

“Against Cognitive Imperialism:  
A Call for a Non Ethnocentric Approach to Studying Human  
Cognition and Contemplative Experience”

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### “A Call for a Non Ethnocentric Approach to Studying Human Cognition and Contemplative Experience”

#### I. Unreflective Ethnocentrism and Cognitive Imperialism

In a widely circulated cover article in the *New York Times Magazine* of March 4 2007 entitled “Darwin’s God,” author Robin Marantz Henig asks the apparently scientific question: “In the world of evolutionary biology, the question is **not** whether God exists but why we believe in **him**. Is belief a helpful adaptation or an evolutionary accident?”

It is implied in the question and becomes apparent in the article, that Ms. Henig and her sources (anthropologist Scot Atran and others) assume that all human beings throughout time and across cultures believe in God. Indeed, she writes:

According to anthropologists, religions that share certain *supernatural* features – belief in a noncorporeal God or gods, belief in the afterlife, belief in the ability of prayer or ritual to change the course of human events – **are found in virtually every culture on earth** (p. 39).

She further asserts:

“These scholars (scientists studying the evolution of religion) tend to agree on one point: that religious belief is an outgrowth of brain architecture that evolved during early human history. What they disagree about is why a tendency to believe evolved, whether it was because belief itself was adaptive or because it was just an evolutionary byproduct, a mere consequence of some other adaptation in the evolution of the human brain. In other words, she writes (in an appropriately condescending manner as befits her own

(and many others') *belief system*): "Which is the better biological explanation for a belief in God – evolutionary adaptation or neurological accident?" (Ibid.)

To answer this I would pose another question: Which is the better explanation for a modern scientist's *unsubstantiated* assumption that all human beings believe in God: neurological accident or deeply ingrained --*unreflective* -- ethnocentrism? In assuming that some form of our Judeo-Christo-Islamic (Abrahamic for short) beliefs are not just a product of our own Western civilizations but are universal for all *homo sapiens*, Ms. Henig and her scientific sources are falling into the same trap that has bedeviled Western assumptions about religion since, for example, the Jesuit missionaries landed in China in 1574, one that is well typified by the comments of one of the fathers of the field of the academic study of religion (which developed out of liberal Protestant theology). Writing in 1951 Joachim Wach baldly stated:

“...there can be no ‘godless’ religion, and only a misunderstanding can make Buddhism and Confucianism into such. Buddhism and Jainism may have started as criticisms of the traditional or of any positive characterization of Ultimate Reality, but they soon developed into *genuine religions*. (italics mine; Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religion*, p. 37)

Wach was a pioneer in the history of religions who actually was a founding member of the Brown Religious Studies Department. He strove mightily to free the academic study of religion from Christian theological influences. Yet in this quotation and throughout the book (*The Comparative Study of Religion*) he makes an essentially theological assumption: that “genuine religions” must see God as the Ultimate Reality.

This kind of unreflective ethnocentrism is understandable --although not at all justifiable -- in someone thinking and writing almost seven decades ago. That it still persists in subtle forms among scholars of religion and in grosser forms among the scientists whose work is reviewed in the *NY Times Magazine* article really indicates how, as modern Westerners, our religious upbringing – the ways in which we have been brought up to

understand religions, whether we embrace or reject them – is still deeply entrenched within our own everyday perspectives. It also represents a failure of the academic study of religion to make much of a dent in our culture. I would attribute that to the complete failure of this field to free itself from these very culturally defined categories of religion, in other words, our own “unreflective ethnocentrism,” and to our obsession with arguing with one another from within these categories.

Popular and influential social scientific studies of religion are unfortunately confined within these very limited understandings of religion as well. The anthropologist of religion, Pascal Boyer is characteristic of these approaches, and his understanding of religion is quite compatible with that of Scott Atran. Boyer, who purports to “explain religion” using the lens of cognitive science, argues that **all religions contain “supernatural notions”** – including

“...a variety of artifacts animals, persons, plants: concepts of floating islands of mountains that digest food.. . .These are found in folktales and correspond to a small catalogue **of templates for supernatural concepts**. We also find that a particular subset of these concepts is associated with more serious commitment, strong emotions, important rituals, and/or moral understandings. An association between a **supernatural concept** and one or several of these social effects is our main intuitive criterion for what is religious. (Boyer, in Proctor, p. 240).

Here and elsewhere in his writings, Boyer assumes that supernatural concepts are one of the essential defining characteristics of religion and that these are caused directly by specific cognitive templates. They include anthropomorphic ideas about God or gods, including intentional agency and they are **never** based on actual experience:

“... it is also striking that the details of such representations (of supernatural agents’ actions in the world) are generally derived not from what one has experienced but rather of what others have said. People take their information about the features of ...gods, to an overwhelming extent, from socially transmitted information, not direct experience. (- Proctor 244)

Arguing from observations of relatively primitive cultures, Boyer extends them to all religions and includes in his purview all Christian beliefs about the nature of God, which he considers to be *the supernatural agent par excellence*. He never once stops to consider that there are religious traditions that put absolutely no stock in anything supernatural; there are traditions that derive their concepts and understanding of the functioning of consciousness completely empirically, grounded in experience, experience that is direct and that can be proven again and again by spiritual scientists who follow the same procedures of working in the common laboratory of their own consciousnesses.

