subspecialties that rarely talk to each other,

it is hard to see from whence might come the unifying syntheses necessary for much broad use in the crucial human projects that face us all. This is always true in professionalized research, where livelihoods and careers require publishing, or vanishing—sadly, at least in psychology, with only controversial, problematic, and often unpracticed connections with healing the distressing and twisted agonies of real human psyches.

History tells us where human nature can lead us. We need to know our limitations, because people suffer and we seem helpless to do much about it, because we are mortal, because we love. But these are not scientific truths, are they? Again, this is not to say that they come from elsewhere, or that science is not essential to help us better understand how things as they are have come about, or necessary in order to get where we want to go. Science is just not the symbolic form in which these questions are asked or in which imaginative answers are proposed, which give us the hope that we need, individually and corporately, to go on, to not surrender to despair. Eagleton (2009) provides an incisive counterpoint to the "liberal humanism" of so-called new atheists, including Richard Dawkins (2006) and Christopher Hitchens (2007), in suggesting that there may be some real value in a "tragic humanism" and claiming solidarity with Christians in declaring "the ultimate signifier of the human condition" to be "the tortured and murdered body of a political criminal" (2009, 37). Eagleton's embrace of tragic humanism affirms, in humility and without hubris, the knowledge that we are frail and mortal, embracing the disruptiveness of death, without which we cannot live fully.

Would our very consciousness have evolved without the death of individuals? Without the limitations of mortality, of finitude, how would the prioritizations of value, ethics, and morality have come to be? Could we learn to love each other, to love passionately, if we thought we'd never die?

> Tragic humanism shares liberal humanism's vision of the free flourishing of humanity; but it holds that this is possible only by confronting the very worst. . . . Tragic humanism, whether in its socialist, Christian, or psychoanalytic varieties, holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own. There are no guarantees that such a transfigured future will ever be born. (Eagleton 2009, 168)

I recently had my own little "Kekule dream." In it I also dreamed of an ouroborus, the snake eating its tail, taken as a symbol of life devouring itself, or of consciousness, but also of healing, of wholeness. Like the twist that produces the Moebius strip, in which inner and outer become each other, it was not one but two snakes, mating in that twisting and turning that makes this one of the most embarrassingly erotic displays in nature. But like the "other" that is necessary for self-consciousness, each is devouring the other, one doubled ring. In relationship, we face each other's dark sides and wrestle endlessly about which of us is the one bearing the poison and which the antidote. Happily, this image also encodes my themes: consciousness, relationality, and healing.

First Person: Consciousness, the "Hard Problem," and Neurophenomenology

Contemporary representational theories of mind in the cognitive and neurosciences are traceable to the Cartesian invention of consciousness as a subject matter (Leahy 2000). This leaves an endemic dualism lurking in the background of assumptions about the possibility of scientific objectivity in the study of mind, what Thomas Nagel (1986) called "the view from nowhere." This is especially true when renewed attention to the historical subject matter of psychology, that of human consciousness, is so troubled by the "hard problem" of subjective points of view. But a new synthesis of cognitive psychology, neuroscience, and phenomenology is starting to emerge, as is attention to the narrative over the paradigmatic, to subjectivity, to the nondisciplinary voices of everyday human experience, and to point of view as constitutive of the subject matter. It is likely, argues Evan Thompson (2007), that a mature science of mind will not only require attention to the everyday neurophenomenology of consciousness but also make use of adepts from a number of traditions who are practiced or skilled at producing quite different forms of phenomenal consciousness. Jensine Andresen (2002) provided a trenchant complaint about research on meditative adepts, that, because researchers have ignored how they are socially organized, embedded within religious teachings, and aimed at attaining a particular phenomenological experience, crucial information on precisely what is being studied has gone unrecorded because researchers have not bothered to learn about their subjects' religious traditions in any depth.

