


Essays in Honor of Alister McGrath

with Bethany Sollereeder, "Introduction to *Essays in Honor of Alister McGrath*"; Peter Harrison, "What is Natural Theology? (And Should We Dispense with It?)" ; John Hedley Brooke, "Revisiting William Paley"; Helen De Cruz, "A Taste for the Infinite: What Philosophy of Biology Can Tell Us about Religious Belief"; Michael Ruse, "The Dawkins Challenge"; Donovan O. Schaefer, "The Territories of Thinking and Feeling: Rethinking Religion, Science, and Reason with Alister McGrath"; Andrew Pinsent, "Alister McGrath and Education in Science and Religion"; Andrew Davison, "Science and Specificity: Interdisciplinary Teaching between Theology, Religion, and the Natural Sciences"; Victoria Lorrimar, "Does an Inkling Belong in Science and Religion? Human Consciousness, Epistemology, and the Imagination"; and Alister E. McGrath, "Response: Science and Religion—The State of the Art."

THE TERRITORIES OF THINKING AND FEELING: RETHINKING RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND REASON WITH ALISTER McGRATH

by *Donovan O. Schaefer* 

Abstract. As Alister McGrath has argued across a lifetime of work, we need to approach the binaries that have been handed down to us—personal/academic, emotional/intellectual, secular/religious—with a healthy skepticism toward the integrity of their boundaries, attending instead to the contact zones between them. This article connects McGrath's body of work to what I call "cogency theory," an approach that rejects the thinking/feeling binary itself. It begins with a survey of how McGrath understands rationality—not only as multiple, but as defined, in meaningful ways, by feeling. This is illustrated by reexamining McGrath's controversy with Richard Dawkins, analyzing their debate in terms of how the argument itself comes to feel. This new paradigm allows us to supersede petty antagonisms built into contemporary culture—like the presumed science–religion conflict—and refocus on overarching concerns like the climate crisis. The article concludes with a question about the extent to which beliefs and "worldviews" define how we—either as groups or individuals—can make or unmake ecological disaster.

Keywords: affect, atheism; climate change; cogency theory; Richard Dawkins; emotion; Alister McGrath; new atheism; philosophy of science; religious studies

Donovan O. Schaefer is an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; e-mail: doschaef@upenn.edu.

INTRODUCTION: CONTACT ZONES

I have been asked to write about Alister McGrath's work from the perspective of atheism—both as an atheist and as a scholar of atheisms and secularisms. But I find it hard to start without first talking about friendship. Because friendship is, to me, the guiding light that I use to interpret Alister's work.¹ From 2014 to 2017, I worked as Alister's junior counterpart in the Oxford Faculty of Theology and Religion's Science and Religion program. He and I collaborated on lectures and tutorials, cosupervised postgraduates, organized conferences, developed programming for the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion (IRC), shared an office, and co-convoked the Science and Religion master's degree. It was my first full-time teaching job after grad school (having previously done a two-year research postdoc), my first time living outside North America, and my first exposure to the singular pedagogy of the Oxbridge system. It was, needless to say, a learning experience, and Alister was a constant presence throughout, guiding, teaching, correcting, and caring.

One of Oxford's virtues is its commitment to scholarship done as fellowship—a blending of the personal and the intellectual, the social and the academic, the labor and the pleasure of the life of the mind. Scholarship is not just done in libraries, but on walks and after services, during dinner and over tea. One of my first encounters with this way of life was alongside Alister at an event organized by some of our colleagues in the sciences, the Oxford Forum, held at the high-modernist marvel that is St. Anne's College. Over a candlelit after-dinner conversation, Prof. Andrew Briggs of Oxford's Department of Materials responded to some of Alister's recent work by talking about his own intellectual process.

What Briggs told us was stirring. He described the emotional intensity of his work as overwhelming. "I confess," he said, "that my engagement with a scientific problem produces an extraordinary cycle of effects in me: until I have understood something to my satisfaction, or solved a problem—or even got an experiment to work—I go through a physical pain which can be both intense and prolonged. The reward is that when I come out at the other end, the pleasure is commensurately intense" (Briggs 2014). One of his own signature findings—the Briggs Equation—was, he said, formulated while listening to a performance of *Der Freischütz* by Carl Maria von Weber.

This last detail put me in mind of a story told about Albert Einstein. When Einstein and his wife Elsa went to a dinner party at Charlie Chaplin's mansion in Los Angeles in 1931, Elsa relayed to the actor an account of how her husband formulated the theory of general relativity. Chaplin tells the story in his autobiography:

The Doctor came down in his dressing gown as usual for breakfast but he hardly touched a thing. I thought something was wrong, so I asked him

what was troubling him. “Darling,” he said, “I have a wonderful idea.” And after drinking his coffee, he went to the piano and started playing. Now and again he would stop, making a few notes then repeat: “I’ve got a wonderful idea, a marvelous idea!” I said: “Then for goodness’ sake tell me what it is, don’t keep me in suspense.” He said: “It’s difficult, I still have to work it out.”

[He] continued playing the piano and making notes for about half an hour, then went upstairs to his study, telling her that he did not wish to be disturbed, and remained there for two weeks. “Each day I sent him up his meals,” she said, “and in the evening he would walk a little for exercise, then return to his work again. Eventually,” she said, “he came down from his study looking very pale. ‘That’s it,’ he told me, wearily putting two sheets of paper on the table. And that was his theory of relativity.” (Jammer 1999, 56)

Much like Briggs, Einstein noticed that his intellectual method transcended our conventional wisdom about science. He moved beyond the binary divide between the musical and the mathematical, the emotional and the intellectual. Pleasure and pain were wrapped up with the work of science itself. This approach would, I suspect, please Alister very much. As I am about to detail, it resonates with his own thinking about these topics over the past two decades.