The entire concept of “supernatural” beings and agency is drawn from worldviews that seek causes for natural events in forces or powers that cannot be perceived within the natural world. The classical Christian notions of an anthropomorphic God, the creator separated from creation by a “cosmological gulf,” certainly fit this label. However Boyer, in his “unreflective ethnocentrism” demonstrates absolutely no awareness that in some of the major contemplative traditions of the non-Western world, such as foundational Daoism in China and Theravada Buddhism in South Asia, there are either no “supernatural” powers or forces or their role is totally minimized: the Daoist Way is very much a force inherent in the universe; Theravada ‘no-self’ (*anatta*) is not even a force: it’s a mode of cognition. The Confucian tradition too contains no supernatural powers. Clearly, Boyer, Atran, and anthropologists and cognitive scientists who have proposed reductive and evolutionary attempts to “explain religion” are working with models of religion heavily influenced by their own personal cultural experiences, and demonstrate no awareness of the exceptions to their presumed universal assumptions about religion that are posed by the Asian contemplative traditions. Furthermore, the very prominent distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” that dominates their discourse may not even play a significant role in the worldviews of these contemplative traditions. Thus the unreflective ethnocentrism of these researchers has led them to restrict their sources to religions that fit into the accepted cognitive models of their own European religious traditions. This demonstrates a deep commitment to these cognitive models that is troubling at best and leads to bad science at worst. This is first of the issues I wish to address this evening.

There is a second related issue that is just as deeply entrenched and unreflective. It is the assumption that our European religious, philosophical, and now scientific conceptions of human experience **contain its only possibly veridical models**. Thus any tradition that posits veridical cognition that does not fall within these models is *ipso facto* false and delusional. There are a number of key beliefs associated with this assumption, one of them being that human experience cannot possibly occur that is not totally conditioned by pre-existing cognitive categories. This position is forcefully stated by Steven Katz in his influential essay, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism:”

...let me state the single epistemological assumption that has exercised my thinking and which has forced me to undertake the present investigation: *There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences*. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. ...This epistemological fact seems to me to be true, **because of the sorts of beings we are**. ...  
(Katz in Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 26)

Yet mystical traditions the world over argue that it is only when these mediating cognitive categories are stripped away that genuine intuitive knowledge and clear cognition is able to begin to develop, yielding experience that is truly noetic, as William James has put it. Katz, of course, never attempts to explain why, if all mystical experiences are totally culturally mediated that mystics the world over concur in asserting that these experiences are ineffable. Katz’ arrogant position thus assumes that he, as a modern European child of the Enlightenment, understands more about what the world’s great mystics have experienced than those mystics themselves; this a form of ethnocentric hubris that parallels the assumptions of European Imperialists who dominated the world in the name of their cultural superiority. Katz is but one example of this epistemologically blinkered attitude that I would like to call “cognitive imperialism.” By cognitive imperialism I mean the presumption that our own cultural models (in this case European) of the nature and limits of human cognition --whether of everyday experience or of religious and contemplative experience – are objectively true for both ourselves and for every other culture on earth, living or dead.

The ultimate implications of this for the study of religion and human cognitive possibilities are far reaching: namely that mystical experience can not possibly be **veridical**. Nor, for that matter, can any subjective experience, which, after all, can only be a product of the pre-existing categories. Thus our subjective experience can tell us nothing new and nothing true about the world because we can only possibly cognize the world through the categories imprinted within us by our historical and cultural context. Subjective experience is thus relative and individualistic and has no claims to truth that anyone else must take seriously. Religious experience only tells us what our religion already knows, so there is absolutely no point in trying to understand or assess it because it yields no genuine knowledge about the world. In Religious Studies Departments throughout North America, this has led to a profound lack of interest in religious experience – for James the very essence of religion – and to a shift in scholarship in the field not just to historical research, but to historicism, the approach to critical study that asserts that a text can ONLY be understood as a product of the social, historical, and political forces of its time.

## **II. Historicism Reductionism: The Reigning Paradigm in the Study of Religion**

This unreflective ethnocentrism and its concomitant cognitive imperialism reach deeply not only into Anthropology and the Cognitive Sciences, but are also prominent features in the academic study of religion in North America. As we approach the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the field of “Religious Studies” has gradually moved away from its origins in Christian Theology, and has gone through a number of developmental phases in first separating its mission from that of the chaplaincy and second introducing what one scholar has called the “historical-scientific-philosophical study of religions committed to an underlying ideal of detached objectivity and value-neutral inquiry” (Twiss 1995 p. 33). To a considerable extent, historical and social scientific studies have gradually come to dominate research and teaching in North American Religious Studies departments. For example, the recent publications of one American department of Religious Studies include the following topics:

"Israelite Interment Ideology,"  
"Women's Religions Among Pagans,"  
Olfactory Imagination in Ancient Christianity  
Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity  
Jewish piety in antiquity

In case this one example be thought of as idiosyncratic, let's examine the list of monographs of the American Academy of Religion, the professional association for the field, for the past decade. Therein titles such as the following predominate:

Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission  
Daoist Monastic Manual: A Translation of the *Fengdao Kejie*  
History of the Buddha's Relic Shrine  
Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World  
Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative  
Sacrificing the Self: Perspectives in Martyrdom and Religion  
Specter of Speciesism: Buddhist and Christian Views of Animals

Thus historical and sociological studies dominate the publications of the AAR, alongside the other major category, theological studies:

Intersecting Pathways: Modern Jewish Theologians in Conversation with Christianity  
Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology  
Paul in Israel's Story: Self and Community at the Cross  
Yves Congar's Theology of the Holy Spirit  
Bonds of Freedom: Feminist Theology and Christian Realism  
Creative Suffering of the Triune God: An Evolutionary Theology

If we concentrate exclusively on the religious traditions of Asia, we find a similar emphasis on historical/sociological studies:

In articles published in the 2005 and 2004 issues of the *Journal of Chinese Religions*, we find the following topics:

A Lingnan monk in Manchuria during the Ming-Qing transition

a cultural history of Muslims in late imperial China

Prehistoric images of women from the North China region: the origins of Chinese goddess worship?