Fragmentation of the intellectual world may be useful in the highly analytic sciences, but it makes difficult the syntheses necessary to address real human problems, real human suffering, real human wounds. It is here, in particular, that first-person phenomenology may be crucial, because it is in the accounts of how dysfunctional, or other-functional, processes *produce* such experience that any healing progress is likely to be made. Gail Hornstein (2009) suggests that even psychotics may be better understood by closer attention to the content of their first-person accounts. Judith Herman (1992) suggests that a traumatized individual's healing may depend crucially on how safely and seriously her personal account is taken. Jonathan Shay (1994) argues that for combat trauma, narrative itself may provide the only healing possible. None of this suggests that such phenomenological accounts of experience should be taken at face value.

The cognitive and neurosciences have been gathering evidence for a generation about the neural substrates of voluntary action and conscious will, showing some serious disjuncts between what we think we are doing and what brings our actions about. Daniel Wegner (2002) has elaborated a theory of apparent mental causation, providing evidence that the experience of conscious will is produced by processes distinct from those that generate action. Theorist Thomas Metzinger (2003) argues that a con-

sciously experienced first-person perspective, the phenomenal self, actually is an ongoing process and the content of a "transparent self-model." Indeed, many of our emotional, ethical, and even behavioral problems may be rooted in the limitations of that transparency, what he calls *The Ego Tunnel* (2009). Timothy Wilson (2002) cites a plethora of evidence from social psychology of many of the limitations and outright errors to which introspection is prone. Asked by a distraught audience member about how she deals with the serious limitations to our experienced agency and autonomy, Susan Blackmore (2005) responded, "I just watch to see what she will do next."

One lesson is that we are not self-sufficient, self-originating, or the sole authors even of our own narratives. Eagleton's *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009) has much to say in this regard, particularly on the value of religious faith. One reviewer comments:

> "Self-sufficient" gets to the heart of what Eagleton sees as wrong with the "brittle triumphalism" of liberal rationalism and its ideology of science. From the perspective of a theistic religion, the cardinal error is the claim of the creature to be "self-originating": "Self-authorship," Eagleton proclaims, "is the bourgeois fantasy par excellence," and he could have cited in support the words of that great bourgeois villain, Milton's Satan, who, upon being reminded that he was created by another, retorts, "[W]ho saw/ When this creation was…?/ We know no time when we were not as now/Know none before us, self-begot, self-raised" (Paradise Lost, V, 856–860). That is, we created ourselves (although how there can be agency before there is being and therefore an agent is not explained), and if we are able to do that, why can't we just keep on going and pull progress and eventual perfection out of our own entrails? (Fish 2009)

A mature, postmodern science of mind may challenge a dualism of mind and body, of spirit and matter, that leaves us disembodied, at odds with others, projecting arbitrary meanings on a world with no intrinsic meaning, and divorced from a world ecology upon which we had better realize our existence depends. The emergence of the particular *form* of subject/object, self/other, and internal/external during the ascent of science in the early modern period is something that Morris Berman (1989) warns us also came with a cost of alienation from our bodies and our senses. Hence, perhaps, the importance of our bodily engagement with others, the empathic responses of their bodies also making ours come alive and ours, theirs (Thompson 2007).

Second Person: Externalism, Social Neuroscience, and Relationality

The particularly toxic form that individuality has taken in European and Anglo-American culture in this era is substantially underpinned by a conception of mind, self, and soul that would hold these to be internal to the central nervous system of our biological organism. The historical development of individuality has taken an increasingly bounded and self-contained

view that may be corrosive to our communal life (Cushman 1990). Nevertheless, a growing movement within scientific and philosophical studies of mind views it as embodied, enactive, encultured, and embedded in social and technical networks—and as a construction inclusive of its extensions beyond the boundary of the individual organism (Wilson 2004).

