

Editorial

UNDERSTANDING, EMPATHY, AND EXPLANATION

One of the aims of religion-and-science is to understand and appreciate human nature, our cultural and social life, our self-understandings and self-expressions. Some people fear that the sciences dismantle and deny the richness of human life, with its art, culture, religion, and relationships, by presenting a self-image of us as “nothing but. . . .” Thus, they assume that a humanist and religious perspective must be opposed to the sciences. A controversy regarding science and human nature often comes with a simplistic view of religion, as if religion is about a theory that competes with scientific explanations of human nature.

How do our self-understanding and our empathic understanding of others relate to explanatory insights offered by the sciences? The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur has offered many substantial reflections on the interplay of understanding and explanation. In that same tradition stood Don Browning, member of the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*, who passed away in early June this year. Just three weeks earlier, at a meeting of that Joint Publication Board, he had given me his latest book, *Reviving Christian Humanism: The New Conversation on Spirituality, Theology, and Psychology*. Browning was a gentleman, a great friend of our journal, and a major scholar. He wrote many books and articles that address key issues at the intersection of scientific and religious or humanistic approaches to human nature, on psychology, practical theology, theological ethics, and family law. Not only the topics are relevant, but so too is the methodological plea for a critical hermeneutical philosophy that does not go against the natural sciences but brings it into genuine dialogue with the humanities and humanist voices. This is one approach that may help us to understand “how science can help refine religious traditions rather than to attack or dismantle them” (Browning 2010, 4) while also seeking to assist science “to understand (in the sense of *verstehen*) the complexity of religious traditions” (Browning 2010, 5). In one of the issues of *Zygon* next year we will honor Browning’s contributions to religion-and-science by a critical hermeneutical engagement with his work.

Relating religion and science in a constructive way has been the focus of many contributions over the years—for example, the section in our March

2009 issue on “The Really Hard Problem, Meaning in a Material World—Symposium with Owen Flanagan” (Taves 2009; Peterson 2009; Wiebe 2009; Flanagan 2009). In the present issue we have a substantial set of papers reflecting on a slightly different philosophical tradition that has a similar interest in human interpretative practices: semiotics as inspired by Charles Peirce. In our June issue we published various essays that focused on the potential of semiotics to enlighten our understanding of the sciences (Robinson and Southgate 2010; Weber 2010; Hoffmeyer 2010; Ulanowicz 2010; Robinson, Southgate, and Deacon 2010). The focus in the present issue is on the theological potential of this research program. The key essay by Andrew Robinson and Christopher Southgate is aptly titled “Semiotics as a Metaphysical Framework for Christian Theology,” although I suspect that the framework is to be understood as conceptual and methodological as much as metaphysical. Jeremy Law offers an additional constructive essay on the way God as transcending all boundaries might be seen as the ground of a world full of boundaries that give it specificity. Critical reflections by F. LeRon Shults and Philip Clayton make this into a rich conversation.

A more straightforward scientific perspective may be expected from essays that address the relevance of modern brain-imaging techniques for the way we imagine the Buddhist brain. Both agnostic and more emphatic voices are included: Florin Deleanu, and Antonino Raffone and colleagues. Bernhard Hommel and Lorenza Colzato analyze the way religious beliefs may shape cognition and thereby be strengthened. Their interest in cognitive processes is also present in various other contributions in this issue by Gregory R. Peterson, Doren Recker, and Helen De Cruz and Johan De Smedt.

Intelligent Design is not that central to the discussions in this journal. I assume that most readers find problematic not only the antagonistic attitude toward mainstream biology but also the way the ID discussion seems to anchor the plausibility and significance of a religious view in its opposition to current science but at the same time thereby its similarity to science. In two contributions in this issue, the key metaphor of design is analyzed in more detail. Recker considers the psychological appeal of machine metaphors and of a teleological perspective that attributes agency where no such attribution is needed for a satisfactory explanation. In an article that in its title refers to “Paley’s iPod,” De Cruz and De Smedt too analyze the cognitive, psychological mechanisms that make the design argument attractive. They conclude that certain prior probabilities given to the emergence of complex life by chance play a major role and hence provide atheists and ID-oriented theists with a rational basis for disagreement.

Three more articles address key issues. Peterson analyzes the relevance of cognitive and evolutionary theories of religion, a relevance that he argues has been overrated. Matthew Walhout considers best practices in phi-

losophy of science and philosophy of religion, going against “essentialist” views of science, stressing more science as a practice and the role of interpretation (hermeneutics). He takes his inspiration from Joseph Rouse and Charles Taylor. Kile Jones reflects on contemporary proposals for envisaging the possibility of divine action, in particular the concluding retrospective volume of the series of studies on divine action in scientific perspective organized by the Vatican Observatory and the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences. This theological theme also was addressed in our March issue of this year, for example by Nancey Murphy (2010) and Robert John Russell (2010).

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