Fate and fortune: popular religion and moral capital in Shenzhen

The Tang Buddhist palace chapels

**Book Reviews:**

pilgrimages to Mount Tai in late imperial China

social change and religious life in rural north China

the Confucian transformation of popular culture in late imperial Huizhou

Religion in modern Taiwan: tradition and innovation in a changing society

**Rare are Books on Philosophical Approaches:**

Buddhist phenomenology: a philosophical investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun

After Confucius : studies in early Chinese philosophy

Hiding the world in the world: uneven discourses on the Zhuangzi

I am not here to argue that historical and social scientific studies of different religious traditions are not valuable: indeed this is **not at all the case**; they are extremely valuable in contextualizing religious experience and helping us to clarify differences between our own modern perspectives and those of the authors of ancient religious texts. In my own scholarship I have often done very detailed historical and text-historical studies of foundational Daoist religious and philosophical works. However, the field dominance of such scholarship belies a deeper question: Why this almost total retreat from serious consideration of religious experience? Why has the role of subjective experience in religion been totally abandoned by the field?

We can explain this in part because of the historical development of the field of Religious Studies. Because the entire field emerged from Liberal Protestant Theology in the immediate pre-War and Post-War periods, in the early stages the concerns of Christian Theology predominated. The issues that were studied included: the existence and nature of God; balance between faith and reason; religious experience as source of information about the nature of God; miracles; importance of historicity (of Jesus). As it gradually moved away from explicitly Christian theological concerns and towards attempting to consider other religious traditions of the world on an equal footing, the field nonetheless continued to think about religion in the terms and categories of Christian Theology. For example, the following conceptual categories still dominate approaches in the field: soteriology (how people *are saved*; *implies a Power that does the saving*); metaphysics (implies non physical, world-transcending supernatural power), ontology (implicitly posits ultimate Being in the world); cosmogony (implies that the universe had a unique and discrete beginning – yet in China, in the words of the famous scholar of Chinese science, Joseph Needham, the world had always existed and always would and the point was to figure out not where it came from but how to live in it) and so on. Thus the concerns and categories of Abrahamic traditions, particularly Christianity, were presumed to be universal; see above Wach comments on “True Religion.”

To a great extent the strong emphasis on historical and social scientific models that now dominates the field of Religious Studies represents a forceful attempt to move the field of Religious Studies away from Christian concerns and values and to develop a more neutral perspective from which to study all religions (although the obsession with historicity seems still to be a rather Christian one -- see all the arguments about the historicity of Jesus that were prominent in the field until about three decades ago). Nonetheless, it is apparent that this attempt at value neutrality has not been entirely successful, as I have attempted to explain. Despite this, popular critics of the field such as Russell McCutcheon, have completely missed this point: they mistake historicism and reductionism for “critical method,” entirely ignoring the unreflective ethnocentrism that undergirds these methodologies. McCutcheon focuses on dividing scholars in the field into two camps: “critics” (who have this presumed position of neutrality) and “caretakers” (essentially theologians in disguise who seek to prove the truths of religion in the guise of value

neutrality).<sup>1</sup> The only way to be critical and hence good for McCutcheon is to treat religion and religious phenomena as objects to be analyzed according to historical and social context and to be reduced to their basis in some kind of **cognitive impairment**. For him, any *subjective* involvement in the actual practices and experiences of religion – even if it is explicitly for the purposes of better understanding the religious tradition – cannot escape active or tacit *faith* in the truths that the religious tradition espouses. Thus McCutcheon does not escape the cognitive imperialist assumptions of Atran and Boyer: his concept of religion is totally derived from Abrahamic traditions: it's all about faith, belief, God, and the supernatural. This total ignorance of the contemplative traditions of the non-Western world demonstrates the kind of continued shocking failure of scholars of religion -- who put such a high value on contextualizing the religions they study – to contextualize themselves.

This failure at self-contextualization is particularly ironic for those who consider themselves critical scholars of religion, because much of their historical and social scientific research is dominated by *historicist* agendas that assert that all aspects of religion, particularly the epistemic insights that derive from their practices – are totally determined by their historical and social context. Following this way of thought, religious experience is **never to be studied** *from the insider, first-person perspective*. That perspective is denied to scholars because we can study religion only from the outside in; only its external qualities are available to us; only the outer aspects of religion are potentially *veridical*.

To a certain extent this externalizing approach derives from two of the most influential figures of figures, Descartes and Kant. Because of their emphasis on the importance of rational thought and on the deep insinuation of categories of thought into every conceivable human experience, it had led subsequent generations of philosopher and scholars to place an overly strong emphasis on the rational and externally observable dimensions of human experience. This in turn has served as the intellectual support for the development of historicist and social scientific approaches of religion that, in effect, only examine the external, “objectively observable” aspects of religion: its institutions and how they interact with society, their internal power relations, ethics and society, and so on. This, in effect, basically excludes religious experience and human subjectivity from serious critical

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<sup>1</sup> Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp.

examination because they are internal. Yet it is precisely these internal experiences that for William James are the very heart of religion and that should be the very heart of any serious approach to studying both religion and human cognition.

This has far-reaching implications for the academy: by completely abandoning the subjectivity of religion as a serious topic of rational inquiry, we have abandoned the field entirely to religious practitioners, who may indeed place dogmatic faith in the truths of their religion as *the primary* article of practice. Ironically this supports the very traditions that the anti-subjectivist scholars wish to undermine. By turning our backs on the systematic exploration of religious subjectivity from the “inside out” so to speak we have also cut ourselves off from a valuable approach to the many problems of human existence, a valuable source of empirical knowledge that has been well developed in the contemplative traditions of Asia, and a potentially valuable *method* for studying these traditions.

I would argue that the very reason we have become so devoted to historicist approaches to religion is that we are still dominated by what I have called the “cognitive imperialist” bias. An essential defining presupposition of this viewpoint is what Alan Wallace calls “metaphysical realism,” the unproven belief that the objective world is ultimately real. This results in an “objectivist” view of the world whose principles are as follows:

1. The real world consists of mind-independent objects;
2. There is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is;
3. Truth involves some sort of correspondence between an existing world and our description of it;<sup>2</sup>
4. That it is not only possible, but desirable, for scientists and scholars to describe the world from the “God’s-eye” viewpoint of a completely detached, objective, and value-neutral observer.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> B. Alan Wallace, “The Intersubjective Worlds of Science and Religion.” In James Proctor (ed.), *Science, Religion, and the Human Experience*. Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> B. Alan Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity*. Oxford University Press, 2000, pp.