Externalism is the view that "the mind ain't in the head." It denies that thoughts, beliefs, and desires are entirely constituted by states and processes physically internal to the organism. It does not mean that the mind is elsewhere, because the individual's head and body are proper parts of a mind; it entails a subject's essential embodiment and immersion in the world. Bodies are necessary not only for the "somatic marking" that may be central to our conscious experience (Damasio 1999) but also for our external interdependencies, the most important of which are both developmental and social. Mental phenomena are hybrids of physical events in the head and events in the world to which they are often coupled, not least of which are events within and between other people and ourselves. According to Mark Rowlands (2003), this was the most important development in the philosophy of mind in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Because our neuroplasticity makes it possible for us to be "natural-born cyborgs" (Clark 2003), one crucial lesson of our extended developmental dependency must certainly be how much our externalism is rooted in biologically embodied relationships with other human beings. Thompson (2005; 2007) argues that thinking about consciousness and subjectivity as *interior* is a distortion, because the coemergence of internal/external or self/other "depends formatively and constitutively on the dynamic coupling of self and other in empathy" (2005, 263). This includes our involuntary affective and sensorimotor coupling, mediated by a population of "mirror neurons" that respond similarly whether preparing one's own movements or observing those of another. There is also affective resonance from our capacity to read and mimic facial expressions, and a measurable nonverbal duet in empathy (summarized in Goleman 2006). The imaginary transposition into another's place is linked to the emergence of joint attention and the mutual development of self- and other-understanding out of an experience of intentional relations in which first-person and third-person sources are not differentiated (Barresi and Moore 1996). Mutual self- and other-understanding involves a reiterated experience of seeing each other as experienced empathically by the other. Therefore the ethical and moral perception of each other as persons worthy of concern and respect comes not from imposed rules but from empathizing with the other as a mental agent whose point of view one can take.

There is genuine human suffering among those whose fear, isolation, and sense of being overwhelmed by others renders them incapable of loving another, often for long years, affecting not only themselves but all who try desperately to love them. "[Fromm-Reichmann] insisted that schizo-

phrenia was a condition of abject loneliness caused by early experiences of trauma that could, even in its most severe forms, be healed through relationship" (Hornstein 2009, xvi). This is likely also true with trauma survivors (Johnson 2002). Indeed, this is the whole premise of the new "relational paradigm" (Robb 2006) being implemented effectively at the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute in Wellesley, Massachusetts (Jordan et al. 1991).

Erosion of community in the increasingly isolated, internally fragmented, and even empty self (Cushman 1990) has been documented extensively and appears to be accelerating precipitously in contemporary life. Even data from the last United States census (see *Newsweek,* 28 May 2001) shows married households with children dropping from 40 to 24 percent and single-person households doubling from 13 to 26 percent in little more than the space of a generation. The unlikelihood that the individual can be the source of any kind of salvation is detailed elsewhere (Teske 2002), but meta-analytic findings of major increases in trait anxiety over the latter twentieth century suggest that it may not be a source of any solace at all (Twenge 2000). Our contemporary culture of indirect, distant, electronic communication, however available, can easily attenuate our mimetic, face-to-face, and embodied empathies (Teske 2002). Our relationships are our redemption. We act on each other's behalf and show kindness in our bodily presence—with a touch, a kiss of peace, in holding and being held, in assurances of love, in the return of hope, in laughter and in tears. As an old friend wrote, "Your tears moved me. I don't think people really have any idea what they do for one another. I don't know if you realize how much you've done for me."

Third Person: Tribalism, Us/Them, and Healing the World Community

Given the realities of conflict in the world, particularly violent conflict often bred from economic inequities (exacerbated by the recent economic collapse), the need for greater human cooperation in an era of world ecological crisis suggests no small value in the better understanding and mitigation of destructive human conflict. Conflicts are probably inevitable, but, although their roots often lie in self-deception and misunderstanding, they are not always unwanted or unhealthy. However, assertions of power and oppression are too often the common response. Genuinely moral answers are necessary.