Well-known to many in our peculiar subfield of science and religion is that Einstein saw the domains that bridge our subject matter as interlinked rather than cardinally separate. In a 1930 op-ed in the *New York Times*, Einstein proposed that the truest form of religion is oriented to what he called the “cosmic religious feeling.” In the radiance of this emotion, he wrote, “[t]he individual feels the futility of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and in the world of thought.” (Einstein 1930) Even more startling is that Einstein saw this feeling as not only the foundation of religion, but of science. For Einstein, true religion and true science have the same source: a passionate thirst to learn, explore, and map the dazzling patterns of the universe.

The Territories of Science and Religion, a recent work by Alister’s predecessor, Ireos professor emeritus Peter Harrison, starts with a brilliant analogy. Harrison asks whether it would be possible to talk about a war between Israel and Egypt in the year 1600. This would, of course, be a wince-worthy anachronism, because it would presuppose the existence of two states that did not come into being until centuries later (Harrison 2015, 1). Even more interestingly, the territory now occupied by these two states was actually part of the *same* political entity—the Ottoman empire—so the notion of warfare between them would have been even less realistic (Harrison 2015, 2). Harrison launches from this image into an extended reflection on how definitions of “science” and “religion” have mutated over the past several centuries—though they were once part of the

same intellectual framework of virtuous self-cultivation (Harrison 2015, 11). This proves that any envisioning of science and religion as domains in permanent conflict—the claim set down by Victorian thinkers like John William Draper and A. D. White, and still powerfully present today—is absurd.

Alister's *The Territories of Human Reason* picks up where Harrison leaves off. Alister's volume zooms in on science as it is done now, making a point that is consonant with Harrison's. He proposes that we should see science and religion as inevitably up for grabs—as domains of inquiry and activity that are not just *not in conflict*, but always open to multiple angles of interpretation. He is particularly interested in the assessment of philosophers of science who characterize science as permanently *underdetermined*. That is: there is no one theory that explains the data in front of us that *logically* demands our assent. We always land somewhere on the terrain of interpretation, whether in science or in religion.

This article is about the binaries that have been handed down to us—the personal and the academic, the emotional and the intellectual, the scientific secular and the religious—and about the sprawling border regions between them. As Alister has argued across a lifetime of work, we need to approach these categories from a posture of default skepticism toward the integrity of their boundaries. We should, Alister proposes, recognize all of them as contact zones—territories of conversation, interaction, and transformation. What I have come to call “cogency theory” follows suit. Starting from the premise that thinking and feeling cannot be crisply separated, it plugs into Alister's core insight: that the binary frameworks we have inherited are constructs that often do much more to obscure and confuse than they do to illuminate, manufacturing fictional conflict in their wake.

I begin with a survey of how Alister understands rationality—not only as multiple, but as defined, in meaningful ways, by feeling. I illustrate this by reexamining his controversy with Richard Dawkins, analyzing their debate in terms of how the argument itself comes to *feel*. I then move on to a consideration of how this paradigm allows us to supersede petty antagonisms built into contemporary culture—like the presumed science-religion conflict—and refocus on overarching concerns like the climate crisis. I conclude with a question, asking about the extent to which beliefs and “worldviews” define how we—either as groups or individuals—can make or unmake ecological disaster.

MCGRATH ON THE MAKING OF RATIONALITY

I have learned a lot from Alister—and find myself continuing to learn. His way of interacting with students is model. The art of trying to see through the student's eyes and hear through the student's ears is unknown

to many in our profession, but Alister has a feel for it like no other. His lectures bring everyone in on the ground floor and then build them up. As a researcher, too, I have seen how Alister is able to reach people outside our academic corridors, dissolving the classist barriers that fortify so much academic work by speaking in a voice that carries ideas to people where they are—rather than forcing them to climb the walls of the ivory tower.² As a colleague, too, Alister's gifts are shining. Even the most cursory e-mail from Alister is a simple, perfectly crafted marvel of grace and warmth. This will sound trivial to some, but Alister is also amazing at leading faculty meetings, somehow squaring the circle of being both gentle and time-efficient in finding consensus. (Of all the many aspects of Alister's academic persona I have tried to study and imitate, this is the one that remains most mysterious to me.)

But the main thing I learned from Alister is the insight that I see at the core of so much of his work: don't go looking for fights that don't exist. There is a world of conversations for us to be having. Preconfiguring everything as a battlefield shuts down far more than it opens up. In studies of science and religion, this insight is particularly important. It is, arguably, the core finding of the field. The people who know least about theology, religious studies, and the history of science are those most likely to assert—with a brittle, overbaked confidence—that science and religion are and must be at war.

Alister's work has long been concerned with a simple problem: how do different people reach different conclusions about the same facts? This is one of the central problems not only of science and religion as a subfield, but of philosophy of science and epistemology generally. It is the core displacement of the commonsense claim of universal rationality—the “view from nowhere” that Alister, drawing on feminist philosophy of science, shows to be flawed (McGrath 2019, 31).³ What Alister calls for is a “move away from the notion of a single universal rationality towards a plurality of cultural and domain-specific methodologies and rationalities” (McGrath 2019, 2). Rather than a universal “republic of reason,” he writes, “we have to contend with an array of distinct, yet occasionally overlapping and competing, epistemic territories and communities” (McGrath 2019, 3).

Built into this is Alister's deep interest in the tradition of classical phenomenology, especially the work of Martin Heidegger and the problem of the “thrownness” of existence, the way an accumulation of experiences leads each person to an intransigent, idiosyncratic perspective on the world (Heidegger 1962, 174). It is also wrapped up in his reading of philosophers of science who have stressed the “underdetermination” of theory by data.⁴ Simply put, this means that we can draw different theoretical interpretations from the same cluster of data points. A number of different theories can capture an existing collection of data; no one theory can claim strictly *logical* necessity. “One thus cannot really speak of ‘proving’

theories,” he comments, “unless this word is taken in a significantly reduced sense, meaning something like ‘having reason to believe that this is the best possible explanation, but being aware that there are others that cannot always be excluded’” (McGrath 2002, 164). What we were left with is a vision of science as inductively organized around “best” inference, not proof, and so “competing explanations are evident at every level of the human endeavor to represent the world—from the details of quantum mechanics to what Karl Popper termed ‘ultimate questions’ of meaning” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 35).