As Wallace has cogently argued, this is the foundation of the “scientific materialism” that so dominates our modern understandings of the world and ourselves. What is missing is our very own human subjectivity that is the basis of all our experience of ourselves and the world. On the scientific level, human subjectivity is the source for all the conceptual models we develop to explain the underlying structures of the world in the physical sciences and the underlying structures of consciousness in the cognitive sciences. All scientific experimentation used to establish these underlying “truths” is also a product of human subjectivity. Thus, despite all the principles of experimental science that attempt to establish objective standards for research, in the last analysis all these are derived **by human beings** and are therefore grounded in human subjectivity. Because of our headlong quest for scientific certainty in an objectivist-materialist world, we have in general ignored this important foundation, and this is true not only for scientists but for scholars of religion as well.

Ruling out the systematic exploration of human subjectivity because it is not a veridical epistemological source has given both scientists and religionists a considerable amount of control over their subject matter and a rationale for their approach, yet at the same time it severely restricts it. If human cognition can be effectively reduced to the product of pre-existing historical, social, and political forces, then it can be valuable to study only as a product of these forces and it provides no new insights in its own right. Yet the very history of human inventiveness flies in the face of this notion, for if people only experience what their culture imprints on them, how can anything new arise? Even if they are reacting against cultural standards, the act of creation involves imaginative leaps that cannot be fully accounted for by extant cultural categories. Clearly something else must be going on. We cannot understand this something else without fully appreciating the importance of subjectivity.

Furthermore, failing to explore human subjectivity, scholars of religion and cognitive scientists remain blind to the very personal, subjective, ethnocentric, and cognitive imperialistic biases of their own approaches. Failing to contextualize their own methodological positions, they are very much reminiscent of those whom Nagarjuna criticizes for failing to apply emptiness to their own arguments:

“Emptiness wrongly grasped utterly destroys the dumb witted, like a snake picked up by the wrong end or a magical spell incanted backwards.” (*Mulamadhyamika karikas* 24.11)

### III. The Intersubjective Universe

This objectivist model of the universe that underlies the unreflective ethnocentrism and cognitive imperialism pervading the fields of Cognitive Science and Religious Studies is not without challenge, if we would only expand our vision to include non Western sources. Alan Wallace, Francisco Varela, and Evan Thompson have explored Buddhist visions of the universe and how these can inform the development of new models of understanding how the subjective and objective perspectives can mutually inform one another in order to give a more accurate and more scientific vision of the world. After examining their ideas I will examine a cosmology of considerable antiquity that poses a serious challenge to European objectivism and extends Varela and Thompson beyond their limitations: the Chinese model proffered by the classical Daoist thinker Zhuangzi.

#### A. New Developments in Cognitive Science

There is a newly emerging movement in Cognitive Science that has broken free of many Western epistemological biases and asserts that human experience is fundamentally both *embodied* and *intersubjective*. Pioneered by the later cognitive neuroscientist Francisco Varela and his colleagues Eleanor Rosch and Evan Thompson, it describes an “enactive” approach to cognition, asserting that human cognition is fundamentally grounded in the subjective experience of our minds within a physical body and is hence both simultaneously subjective and objective. As Thompson states:

...We propose as a name the term *enactive* to emphasize the growing conviction that cognition is not the representation of a pregiven world by a pregiven mind but is

rather the enactment of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs... (*The Embodied Mind* p. 9)

Developed to counter the deliberate omission of lived subjective experience in theories of human cognition, such as those proffered by Steven Katz and many others, it draws upon the *hermeneutic* philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, who argue that cognition is *embodied* in the sense that it depends on being in a world inseparable from our experience of our bodies, our language, and our social history. As Varela, et. al. state:

...If we are forced to admit that cognition cannot be properly understood without common sense, and that common sense is none other than our bodily and social history, then the inevitable conclusion is that knower and known, mind and world, stand in relation to each other through mutual specification or dependent coorigination. If this critique is valid, then scientific progress in understanding cognition will not be forthcoming unless we start from a different basis from [sic: than] the idea of a pre-given world that exists “out there” and is internally recovered in a representation [in here]... (*The Embodied Mind* p.150)

In other words, human cognition is not at all a subjective representation of an objective world, or, conversely, a subjective projection of cultural categories on an objective world, as Katz would have it, it is, rather, the constantly shifting *enactment* of a myriad of worlds of experience that are context-interactive (simultaneously subjective and objective). Citing phenomenologists Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, Thompson further argues that our very self-identity has no meaning without “Otherness” being implicated in the very structure of our consciousness:

...“I” and “other” are not simply co-relative and interchangeable, like the spatial perspectives of “here” and “there”... “I-ness” is already internally constituted by “otherness.” Experience is intrinsically intersubjective in the sense that alterity and

openness to the other are a priori characteristics of the formal structure of experience.... (“Empathy and Human Experience, in Proctor, p. 273)

Wallace too supports this fundamental intersubjectivity as a primary insight into human experience developed by the tradition of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism:

The theme of intersubjectivity lies at the very core of the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist way of viewing the world...According to this worldview, each person does exist as an individual, but the self...does not exist as an independent ego that is somehow in control of the body and mind. Rather the individual is understood as a matrix of dependently related events, all of them in a state of flux. .. The self arises in dependence on prior contributing causes and conditions...In this way our existence is invariably intersubjective, for we exist in a causal nexus in which we are constantly influenced by, and exert influence upon, the world around us...(2) The individual self does not exist independently of the body and mind, but rather exists in reliance upon a myriad of physical and mental processes that are constantly changing. (3) The misperception of a fixed self arises from ignorance of these insights and through conceptual imputation... (Wallace, “Intersubjectivity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 no. 5-7, 2001, pp. 209-10)

For precisely these reasons we cannot ignore human subjectivity by the intellectual trick of pretending that it doesn't exist or isn't relevant, as we find in the cognitive imperialist perspective. If we do this, we are living in what Zen master Joshu Sasaki has called a “two dimensional” world, one in which I appear to stand apart from a pre-existing objective world affirming truths from my position of a fixed self as if it was the only one possible. This seems to also have been well understood by the Foundational Chinese Daoist Zhuangzi:

Is this [theory] acceptable? Yes it is. Is that [theory] unacceptable? Yes it is. A Way develops as we walk it, things become so by being called so. Why are they so? They are so from where they are so. Why are they not so? They are not so from where

they are not so. ..Therefore when someone with a fixated mode of cognition [*weisbi*] differentiates between a stalk and a pillar, a hag from the beauty Hsi Shih , things however peculiar or incongruous, the Way pervades and unifies them (ACG 53 mod.)