Jonathan Haidt, well known for his research on cultural differences in moral judgment, points out in his new book (2010) that liberals (and atheists) don't really understand the breadth of human morality and think morality is about decreasing harm and increasing justice and autonomy. He asserts that there actually are five innate psychological systems that ground the moralities of different cultures. Along with the liberals' systems of attention to (1) harm/care and (2) fairness/reciprocity, there are also (3)

in-group/loyalty, in which group membership is more important than overall utility, (4) authority/respect, in which hierarchical authorities have a responsibility to establish and sustain order and stability, and (5) purity/sanctity, which urges the cultivation of a higher, spiritual nature over carnal pleasures and petty concerns. Most culture-war battles are over the legitimacy of the latter three systems. Amin Malouf (2000), for example, argues that violence in the name of identity is really about the deep human need to belong. But none of these moralities sees society as a social contract made to benefit individuals, and the latter three are moral in how they constrain individuals from pleasure-seeking individualism by binding them into larger groups and—contra the "new atheists"—suggest that what religions are about is not a contest between belief systems but sets of unifying social practices.

Haidt argues that people need to be part of something larger than themselves in order to flourish, but this may make the struggle between for and against, between us and them, to be the mind's worst disease, and righteousness the fuel of conflict. Happily, the sciences of mind do have some things to offer about conflict resolution, how to use moral psychology to improve relationships, and how to balance the necessary and dynamic tension between forces pushing for change and those guarding stability. Their therapeutic uses have long suggested the value of dealing with one's own issues rather than projecting them onto others, and the better we get to know our putative enemies, the more empathy can replace projection.

The gulf that divides groups begins with simple cognitive strategies that make perfect sense and appear even in minimal groups (Tajfel 1982), like randomly assigned discussion groups in a college classroom. Such strategies reduce information overload by (1) paying attention to and differentiating members of the in-group, and treating members of the out-group as more alike, (2) seeing the differences between groups as greater than they are, and (3) seeing members of the in-group more positively and the out-group more negatively. The problem is that under circumstances of information overload these are likely to be made stronger, be institutionalized historically, and prime biases even when we think we no longer operate with historical prejudices. Moreover, such processes, by limiting attention and contact, also are likely to substantially reduce empathy, freeing us to project what we most fear in and for ourselves. Even socially splintered high schools can produce "outsider" groups whose lives are sufficiently hellish that the result is a Columbine massacre, such as occurred in 1999.

Emotional involvements, friendships, and even romances are the essential requirement for overcoming such prejudices, as we have known since the Capulets and the Montagues produced two star-crossed lovers in *Romeo and Juliet.* Solutions like "jigsaw classrooms" (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), in which each student in a group holds a necessary piece of a task to be accomplished, tend to result in help and encouragement across previous

group lines, lower anxiety, and greater performance. Group differences exacerbated by political and economic oppression, including long histories of division, can spawn mass murders like those of the Tutsis by their Hutu neighbors in Rwanda in the early 1990s (Staub 1992). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa presents a model for solution that includes not only forgiveness but also reconciliation, where perpetrators acknowledge what they have done, show regret, and express empathy for survivors. Responding to the Holocaust with "this will never happen again" may be healthy, but with "this will never happen again *to us*" may have the opposite effect and represent the true victory of Naziism, as victims turn into perpetrators again and again through history.

The solution? It may be as in the wonderful scene in the movie *Gandhi,* (1982) where a distraught Hindu, having participated in the slaughter of the parents of a Muslim child, catching himself before bashing the child's brains out on the pavement, comes to Gandhi (played wonderfully by Ben Kingsley) and is told he must raise the child as his own, *and raise him as a Muslim.* Putting ourselves in others' shoes requires empathy.

Our bodily attachment, the bonding with each other in communal life, is a product of our commonality of affective experience, rooted in our biology, as well as the developmental shaping that makes cultural differences so difficult to overcome and historical changes in it possible. Love is the positive form, shame an affect that produces the boundaries of isolation. Can this, then, be the image of God, in our quest for loving relationality in our communal life, at historical tension in our contemporary world, with the postmodern isolation of the individual, the fragmentation of self and meaning? We still face injustice, we still feel the alienation of one tribe from another, of hatred and warfare, of the isolation and separation of our loneliness, and of the ecological degradation of our planet. The cognitive and neurosciences can help us see how we are parts of each other, members of a communal body, and coupled with/ wed to the world, of one flesh with it, and it deserves no less care. It may take a religious imagination to see how, in redeeming each other and our broken world, we redeem ourselves.

NOTE

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