Sometimes this commitment to epistemic pluralism cashes out, for Alister, as a way of mapping a divide between the dimension of human values and the dimension of facts—bringing him close to Stephen Jay Gould’s template of science and religion as “nonoverlapping magisteria,” (NOMA) each with their own discrete domains of intellectual action and assessment. For Gould, science is the realm of the factual, the observable, and the empirical. Religion is the realm of values, including ethical values and questions of meaning and final purpose (Gould 1999, 4). It is an artful repackaging of the classic fact/value distinction, Hume’s notice that *is* and *ought* land on separate axes of inquiry (Hume 1960, 461). This might seem intuitive enough, but Gould’s carving operation actually produces deeply eccentric results. The domain of miracles lands in the province of science, for instance, while existentialist philosophy turns out to be religious.

McGrath has sympathy for Gould’s procedure but also sees the problems it stumbles into, proposing instead a “partially overlapping magisteria” (POMA) in which science and religion have modalities of interaction that are not just politely waving at each other from opposite sides of a chasm (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 41). He wants to see our different ways of knowing interacting more vigorously and more enthusiastically, for the mutual benefit of each. He characterizes his program of “scientific theology” as dedicated to examining “how theology can learn from the methodology of the natural sciences in exploring and developing its ideas” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 41). Switching gears from POMA to NOMA enables this interaction.

But Alister follows the multiple rationalities model to an even more profound set of conclusions, ending up with a form of antireductionism that embraces multiple levels of explanation. Steven Rose’s parable from *Biology beyond Determinism* of the five levels of biological explanation of a frog jumping is a favorite of his. The physiologist explains the action in terms of tendons and muscles; the ethologist explains it teleologically—the animal’s goals in interacting with their environment; the developmental biologist adds a historical account to explain it ontogenically, in terms of the organism’s developmental trajectory; the evolutionist looks at how the action fits into a framework of adaptation to the environment; and the molecular biologist talks about the biochemistry of the animal’s thinking and moving

body (Rose 1998, 10–13; see McGrath 2019, 10). Alister’s assessment of this picture is that although nature has an “ontological unity,” “its depth and complexity demand an epistemological pluralism if it is to be fully and reliably characterized” (McGrath 2019, 10).

Alister layers this with a strong sense of how different analytic vantage points are themselves made by communities of discourse and practice, rather than intellectual essences (McGrath 2019, 41). “Human thinkers,” he writes,

are embodied, existing in a complex relationship with their physical and social environment, involving both top-down and bottom-up interactions which make it impossible to treat cognitive functioning in a culturally or socially detached manner. The human mind creates culture, which in turn interacts with the manner in which that mind functions, thus creating a complex layered framework of interaction and feedback. (McGrath 2019, 26f)

Alister does not just reject essentialist definitions of “science” and “religion” (McGrath 2019, 13f). He proposes that everything we might identify as an academic discipline has been made through a historic sedimentation of influences.

And these influences, crucially, are not just intellectual. Building on the research of anthropologists of science like Karin Knorr-Cetina, Bruno Latour, and Steve Woolgar—who saw science as the product of complicated configurations of bodies, objects, groups, communities, resource streams, equipment, disciplinary and training regimens, and spaces⁵—he notes that “human cognition is both embodied and embedded. Our cognitive properties and performances are often significantly dependent on our embodiment, and our relationship to our physical and cultural environment” (McGrath 2019, 23). In short, rather than a dance of detached minds, science—and reason itself—is always done in the flesh. “These works,” Alister affirms, “suggested that purely philosophical analyses of core concepts such as rationality, evidence, and knowledge were generally of little relevance to understanding how scientific knowledge was actually acquired and tested” (McGrath 2019, 89). “Reason,” he concludes, “is an embodied activity” (McGrath 2019, 32).

Another way Alister will sometimes phrase this is in terms of opposition to “scientism,” that “inelegant contraction of ‘scientific imperialism.’” Scientism, as he defines it, “privileges the natural sciences, holding that scientific enquiry enables the resolution of conflicts and dilemmas in contexts where traditional sources of wisdom and practical knowledge are seen to have failed” (McGrath 2019, 56f). Scientism makes science the single mode of rationality of all intellectual domains. But it is doomed to failure, exactly because “the rich variety of human discourses and experience prove resistant to even the most persistent demands that they should be

reduced to any single vocabulary, whether this be scientific or something else” (McGrath 2019, 58).

Alister is particularly interested in how this perspective opens on to antiracist and anticolonialist lines of analysis. It is exactly the universalist definition of reason as a “view from nowhere” that underwrites imperialist projects that insist on the natural right of truly rational Europeans to dominate and subjugate other cultures and societies. The European Enlightenment, he notes, “tended to prefer creating social binaries, such as ‘civilization—savagery’ and ‘rational—irrational’, to accommodate (and thus to neutralize) these anomalies within the framework of this totalizing and universal notion of reason” (McGrath 2019, 27). Alister endorses the “multiple modernities” thesis, praising its “appreciation of the creative role of cultural contingency, resulting in different cultural inflections and embodiments of rationality, thus complexifying the older notion of a single Enlightenment rationality shaped by the notion of the rational mastery of the natural world” (McGrath 2019, 44; see also Smith and Vaidyanathan 2010). There is a powerful and important convergence here with postcolonial thinkers who have criticized the secular as a presumed universal rationality that is actually masking parochial, Eurocentric concerns.⁶

But our main concern here—what I want to develop for the rest of this article—will be how all of this suggests the entanglement of reason not just with the bodily, the social, the material, the physical, the cultural, and the historical, but with that which has so often been defined as reason’s binary complement: feeling itself.

THINKING, FEELING, COGENCY

My time in the Science and Religion research cluster at Oxford shaped my thinking around what I gradually came to call “cogency theory” (Schaefer 2022). Cogency theory is my term, but it is really an umbrella word that brings together conversations happening in philosophy, theology, religious studies, secularism studies, and many other fields and subfields under a single canopy. Alister’s work—and his conviction that we need to rethink the traditional understanding of rationality as disembodied—helped me to define and sharpen the concept. Alister mentions the affective dimensions of cognition in books like *Territories of Human Rationality*, referring to the work of my colleague Simeon Zahl, as well as philosophers of affect like Colombetti (see Colombetti 2014; Zahl 2015, 2020; McGrath 2019, 23). But I think the roots of this are even deeper, in his interest in thinkers like Heidegger and William James—and perhaps even Darwin himself.