In other words from the ecstatic and illumined vision of Zhuangzi none of the perspectives in the enacted world are anything more than relatively true to their own standpoints. This cannot be SEEN when one is confined within such a standpoint. Only the sage who “sees right through” and whose embodiment of the Way has transformed her cognition from fixated to flowing is able to know this and to respond without prejudice and attachment to any situation. The ability to do this is based upon the experience of embodying or merging with the Way, an experience in which the dualities of subject and object and subject and subject fall away. As we saw above, Zhuangzi asserts that:

...[When] flowing cognition comes to an end. .. that of which we do not know **what is so of it**, we call the Way. (2/37)

Rather than acknowledge this Daoist turn to a deeper mode of unitive cognition as the basis for a full appreciation of intersubjectivity, Varela and Thompson rely on Madhyamaka philosophy to deal with the non reliance on either objectivity or subjectivity and speak of the realization of the fundamental groundlessness of human experience and its concomitant awareness of empathy and compassion.<sup>4</sup> But they go no farther in positing any deeper mode of experience other than to suggest the Japanese philosopher Nishitani Keiji’s concept of “nihility,” “the groundlessness in relation to the subject-object polarity” that differs from nihilism in its “letting go of the grasping mind.”<sup>5</sup> Zhuangzi, on the other hand, is more precise in presenting this deeper mode of experience, although this early thinker does share much of their views of intersubjectivity and the relativity of experience.

## **B. The Vision from Classical China**

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<sup>4</sup> Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, *Embodied Mind*, pp. 217-54.

<sup>5</sup> *Embodied Mind*, pp. 243-44.

Zhuangzi is one of the foundational thinkers of the Daoist tradition who lived, taught, and wrote around the year 300 BCE. If, from the position of a neutral observer, the arguably more famous Laozi analyses the Way --the force that interfuses all phenomena yet cannot be fully known as an object -- Zhuangzi does so from a position that is clearly enmeshed within the subjective.<sup>6</sup> Arguing that any “objectivist” position contradicts itself, Zhuangzi criticizes the philosophical schools of his day for affirming their own limited truths as if they were universal:

...for there to be [objective standards] of true and false before they have formed in the human mind would be [as ridiculous as the Sophistic saying] “I go to [the state of] Yue today but I arrived yesterday.” This would be crediting with existence what has no existence; and if you do that, even the mythological sage Yü could not understand you, and how can you expect to be understood by me? (ACG p. 51 modified)

The true nature of phenomena cannot be known from an independent value neutral position because there are no perspectives from which all agree on that truth. As he says...

...If being so is inherent in a thing, if being acceptable [in debate] is inherent in a thing, then from no perspective would it not be so, from no perspective would it not be acceptable.

The reason for this is that our knowledge of that thing is always subjective and relational. As Zhuangzi says:

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<sup>6</sup> I use the names Laozi and Zhuangzi as conventions to refer to the philosophical arguments made within those works; I do not intend to imply that there was a real historical person named Laozi who authored this work (there was not). The historical Zhuangzi or Zhuang Zhou was author of perhaps chapters 1-7 (the “Inner Chapters”) of the *Zhuangzi* text. For the former see, A.C. Graham, “The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan.” In Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue, ... For the latter see Graham, “How Much of *Chuang Tzu* did Chuang Tzu Write?” In Harold Roth (ed.) *A Companion to Angus C. Graham’s Chuang Tzu: the Inner Chapters*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, pp. ; and Harold Roth, “Who Compiled the *Chuang Tzu*?” in Henry Rosemont Jr. (ed) *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays in Honor of Angus C. Graham.* LaSalle, Il: Open Court Press, 1991, pp. 79-128.

‘Without an other there is no self; without self there is no choosing one thing over another.’

This is the idea that notions of other are implicit in notions of self and so are relative, not independent. The problem for Zhuangzi is that we fail to recognize that *all* attempts to assert objective truths from a fixed standpoint are contingent and non absolute:

Saying is not just blowing breath; saying says something: the only trouble is that what it says is never fixated. Do we really say something? Or have we never said anything? If you think saying is different from the chirping of fledglings is there proof of the distinction? Or isn't there any proof? By what is the Way hidden that there should be a genuine or a false? By what is saying darkened, that sometimes we say that “this is true” and “that is false?” Wherever we walk how can the Way be absent? Whatever the standpoint, how can a saying be labeled as false? The Way is hidden by the formation of the lesser, saying is darkened by its foliage and flower. And so we have statements that “this is true” and “that is false” each made by [the rival schools] of the Confucians and Mohists by which what is true for one of them for the other is false and what is false for one of them for the other is true. If you wish to affirm what they deny and deny what they affirm, the best means is **Illumination** [*ming* 明]

What is meant by “Illumination” is best explained in reference to two essential ideas that most translators have missed in this second chapter, the key to understanding the entire work in my view. Here and in other places in this important chapter of the *Zhuangzi* text, Zhuangzi differentiates between two major modes of cognizing the world: *weishi* 未是 and *yinshi* 因是, difficult to translate technical terms rendered by the late A.C. Graham first as “the fixed “That’s it” and the “adaptive That’s it;” he later changed these to “the That’s it which deems and “the That’s it which goes by circumstance.”<sup>7</sup> Without going into a long

