Book Review


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Challenging the mind-body dualism has been a contentious issue in philosophy and cognitive science. Cognition depends on the mind-body-brain connection, but cognitive science lacks a decisive answer to this fundamental question. The cognitive science of religion (CSR) inherits this problem. In CSR, the unresolved mind-body dualism is compounded by other “dualisms”: cultural and cognitive, sacred and profane, natural and supernatural. In his newly released book, Beyond Heaven and Earth: A Cognitive Theory of Religion, Gabriel Levy attempts to move beyond dualisms and integrate the fragmented components of the whole, bridging the gaps between mind and body and addressing the very root of the problem: the absence of a definitive and well-founded metaphysical foundation of the scientific study of religion.

The author highlights the metaphysical contradictions inherent in the natural sciences and humanities, with each field having distinct subject matters and methods. While the natural sciences formulate knowledge about the world from the observer’s perspective, the humanities focus on creating interconnected systems of concepts without necessarily aiming for correspondence with reality. Though these contradictions do not hinder scientific advancements in studying either nature or culture, they pose a significant obstacle to the progress of the science of mind and religion. CSR has developed a form of naturalistic monism, seeking the origins of religiosity in the evolution of biological species. However, according to Levy, this approach fails to account for the fact that religion is fundamentally a mental phenomenon. At the same time, naturalism focuses solely on the material substrate, treating religious content as a mere epiphenomenon. Thus, the metaphysical constraints of natural science severely limit its ability to study religion within the framework of CSR.

The ontology that reconciles naturalistic and humanistic approaches is the subject of the first half of Levy’s book, namely chapters 1, 2, and 3. Based on Davidsonian philosophy, Levy advocates an anomalous monism as the solution. Anomalous monism postulates that mental and physical events are fundamentally the same but are described using two different conceptual frameworks or
vocabularies. “Anomalous” refers to the idea that mental states, events, or properties are not strictly governed by deterministic laws or rules, especially when compared to physical phenomena. At the same time, mental content, including religious content, is perfectly real, just as real as physical objects. In this sense, religious ideas can resemble and behave like living organisms: they strive to sustain life, change, and evolve. Anomalous monism, as conceived by Davidson, provides guidelines for integrating both the natural sciences and the humanities within the same metaphysical framework while preventing the one from being reduced to the other.

A key concept integral to Levy’s overall conception, which runs throughout the book, is the notion of triangulation as a means to generate religious content. This geometric metaphor, also developed in Davidson’s philosophy, intends to show that religious content is not generated in one person’s mind or the abstract space of social relationships but through an interaction of three elements: at least two agents and a common environment. Among modern theories within cognitive science, enactivism encapsulates this idea, positing that consciousness at its most basic level is an interactive process between a living subject and the environment, irreducible to either its physical or mental components. The author highlights the enactivist approach in cognitive science as a methodology that resembles Davidsonian ideas.

In the book’s second part, the author gives his ontology an outline, applying it to the real relations between agents of religion. In Chapter 4, religion and science are presented as the result of learning to operate symbols. Even conceptions of numbers – a seemingly universal abstraction – are culturally conditioned and influenced by the system in which one is trained. The worldview foundations are evident in the expressed content and the unexpressed ways of operating with information. The author provides a notable illustration of how religious perspectives can shape scientific concepts through the example of Albert Einstein. In his theory, Einstein employs modes of reasoning that depart from typical scientific conventions and instead reflect principles inherent to Judaism, such as contextual properties of the universe, dialogical reasoning, and the influential power of language. In Chapter 4, religion and science are equated in their rights to represent the world. Both are learned ways for agents to interact with information and the environment. Moreover, religious systems are sometimes aware of their origin, as expressed, for example, in the Middle Eastern text Sefer Yetzirah with its reflection on how information and learning are part of the elements from which the revealed world is created.

Chapter 5 shows how the cognitive factors of religious content formation can be traced to old and new forms of religious-like content. In ancient times, people created stories about constellations to relate them to their own lives, while in modern times, individuals define their identity by relating themselves
to celebrities, also called “stars,” in the media space. The embodying of actors in their characters is similar to possession, and the fascination with animals that characterizes ancient cults is similar to the delight in the charisma of iconic singers. All these phenomena, both in antiquity and now, arise in the triangulation between agents and objects of their common environment.

Chapter 6 delves into the concept of intimacy, viewing it as a vital component for developing religious content and its study. The nature of the interaction between the agents creating religious content resembles Martin Buber’s YOU and I relationship, that is, a second-person position rather than a third-person one, as would be in scientific observation. Consistently following this reflection leads to the realization that understanding religion requires engaging with it in meaningful dialogue from a second-person perspective. The Principle of Charity, which involves interpreting others’ statements as rational based on their context, should be applied in this process. In the context of religion, this would mean that religious narratives are neither the by-product of cognitive activity per se nor the consequence of cognitive error, but a narrative about the world that has emerged as the best possible in the interaction of these particular rational agents in this specific environment.

Following the author’s wide-ranging exploration of topics ranging from science and metaphysics to modern celebrities and popular podcasts can present a challenging task for readers. However, an even more significant challenge lies in the extent to which the author’s perspective diverges from the mainstream, making it necessary for readers to approach the book with an open mind and a willingness to engage with unconventional ideas. In its current state, CSR is mainly based on a general scientific methodology and naturalistic metaphysics embedded in it. Even if anomalous monism is indeed a more grounded metaphysical position, building a science of religion on its basis would have to be done from scratch, constructing anew the core concepts for the discipline. Furthermore, such a way of thinking requires significant philosophical background, and engaging in CSR would require profound philosophical competence. Adding an annexe containing a clear manual on conducting a scientific study of religion based on the author’s theoretical suggestions would have been a valuable contribution to the book.

Either way, Beyond Heaven and Earth is a bold and intriguing methodological project. The publication of this book is a testament to the potential of CSR to develop its unique methods and perspectives beyond the confines of a natural science paradigm. By exploring the theoretical foundations of religion, the book opens new avenues of inquiry and highlights the significance of the CSR in contributing to our understanding of the world. Its insights have implications that extend beyond the discipline, challenging our assumptions about the nature of science and the narratives we use to make sense of the world.