Although many of Darwin’s contemporary champions take him to be the perfect specimen of pure, unfeeling reason, Darwin’s own views on this topic were much more speculative and suggestive. In a pair of books published in 1871 and 1872 (*The Descent of Man* and *The Expression of*

the Emotions in Man and Animals), Darwin had set out to document for the first time what he saw as the extensive continuities between humans and animals—on the levels of both psychology and physiology (Darwin 1882, 2009). As part of this investigation, he explored evidence for what he considered to be a class of emotions of “Reflection” or “Meditation” that displayed themselves on the face in a furrowed brow or lowered eyelids (Darwin 2009, 204–209).

These movements “in relation to the state of the mind” suggest, for Darwin, that there may be an emotional dimension to cognition (Darwin 2009, 208). Early in *Expression*, he approvingly cites this passage from the French scientist Louis Pierre Gratiolet:

The result of all the facts I have mentioned is that the senses, the imagination, and thought itself—elevated and abstract as we suppose it to be—cannot operate without arousing corresponding feeling; and that feeling is conveyed directly, sympathetically, symbolically, or metaphorically to all areas of the external organs, which all react according to their own mode of action, as though each of them had been directly affected. (Darwin 2009, 336)

Another French scientist, Guillaume Duchenne, Darwin points out, even goes so far as to call the corrugator (which makes ridges appear on your forehead) “the muscle of reflection” (Darwin 2009, 204). Although he does not put too fine a point on it, it is clear that Darwin is creating a space for the territory of the cognitive to be subsumed into, or at least fused with, the territory of the affective.

William James develops this line of thinking even further. In his early article “What Is an Emotion?,” he proposes that we reject theories of feeling that situate it as a strictly neck-up set of mental processes, insisting that all feelings must also be somatic. “If our hypothesis be true,” he argues, “it makes us realise more deeply than ever how much our mental life is knit up with our corporeal frame, in the strictest sense of the term” (James 1884, 201). This means that for James we have not only well-studied emotions like fear, anger, and happiness, but also what he calls “moral, intellectual, and aesthetic feelings” (James 1884, 201).

James’ contribution to cogency theory is to suggest that some configurations of information are actually more likely to bring us intellectual *pleasure* than others. “Certain sequences of ideas charm us as much as others tire us,” he writes. “It is a real intellectual delight to get a problem solved, and a real intellectual torment to have to leave it unfinished” (James 1884, 189). In an essay from the collection *The Will to Believe* (a favorite of Alister’s), James names this the “sentiment of rationality.” “The transition from a state of puzzle and perplexity to rational comprehension,” he writes, tracing the contours of this feeling, “is full of lively relief and pleasure” (James 1907, 63).

Heidegger's analysis of subjectivity as meaningfully shaped by the factual conditions of our lives is one of his most well-known contributions to philosophy. But there is more to be said about how he theorized rationality. For Heidegger, one property of human experience is to always be in a "mood" (Heidegger 1962, 173). We cannot move through the world without some sort of felt attunement to the world. Sara Ahmed notes that this moodiness colors the horizon of our conscious experience (Ahmed 2014, 14). Later commentators like Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman make the link directly between this "moodiness" and the emotional valence of our thoughts. "Mood," they write, "is not optional, but a prerequisite for any kind of intellectual engagement... Whether our attitude is ironic or irenic, generous or guarded, strenuous or languorous will help determine how we situate ourselves in relation to an object of study and what we find most salient" (Felski and Fraiman 2012, vi).

These three thinkers—Darwin, James, and Heidegger—are important (each in their own way) for Alister's research. This is why, I would suggest, the theme of overlap between thinking and feeling is so widely present in Alister's work—not necessarily as an explicit concern, but as a resonant undertone. It is woven into the foundations of Alister's assessment of science, for instance. Drawing on his own autobiography, he talks about the way science emerged for him as a youth as a way of exploring a profound passion. "My love affair with the natural sciences," he writes,

began when I was nine or ten. The night sky seemed to me overwhelmingly beautiful, and I longed to explore it further. I ransacked my school library for books on astronomy and even managed to build myself a small telescope so I could observe the moons of Jupiter. (McGrath 2010, 101)

The intellectual pleasures of exploration and discovery build Alister's on-ramp to the life of the mind. "Science," he writes elsewhere, "is an intellectual joy, allowing us to grasp and appreciate the complex beauty of the natural order." (McGrath 2002, 101)

Alister's 2010 volume *The Passionate Intellect* delves even deeper into these themes, explicitly linking the mental action of theological reflection with profound feeling. For Augustine, he notes, "there is a genuine intellectual excitement to wrestling with God" (McGrath 2010, 19). It is, in other words, a field of interlocked ideas and puzzles to be enthusiastically explored. Although he broadly embraces Terry Eagleton's argument against Dawkins that "Christianity was never meant to be an explanation of anything in the first place" (McGrath 2010, 10), he also insists that Eagleton goes too far in dismissing religion as a field of analytical thinking altogether (McGrath 2010, 10). Moreover, he writes that "it is surely one of the most exciting things about the Christian faith that it creates intellectual space for the natural sciences by articulating a vision of an ordered reality that is open to study by a human mind shaped in the 'image of God'" (McGrath

2010, 108). In other words, religion, in his view, solves the puzzle of how we solve puzzles. Whether or not it is the queen of the sciences, theology operates in a dynamic interplay with other fields of study. It proposes theories that, like all academic theories, can be engaged, explored, and tested; sporting on this field of intellectual activity elicits joy.