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<sup>7</sup> For the former translations see his article, “Chuang Tzu’s Essay on Seeing Things As Equal.” Originally published in *History of Religions* October 1969-February 1970; reprinted in Harold D. Roth, *A Companion to Angus C. Graham’s ‘Chuang-tzu: the inner chapters.’* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003, pp. 104-29; for the latter, see his *Chuang-tzu: the inner chapters*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1981.

explanation of these translations, let's say that the idea translated as "That's It" really means a cognitive affirmation of something as intellectually, emotionally, or perceptually true; hence it symbolizes human cognition. So the contrast is between **fixed cognition** that affirms the ultimate truth of the individual self and the objective world it thinks it perceives and **flowing cognition**, which recognizes the fundamental mutability and mutual arising of both self and self and self and other. Confucians and Mohists, for Zhuangzi, are caught up in **fixed cognition**. This contrast is perhaps best brought up by the following famous passage given the name "three every morning:"

A monkey keeper handing out nuts said, "Three every morning and four every evening." The monkeys were all in a rage. "All right, then," he said, "four every morning and three every evening." The monkeys were all delighted. Without anything being left out, either in name or in substance, their pleasure and anger were put to use; his too was a **flowing cognition**. This is how the sage harmonizes things with his mode of cognition and he stays at the point of rest in the Potter's Wheel of Heaven. This is what we call acting from both perspectives. (ACG 54 mod Lau, 2/5/4-5)

I would like to suggest to you here that we can map these two modes of cognition onto the examples we have been discussing. **The fixed cognitive** mode that affirms the truth of the objective world and the subjectivity that represents from the standpoint of a rigid notion of a constant self that itself is an object in the world, is an accurate representation of the cognitive imperialism of Katz, McCutcheon, and others. It's a mode of cognition that utterly fails to contextualize itself and instead promotes an objectivist worldview that the promoters themselves think accurately represents it. In the terms of our Western debates about experience, their experience is mediated, but they are completely unaware of it. Thus Katz is unaware of the causal mediation involved in his unproven contention that all experience is mediated!

By contrast, the Varela and Thompson model of intersubjectivity is fairly accurately represented by Zhuangzi's **flowing mode of cognition**, one that recognizes that experience is simultaneously subjective and objective, or subjective and subjective and is

able to interact with the world from a profound awareness of the total mutability and interdependence of self and other. This is a mode that is completely free from being attached to any one set of pre-defined cognitive categories. Their experience is mediated by both subject and object simultaneously, but “pure” in the sense of being free of attachment to self, in other words: completely unselfconscious. They can thus experience what Zen teachers have called “the nonduality of subject and object.”<sup>8</sup> (Hori, *Zen Sand*, pp. 7-15 )

Where Zhuangzi differs from Varela and Thompson is that instead of suggesting that this new mode of cognition is somehow based in an awareness of “groundlessness” and “nihility,” he proposes that its source is in the Way (Dao)

“What is IT is also OTHER; what is Other is also IT: There someone says “This is true, that’s false” from one point of view; here we say “This is true, that’s false” from another point of view. Are there really It and Other? Or really no It and Other? Where neither It nor Other finds its opposite is called the AXIS OF THE WAY. Once the axis is found at the center of the circle, there is no limit to responding with either, on the one hand no limit to what is IT, and, on the other, no limit to what is not. Therefore I say: “The best means is Illumination (ming 明)”

Once again, Zhuangzi suggests another mode of cognizing the world using what he calls “illumination,” the perspective that is identical to the perspective of the Way, a position that transforms the common rigid cognition from a fixed, self-affirming objectivist perspective to one that is able to shift with the constantly changing circumstances:

... Therefore when fixated cognition picks out a stalk from a pillar, a hag from beautiful Hsi Shih, things however peculiar and incongruous, the Way pervades and unifies them. As they divide they develop, as they develop they dissolve. All things whether developing or dissolving revert to being pervaded and unified. Only those

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<sup>8</sup> For a clear discussion of this in Rinzai Zen, see Victor Hori, *Zen Sand*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 7-15.

who penetrate this know how to pervade and unify things. They do not use fixated cognition, but find temporary lodging-places in [the transformations of] daily life. It is in daily life that they make use of this perspective. It is in making use of this perspective that they pervade things. It is in pervading things that they attain it. And when they attain it they are almost there. Their flowing cognition comes to an end. It ends and when it does, that of which we do not know what is so of it, we call the Way. (2/33-37)<sup>9</sup>

For Zhuangzi the Way is directly apprehended and affirmed in the experience of dropping away all dualistic categories such as “so and not so,” It and Other. This affirmation is the basis of being able to cognize the world as it is, a complex interrelated series of constantly changing subject-object perspectives, a complex world not of independent objects (including myself) that moves around in empty space, but a complex world of interdependent multirelational and completely mutable subjectivities. It is hence **intersubjective or even better, “intersubjective-objective”** in a profound way.

How can we reach this new perspective? Through the careful deconstruction of our fixated ideas of the self, accomplished through the apophatic practices of what I have called “inner cultivation.” For Zhuangzi these includes such consciousness altering practices as “sitting and forgetting,” (ch.6) the “fasting of the mind,” (ch. 4) “putting the things we live on outside ourselves,” (ch.6) “treating our self as other,” (ch.2), pervading and unifying (ch.2). It is a contemplative practice that first involves an emptying out of the usual contents of consciousness – thoughts, feelings, perceptions – until a condition of “embodying” or being merged with the Way is realized. This is its “introvertive” mode done while sitting completely still. There is then a second resulting “extrovertive” mode realized upon return to activity in the dualistic world of subjects and objects that both realizes its fundamental intersubjectivity and retains an awareness of how the Way pervades this world and one’s

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<sup>9</sup> My translation departs from Graham’s on 53-54. The key departure is my rendering of the verbal phrase *tong wei yi* as “to pervade and unify” rather than Graham’s “interchange and deem to be one.” I feel this better captures the activity of the Way and of the sages who identify completely with it: the Way pervades everything and in pervading them unifies them. They are unified to the extent that each and every thing contains the Way within it; and they are unified in that, from the perspective of the Way within, each thing is seen to be equal. Because they attain this Way, sages can have the exact same perspective.

own subjective experience. This is called many things in the *Zhuangzi* including, “letting both alternatives” proceed,” “finding things their point of rest on the Potter’s wheel of Heaven,” flowing cognition (*yinsbi*),” and, as in our passages above, “using illumination.” Thus, for Zhuangzi, the ability to experience or “enact” the world (as Varela and Thompson would have it), must be grounded in a contemplative union with the Dao, that power or force that completely infuses and pervades the universe and everything in it yet remains inconceivable through dualist cognition.