However, moving on from James, the intellectual emotions Alister is interested in are not always about resolution. He considers the possibility that there *may* be a programmatic difference between the territories of science and theology—a difference defined not just by an object of study or even a method, but by a feeling. Where science would seem to aim for an intellectual feeling of resolution, theology aims for a reflection on the limits of human thought itself. “Theology articulates a vision of God,” he notes, “which cannot be adequately accommodated by the human intellect, and thus generates a sense of intellectual wonder most appropriately expressed in worship” (McGrath 2019, 112). But this, he suggests, would still be too pat, since many scientists would insist that their own “experience of a sense of awe in the presence of nature transcends any attempt to reduce it to verbal or conceptual formulae” (McGrath 2019, 113). There is then, it would seem, once again a reconciliation between the territories.

This encounter with the fog of the edge of human understanding is, for Alister, also part of the feeling of thinking. It is both a profound meditation on the limits of our own intellectual capacities and a prompt for further exploration (ideally with a recognition of our ultimate limitations always square in view). Sounding a lot like Einstein, Alister writes that the

greatest stimulus to the exploration of the rationality of the universe is a sense of wonder at its immensity, beauty, strangeness, and solemnity. Yet that sense of wonder proves generative, creating a desire to understand our beautiful and mysterious universe, and our own place within it. It precipitates a process of reflection, grounded in what we observe, stimulated by our sense of wonder, and directed towards grasping at least something of the greater vision of reality that lies behind what we can observe. (McGrath 2019, 154)

In trying to solve the same problem as Einstein—the presumed animosity between science and religion—Alister has articulated a parallel to cosmic religious feeling.

Darwin considers our intellectual capacities to be limited by our fundamental animal natures. “I believe I am in much the same frame of mind as an old Gorilla would be in if set to learn the first book of Euclid,” he writes to Asa Gray when discussing the question of divine design (Darwin 1861). Alister makes the same point, but correlates it to the doctrine of the Trinity, which he characterizes as “our admission that, as created, finite, fallen and flawed beings, we simply cannot fully grasp or express all that God is” (McGrath 2010, 30). For all the differences demarcating their

separate territories, science and religion still seem to wind up drawing on a common reservoir of intellectual feelings—including the sense of wonder arising from the recognition of our own limitations.

The problem of underdetermination—so central to Alister’s thought—can also be productively reapproached from the perspective of cogency theory. When we look at the same information but come to different conclusions, this is because the templates of feeling that we bring to bear on the data—our intellectual moods—are imposing their own organizing logic from below. Inference to the best explanation is really about the explanation that *feels right*. And here, we have to bring in complicated personal histories and associations with certain words, concepts, and theories—the way some ideas chill and others entice. (My suspicion is that whether someone opts for “God” or “not-God” as an answer to big questions like *Why is there something instead of nothing?* or *What happens when you hurl a spear past the edge of the universe?*⁷ depends a lot on whether the word “God,” for any given individual, primarily conjures up thoughts of exquisite puja ceremonies, liturgical music, and civil rights marches or histories of deception, oppression, and abuse.)

THE NEW FUNDAMENTALISM

One of the most powerful ways Alister analyzes intellectual feelings, however, actually steers away from the celebratory vein of the survey we have just made. This is in his criticism of the New Atheism, particularly the version of New Atheism advanced by Richard Dawkins. Reflecting on debates within science about the methodological utility of appealing to simplicity as a criterion of a good theory, Alister expresses skepticism. “It is difficult to see how simplicity can be advocated as an a priori criterion of truth without a set of informing metaphysical assumptions, which themselves add metaphysical complexity to such a theoretical evaluation” (McGrath 2019, 115). In other words, we might *want* things to be simple—because, as James says, it is fun to solve puzzles—but that is *exactly* how we are led astray. This, in a nutshell, is Alister’s problem with Dawkins.

Alister and his coauthor, psychologist Joanna Collicutt McGrath, set up their comprehensive critique of Dawkins’ views on Christianity, *The Dawkins Delusion*, by first outlining their many areas of *agreement* with him. They write that Dawkins’ book *The Blind Watchmaker*—his broadside blast against William Paley’s argument from design—is “the finest criticism of this argument in print” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 24). They praise Dawkins for relentlessly pushing back on “God of the gaps” arguments that still inform many Christian apologetic approaches and challenge exponents of these views in the “Intelligent Design” movement: “those who adopt this approach make Christianity deeply—and needlessly—vulnerable to scientific progress” (McGrath and Collicutt

McGrath 2007, 30). They opt to ally with Dawkins when they see him making a sincere intellectual contribution.

But this also highlights the acuity of their criticism of Dawkins' work. One of Alister's interests in studying the New Atheism is Dawkins's recalcitrant reliance on *mistakes* in building his anti-God war machine. For instance, Alister notes that Dawkins used to quote *credo quia absurdum*—"I believe because it is absurd," a famous misquotation of early Christian author Tertullian—as a weapon against faith. But as Peter Harrison has shown, this line is a modern mutation of a much more complicated passage in Tertullian's writings, in which he seems to suggest that the story that Jesus was crucified, though hard to believe, is actually made more plausible because it is so bizarre, and yet was so faithfully transmitted (Harrison 2018). (To Dawkins' credit, he ceased referring to this at some point, evidently after Alister pointed out his mistake (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 23).)

Yet Dawkins continues to use similar one-off statements extracted from context, like a passage from Luther that seems to suggest the antipathy of reason and faith. Alister (who was and remains a foremost expert on the Reformation before he dipped his hand into the science and religion waters) writes that "[w]hat Luther was actually pointing out was that human reason could never fully take in a central theme of the Christian faith—that God should give humanity the wonderful gift of salvation without demanding they do something for him first" (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 23). As Alister writes, with barely disguised frustration:

Dawkins's inept engagement with Luther shows how Dawkins abandons even the pretense of rigorous evidence-based scholarship. Anecdote is substituted for evidence; selective Internet trawling for quotes displaces rigorous and comprehensive engagement with primary sources. In this book, Dawkins throws the conventions of academic scholarship to the winds; he wants to write a work of propaganda and consequently treats the accurate rendition of religion as an inconvenient impediment to his chief agenda. (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 24)

What Dawkins has created is a misrepresentation machine, designed to deliberately transform religion into a house of cards that can then be effortlessly knocked down—the easiest of intellectual games.

The far more intransigent mistake, though—orienting much New Atheist writing—is what we might call the conflation of extremes with middles. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith characterize this as one of New Atheism's hallmarks—"the argument that even moderate religiosity is deeply implicated in the moral catastrophes perpetuated on the world in the name of religion" (Cimino and Smith 2014, 83). Alister makes the same point, noting that "the most characteristic features of Dawkins's anti-religious polemic is to present the pathological as if it were normal, the

fringe as if it were the center, crackpots as if they were mainstream” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 21).

Alister has no interest in flipping Dawkins’ script and rendering religious people as uniformly noble, atheists as uniformly evil. He fully recognizes that there is unfathomable violence and evil perpetrated under the banner of religion. But Dawkins continues to maintain that there is something purifying—even absolving—about atheism. Reflecting on the London terrorist attacks of 2006, for instance, he writes that “[o]nly religious faith is a strong enough force to motivate such utter madness in otherwise sane and decent people” (Dawkins 2008, 343). This point is so blinkered, it is depressing that we even need to muster a response, but Alister wearily steps in to say the obvious. He mentions, among other examples, the terrifying violence imposed by the French Revolution, the Soviet Union, and the Khmer Rouge (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 78). Whether liberal or Marxist, formations of the secular are no less capable than religion of spilling blood. Again, we see a compelling convergence in Alister’s thinking with the work of postcolonial anthropologists like Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood who have pointed specifically to the capacity of western liberalism to authorize severe violence in the name of spreading “democracy” or “freedom,” often to its religious and racial others.⁸ In Alister’s phrasing, “worldviews”—both “secular” and “religious”—can easily promote fanaticism” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 58).

What is telling is that this is not just a mistake on Dawkins’ part, but a recurring mistake. Alister notes that a few years prior to the publication of *God Delusion*, Dawkins tried to launch a TV series, *The Root of All Evil?*, in which he “sought out religious extremists who advocated violence in the name of religion, or who were aggressively antiscientific in their outlook” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 51). No countervailing voices were brought into the conversation. No effort was made to assemble anything like a comprehensive data set and study the tendencies and trends. Instead, Dawkins curated the program—as he was with all his work—to land the exclusive point that religion is in a 1:1 correlation with wickedness (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 51).

What this all amounts to is a pattern of what I would call *motivated mistakes*—mistakes that the person making them *genuinely believe* because they just “feel right.” Not just right, they feel *good*—and they feel so good they have to be true. Invariably, this goes along with a consistent pattern of ignoring counterarguments and contradictory evidence that would dispel those mistakes. Even Hitchens registers his “annoyance at Professor Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, for their cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called ‘brights’” (Hitchens 2007, 5). Hitchens, too, seems to understand that the constant refrain of secularist triumphalism is itself motivated by a compulsive, cognitive delight in daydreaming about one’s intellectual superiority.⁹ This

sense of Dawkins as a writer who succumbs to a kind of intellectual temptation in reaching, over and over again, for easy answers is what leads Alister to dismiss *God Delusion* as “a work of theater rather than scholarship” (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 96).

(There is another available line of interpretation, of course, which is that Dawkins does not believe these falsehoods and simplifications, but is instead putting them out in the world because he knows *other people* want to hear them—and will pay him to have their delightful prejudices repeated back to them. This is the interpretation of Dawkins as a “slick hellfire preacher” running the secular equivalent of a televised prayer-athon that Alister also develops (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 12). This is plausible, but I am more inclined to go with the first line of interpretation—that Dawkins believes what he says.)

There is, Alister suggests, also a *religious* counterpart to the New Atheism. He often dismisses the New Atheists as Fundamentalists. What becomes clear is that the symmetry of New Atheism and Christian Fundamentalism, for Alister, is not just about their metaphysical frameworks, nor even about their bullish overconfidence in their own views, but in the way both gleefully flatten complex issues into simple, easily resolved problems—machines for cheap intellectual satisfaction. Augustine of Hippo, Alister notes,

stressed the limits of our ability to capture God in neat formulae.... Anything that we can grasp fully and completely cannot be God, precisely because it would be so limited and impoverished if it could be fully grasped by the human mind. If you can get your mind around it, it is not God, but is rather something else that you might incorrectly think is God. It is easy to create a god in our own likeness—a self-serving human invention that may bear some passing similarity to God, but falls far short of the glory and majesty of the God who created and redeemed the world. (McGrath 2019, 195)

This is exactly how Alister characterizes Fundamentalism. It renders God as our robot servant doing and saying whatever we want God to do and say. It is the furthest possible thing from the form of faith as shattering darkness offered by Luther and valorized by Alister. This is a joyful darkness (in part because it brings us to the horizon of intellectual mystery and allows us to meditate and reflect on its profundity), but a darkness that nonetheless refuses to allow us to encircle or resolve it.

These mistakes are not just features of the simplistic moralism of Dawkins' work; they were lodged in its epistemological foundation, including its hatred of so-called “postmodernism.” “Postmodernism,” in the mouths of its contemporary critics—a constituency spanning the religio-secular spectrum, from Dawkins to his Christian doppelgänger Jordan Peterson—has become entirely detached from the critical tradition that spawned it (with all that tradition's admirable successes and undeniable

failures) and been flattened to a cartoonish shorthand for any stance that rejects the viability of absolute knowledge (Cimino and Smith 2014, 29–30). Alister, informed by both the phenomenological tradition out of which “postmodernism” emerged and sophisticated philosophy of science, has no time for these knee-jerk distortions. As he writes, “New Atheism’s response to postmodernism is to demand a reversion to an older way of thinking, long since abandoned by intellectuals as history ruthlessly exposed their flimsy foundations and faulty reasoning” (McGrath 2010, 185).