Working within the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, Wallace’s position is closer to that of Zhuangzi. He speaks of the training of consciousness through *samatha* (meditative quiescence)

... so that discursive thoughts become dormant and all appearances of oneself, others, one’s body, and one’s environment vanish as one attains “experiential access to the relative ground state of consciousness known as ‘substrate consciousness’ (*alaya vijnana*)...a state of radiant clear consciousness that is the basis for the emergence of all appearances to an individual’s mind stream. All phenomena appearing to sensory and mental perception are imbued with the innate luminosity of this substrate consciousness....<sup>10</sup>

Each of our sources posits different sources for the ability to experience the intersubjective world: groundlessness, the Way, and “substrate consciousness.” What is clear is that none of these are possible if we remain trapped within the unreflective ethnocentrism of the cognitive imperialist position, which emphasizes objectivism, historicism, and cognitive reductionism. What is also clear is that the systematic training of consciousness through contemplative disciplines is a pre-requisite for truly understanding and experiencing the role of the subjective in this intersubjective world. What Evan Thompson says about Cognitive Science is equally true of the study of contemplative experience in the major wisdom traditions of the world:

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<sup>10</sup> B. Alan Wallace, *Contemplative Science Where Buddhism and Neuroscience Converge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006, pp. 15-16.

...I believe that a mature science of mind would have to include disciplined first-person methods of investigating subjective experience in active partnership with the third-person biobehavioral science. “First-person methods” are practices that increase an individual’s sensitivity to his or her own experience through the systematic training of attention and self-regulation of emotion. This ability to attend reflexively to experience itself – to attend not simply to what one experiences (the object) but to how one experiences it (the act) seems to be a uniquely human ability and mode of experience we do not share with other animals. First-person methods for cultivating this ability are found primarily in the contemplative wisdom traditions of human experience, especially Buddhism. Throughout history religion has provided the main home for contemplative experience and its theoretical articulation in philosophy and psychology. Thus...religion...is...a repository of first-person methods that can play an active and creative role in scientific investigation itself. [“Empathy and Human Experience,” pp. 261-62]

For Thompson and Wallace this systematic training of the mind to investigate itself has been developed in the pan-Buddhist practices of *samatha* and *vipasyana*, stopping and seeing, mental concentration and focused insight. I have argued that similar practices are present in foundational Daoism. They both **imply** that these practices can be taken out of an exclusively monastic setting and used to develop what the latter calls a genuine “Contemplative Science.” I would assert that we can do this as well in the sphere of religion.

A truly nonethnocentric study of the contemplative experiences found in the world’s religions would entail a number of things. The first is that we remain open-minded to them and do not *a priori* commit ourselves to the historicist reductionism that assumes that these experiences are epistemologically **invalid**. The second entails a “self-contextualizing” recognition of the fact that despite pretending to be “objective” and value-neutral, scholars of religion and human cognition have their own subjective biases that are deeply enmeshed in their cultural presuppositions about the nature of religion and in their own personal experience of it. This has everything to do with how they pursue their study of religion, the kinds of issues they select, and arguments they attempt to prove. It would be fascinating to

hear from Boyer and Katz and McCutcheon just what their own *experience* of religion has been: I would highly suspect it is totally Eurocentric. Rather than pretend their intellectual positions are “objective,” these scholars owe their audiences a full and complete explanation of their own subjective influences. In the interests of full disclosure, I was raised with both Reformed Jewish and Christian Scientist influences, embraced Freud, Camus, and Sartre before college, began studying Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism at university, and have since done serious practice in a number of Asian contemplative traditions: Hindu, Daoist, and Buddhist, particularly in the tradition of Japanese Rinzai Zen.

In addition to openly discussing the subjective factors that have influenced our attitude towards the study of contemplative practices in religion, I would also recommend the pursuit of an approach that is, as Thompson suggests, both third-person and first-person. The historical and social scientific study of religion constitutes the former, and systematic training in a contemplative tradition constitutes the latter. What I am, in effect, calling for is nothing other than what former Berkeley professor Frits Staal called for more than three decades ago in his pioneering, but now overlooked work, *Exploring Mysticism*.

If mysticism is to be studied seriously, it should not merely be studied indirectly and from without, but also directly and from within. Mysticism can at least in part be regarded as something affecting the human mind, and it is therefore quite unreasonable to expect that it could be fruitfully studied by confining oneself to literature about or contributed by mystics, or to the behavior and physiological characteristics of mystics and their bodies. No one would willingly impose upon himself such artificial constraints when exploring other phenomena affecting or pertaining to the mind; he would not study perception only by analyzing reports of those who describe what they perceive, or by looking at what happens to people and their bodies when they are engaged in perceiving. What one would do when studying perception, in addition, if not first of all, is to observe and analyze one’s own perceptions...[*Exploring Mysticism* pp. 123-24 Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975]

It is my contention that contemplative experiences, all sorts of religious experiences, and human cognition itself, can most productively and accurately be studied only by this dual approach. Whether or not departments of the comparative study of religions in North American can sufficiently free themselves from the pernicious influences of unreflective ethnocentrism and cognitive imperialism to allow this kind of dual approach to be established remains to be seen. I, for one, remain very pessimistic about the open-mindedness of the entire field.