Alister’s concern here is that postmodernism’s critics resent the way postmodernism *takes away easy answers and crisp solutions*, like the endless absurdities of evolutionary just-so stories. “The world we experience,” he writes, “is just too messy and fuzzy to fit completely into the orderly systems that some crave and others fear” (McGrath 2002, 10). They resent it because it *feels* wrong to them. James notes that we feel good when we finish a puzzle. What is getting called “postmodernism” in this debate is, at its heart, a call for intellectual humility, a recognition that only the easiest scientific problems have solutions, and that our answers to deeper empirical questions will probably never graduate beyond durable (but fallible) schematic solutions.

Alister, interestingly, really likes Dawkins’ *Selfish Gene*, seeing it as a model of scientific popularization (McGrath and Collicutt McGrath 2007, 8, 71). I am not sure I agree with that evaluation. I find in that early book a foretaste of exactly the same passion for simplistic explanation that boils over in *God Delusion*. Gould, also reflecting on the symmetry between some scientists and some Fundamentalists, notes that both betray Darwin from different directions. Darwin, he reminds us, “was a consistent pluralist gazing upon a messier universe” (Gould 1980, 50). It is the refusal of this intransigent complexity that trades simple puzzles for deep ones, preferring a short-lived sugar high over an intellectual feast.

BUILDING THE ECOLOGICAL ALLIANCE

Alister’s thinking is organized around the concern that the western traditions of rationalism, secularism, and liberalism are inadequate for grasping the full complexity of science, religion, and the relationships between them. Our collaborations have helped me sharpen my own sense of the limitations of these approaches. Alister worked this out through Christianity; I worked it out through Darwin. But the intellectual coordinates, though different, carried us along parallel itineraries. My belief in this line of thinking has become more confident through studying and speaking with Alister over the years.

Are there theological (or atheological) implications of the coalescence of our respective outlooks on the big questions of human rationality? Was one

of us right and the other wrong about the big questions of God and meaning, cosmos and accident? I have to confess: it never came up. We were, it seems to me, looking back, too busy with our shared work of guiding and nurturing our amazing students, with enjoying each other's company, and learning from each other in all the humble but no less beautiful ways that two scholars can reach out to one another to ever sit down for a grand Star Chamber debate about faith. But one theme of Alister's work that I have studied has risen to particular prominence for me. That is his attention to the vital importance of orienting conversations around science and faith to finding common ground on ecological conservation.

I think Alister sees his job as creating more durable, more rich, and more ethically active forms of faith. I think there is a deep need for parallel developments in atheism. As Chris Stedman (one of my fellow atheists who has frequently come under fire from other secular partisans for his insufficient hostility to faith) has written, "[w]e can be dogmatically fixated on who is 'right' and who is 'wrong,' or we can discern a way to live together in tension and ambiguity" (Stedman 2012, 180). When it comes to finding ways to steer the ship of the global social and economic systems humans have built away from our current course of environmental catastrophe, I could not agree more with Alister's assessment: "Saving the earth is so important that there is simply no place for polemicizing against potential allies in this struggle" (McGrath 2002, xvii).

And yet, I think there is room to tailor how we go about this, and one concern I have with, in particular, Alister's otherwise excellent book *The Reenchantment of Nature*, is the extent to which it overstates both the dangers of a "scientific worldview" and the capacity of "worldview" itself to instantiate ecological problems. I agree wholeheartedly with Alister's careful parsing of the now-discredited Lynn White thesis that Christianity is the primary driver of the ecocidal ways of life that are driving our current planetary catastrophe. But I am also wary of the claim that a religious worldview is necessary to "reenchant" the world. (Let me add that this book is now 20 years old—and they have been an eventful 20 years—and far be it from me to pin anyone to their own earlier intellectual persona. I would be eager to hear about Alister's current views on the relations between religion, secularity, and ecology.)

Alister celebrates the "rediscovery of religion" in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s and thinks we can steer this toward a new environmental sensibility (McGrath 2002, 7). But what did that rediscovery of religion entail? White, writing in 1967, muses on how the "newly elected Governor of California, like myself a churchman but less troubled than I, spoke for the Christian tradition when he said (as is alleged), 'when you've seen one red-wood tree, you've seen them all'" (White 1967, 1206). This governor, of course, would go on to be elected president in 1980, and his "Reagan Revolution" spawned not only Christian white supremacy and

neoliberalism, but a rising contempt for environmentalist movements (See Butler 2021, Chapter 3). These currents still surge through our present politics, in which denialism of anthropogenic climate chaos has become, for lack of a better word, an article of faith among conservative Christians in the United States.

White's argument is subtler than Alister makes it out to be (but still misguided, in my view). He actually says that the Christian attitude that is driving our climate crisis *is* the scientific attitude. Science, he contends, is the end result of a complicated chain of intellectual phases leading, via Western/Latin Christendom, away from a cosmology in which "every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit"—a spirit that must be respected and honored before any intervention was made on its land (White 1967, 1205). "Our science and technology," he concludes, "have grown out of Christian attitudes toward man's relation to nature which are almost universally held not only by Christians and neo-Christians but also by those who fondly regard themselves as post-Christians" (White 1967, 1206).

But I still do not want to revert to White's thesis. As Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway have shown, much of the intellectual firepower (such as it is) of the antienvironmentalist movement has been harnessed from a small cluster of physicists who took a dogmatic view on the necessity of human liberty against communitarian movements and governments. This coterie was willing to lend their credentialed expertise in one field to add fake heft to weaponized pseudoscience. They became a sort of SEAL team mobilized by rich and powerful lobbying organizations to muddy the waters on secondhand smoke, acid rain, ozone layer loss, and now climate change itself (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 65). The "scientific Potemkin village" they created to sow confusion around increasingly unambiguous scientific findings was in a deeply adversarial relationship with mainstream science (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 244) Rather than a case of religion subverting ecological sensibilities, this was a civil war between secular titans, mainstream science versus an obsessive commitment to libertarian principles. "Free-market fundamentalism," Oreskes and Conway write, has itself become "an article of faith" (Oreskes and Conway 2010, 249).

White ends his paper by calling for an exploration of alternative Christian visions, much as Alister does, precisely because he thinks more science will only fail us as it already has (White 1967, 1207). Alister himself clearly recognizes that Christianity does not directly yield a thoughtful environmental sensibility, noting that the thrust of his book is "to challenge Christians to take ecological issues more seriously" (McGrath 2002, xvii). In recognizing that an intellectual inheritance can be mobilized in different ways depending on which elements of that tradition are placed on the vanguard, both Alister and White are actually illustrating the *collapse* of a direct relationship between "ideology" and material practices.

What I suggest here is that we need to take underdetermination even more seriously. Anyone who characterized Christianity as a source code that automatically dictated a particular set of behaviors would be in serious trouble among religious studies scholars who have spent the last few generations highlighting the many ways religion is much *more* than just a set of ideas, let alone a determinative set of ideas. Support for the death penalty is high among American Christians despite the explicitly anti-death-penalty assertions of the New Testament, while support for abortion—mentioned nowhere in the Bible—is low. While conservative American Christians maintain a wall of refusal toward any effort to green our economy, Dawkins, for all his flaws, is an ardent advocate for raising awareness about the horrifying risks associated with global climate chaos (PRRI 2019). So in criticizing White's simplistic equation of Christianity with contempt for the natural world, we need a similar repudiation of such an equation for the Enlightenment.

I agree with Alister that we need to be careful not to succumb to our own temptation to find easy answers—let alone certainty—in our approaches to the world around us. Holding on to a commitment to complexity requires that we even approach with caution that firmament of liberal common sense that declares that the sinews and tendons of our actions are deductions from the words and ideas that occupy our minds—as if human subjectivity is, at heart, a contraption of words and ideas. We need to think carefully about the tension between recognition that theory is underdetermined by data and a conviction that beliefs are at the core of who and what we are.

I wonder if Alister would concur with the approach being developed by Oxford DPhil student Tyler M. Tully, the current Arthur Peacocke Graduate Scholar in Science and Religion at Exeter College. Tully is combining academic studies of science and religion with perspectives from Indigenous studies and affect theory to devise a new challenge to White's thesis. He argues that White's emphasis on worldviews *is itself* the problem. What Tully calls the "worldview trap" is the tendency in many subfields (science and religion for one, religion and ecology another) to overstate the importance of a set of conceptual coordinates and downplay the material, ecological, and affective parameters within which interpretations of those coordinates are built.

I suspect Alister would see at least some resonance here with his own focus on the underdetermination of elaborate problems like the relationship between science and religion. Any effort to try to create an archetypal form of the science–religion relationship, he writes, "is to go far beyond the evidence available and impose a dogmatic worldview on an essentially multivalent reality, capable of more than one interpretation" (McGrath 2002, 8). Ideas are important, but we also need to spotlight how the downstream implications of a set of beliefs are highly contingent. This means

constantly mapping the shifting convergences and divergences between intellectual and physical, conceptual and material, and thinking and feeling.

CONCLUSION: CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

In their 2014 book *Atheist Awakening*, sociologists Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith describe a scene they witnessed at the 2012 Reason Rally at Washington's National Mall: "A large circle of atheists surrounded a Christian protestor as they engaged in a shouting match over the finer points of Christian sexual morality. In the back-and-forth on arcane philosophical points that ensued," they observe, "both parties seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves" (Cimino and Smith 2014, 16). The heartbeat of Alister's work, for me, is a deep alarm at the extent to which this state of affairs—secular-religious controversy as gladiatorial spectacle—has come to define so much of the intellectual landscape around religious questions, blocking out the really urgent issues confronting us—like an accelerating ecological disaster. As I have heard him say many times, it's time to "change the conversation."

One of my main methodological takeaways from both studying Alister's writings and working alongside him has been to refuse to take the existing binaries of a conversation as given. This goes for science/religion, religious/secular, and even, it seems to me, atheist/believer. It is an insight that dovetails with much recent work in religious studies, which is increasingly skeptical of the notion that we can define religions as contraptions of beliefs (Smith 2004; Vásquez 2011; Schaefer 2015). And it fits in with recent efforts in critical studies of the secular that have sought to show how, far from being the advance of neutral reason, secularity is bringing with it a set of unexamined sexist, racist, and colonialist attitudes that are masked as strictly rational (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2016; Scott 2018; Thomas 2019). As atheist Sikivu Hutchinson writes, "Who needs arcane religious tracts decreeing the inferiority of women and 'minorities' when the history of modern science and rationality decrees it?" (Hutchinson 2011, 200).

Alister's solution to this problem is to double down on multiplicity—the possibility of plural interpretations emerging from the horizons of thought that open up around us. Rather than reinscribing the Enlightenment picture of subjects as defined, from top to bottom, by ideas, we need theories that explain gaps and inconsistencies in belief "systems." We need to understand how exceptions and excuses are made to open zones of contradiction. We need to account for how people are motivated to make mistakes like the chain of errors Dawkins stumbles into—and why they cling to them against evidence. My suggestion is that the horizon of feeling that Alister and I both take so seriously is doing a tremendous amount of work behind the scenes to organize these wheeling matrixes of ideas. In my view, there is an urgent need to pay attention to how intellectual

affects and emotions determine our underdetermined patterns of cognition. I am not sure Alister would agree with the way I am casting the vocabulary around this—our shared question—though as always, I look forward to the pleasure of our conversation.

NOTES

1. I am going to refer to my friend and mentor Alister McGrath by his first name throughout this piece, as I heard him ask students and colleagues to do many times, with respect, admiration, and affection.
2. Some students once asked Alister at a workshop how he got so much writing done. “I’m afraid I have an unfair advantage in that department,” he beamed. “I’m Irish.”
3. See, for example, Code 1993; Haraway 1991; Daston and Galison 2007.
4. See, for example, Bonk 2008.
5. See Knorr-Cetina 1999; Latour and Woolgar 1986; Latour 1999.
6. See, for example, Agrama 2012; Asad 2003; Fernando 2014; Mahmood 2016.
7. See discussion in Rubenstein 2014, Chapter 2.
8. See, for example, Asad 2007; Mahmood 2005.
9. Arguably, however, Hitchens elsewhere succumbs to this same lure. See Schaefer 2020, for discussion.

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