So what are we to do if we are interested in training contemplative scientists and religionists in the basic methods of contemplation? Can this training only be accomplished in a monastic setting? Or is there a way to bring it into the academy to enrich not just research but pedagogy?

#### **IV. The Field of Contemplative Studies**

There is a developing new field of academic endeavor in North America devoted to the critical study of contemplative states of experience. By contemplation we mean **the focusing of the attention in a sustained fashion leading to psychological experiences of concentration, tranquility, and insight. These experiences occur on a spectrum ranging from the rather common spontaneous experiences of absorption in an activity to the relatively uncommon and deliberately cultivated transformative experiences found in many traditions of meditation.**

Focusing on the many ways human beings have found, across cultures and across time, to concentrate, broaden and deepen conscious awareness, Contemplative Studies is the rubric under which this research and teaching can be organized. In the field of Contemplative Studies we attempt to:

1. identify the varieties of contemplative experiences of which human beings are capable;
2. find meaningful scientific explanations for them;
3. cultivate first-person knowledge of them;

#### 4. critically assess their nature and significance

That is, we study the underlying philosophy, psychology, and phenomenology of human contemplative experience through a combination of traditional third-person approaches and more innovative, critical first-person approaches. In other words, we study contemplative experiences from the following perspectives:

- Science:** particularly psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science, and clinical medicine;
- Humanities:** contemplative dimensions of Literature, Philosophy, and Religion;
- The Creative Arts:** The study of the role of contemplation in both the creation and the appreciation of the visual and fine arts, creative writing, and in the various performing arts of dance, drama, and music.

Central to this approach is the understanding that contemplative experiences are **not** exclusively confined to religion. While various methods to attain contemplative states of consciousness can most certainly be found in religious practices, such states can also be found in a wide variety of non-religious practices such as making or listening to music, dancing, acting, writing poetry or prose, painting, sculpting, and even the intent observation of the natural world. Following the pioneering research on the state of optimal experience called “Flow” by Mihaly Csikszentmihályi and his cohorts, Contemplative Studies seeks to discover the complete range of experiences of attention, focus, tranquility, and insight and to investigate whether or not even the most profound of them, those deliberately cultivated in the world’s great meditative traditions, are not of a fundamentally different kind than the most shallow. Our working assumption is that they all occur on a continuous spectrum of experience that can be rationally identified, scientifically researched through a combination of first and third-person methods, and subjectively experienced.

The first of these major categories of Contemplative Studies includes more than four decades of scientific research into the nature of meditation and its cognitive impact. We can break down this research into four areas:

1. **Clinical Applications**; most often using MBSR: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn; Zindel Segal; Shauna Shapiro); also using TM (Benson), yoga, *qigong*, *taiji*
2. **Cognitive Activity**; how meditation influences cognitive functioning in both advanced and beginning meditators (Amishi Jha; Stephen Kosslyn)
3. **Neurological Measurements**; EEG and fMRI research on both advanced and beginning meditators (Davidson, Jonathan Cohen; Cliff Saron and Alan Wallace)
4. **Positive Psychology** (Martin Seligman; Csikszentmihalyi; Frank Ryan and Edward Deci)

All these areas, taken together, might be considered “Contemplative Science” and Alan Wallace has detailed how we might best approach such a discipline.<sup>11</sup> However, a full discussion of how third-person and first-person perspectives are blended in this category is well beyond what I can give you this evening, but I hope it will suffice it to say that the best of these researches do intimately combine these perspectives.

The second major category of Contemplative Studies is the Humanities, and largely consists of studying the role of contemplation in philosophy (particularly phenomenology and philosophy of mind), literature, and the comparative study of religion. Critical first-person methods are just beginning to be developed in the study of religion and they are quite controversial. For example for eight years now I have regularly taught a course entitled “The Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation” that includes both the regular weekly seminar of three hours AND three one-hour “lab” session each week in which students try out meditation techniques that are directly related to the text we are reading in the seminars.

The third major category of Contemplative Studies is the Creative Arts. In it we explore the production of contemplative states of consciousness via the actual creation of Art. For example, we have several classes in which students write their own poetry in class

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<sup>11</sup> Wallace, *Contemplative Science*

using cues and key words from their professor. We also teach a course on how the actual hearing of music affects the mind.

From the perspective of an educator, what is the point of all this?

1. In general, it is to begin to give students a solid understanding – both third-person and first-person—of the range of contemplative experiences they may encounter in their lives, both what they are, how to understand them when they spontaneously occur, and how to deliberately cultivate them.
2. In particular, it is to give students practical training in a range of techniques to attain calmness, tranquility, and attentional stability.
3. The attainment of states of calmness, tranquility, and attentional stability and focus are important tools to use in
  - a. self-exploration and self-understanding; if the purpose of a university education is “to know thyself”, I suggest to you that there is no better means to do so than through contemplative training;
  - b. developing a sound grasp of the nature of consciousness as a basis for further philosophical and scientific studies;
  - c. first-person approaches to the study of religion: as I said earlier, religious experience is essential to the study of religion; it is my hope that we will someday create a generation of religionists who combine historical studies of religion with first-hand experience.

William James well understood the importance of this type of training:

...the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will....An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about. (*The Principles of Psychology*)

We are finally reaching the point where James' pessimism about the existence of methods for training the attention can now give way to a new optimism about incorporating these methods as essential tools of higher education. Doing this will return the first-person study of contemplative and religious experience to its rightful place in the study of both science and religion. I firmly believe that to do so will significantly broaden our perspectives on the nature and structure of human experience, breaking us out of the objectivism and scientific materialism that has dominated the academy for far too long, and finally projecting us past a world of knowledge dominated by unreflective ethnocentrism and cognitive imperialism and into a fuller appreciation of a world in which subjective and objective fields of experience, in all their varieties, are both on an equal footing and possibly manifestations of yet another, deeper source.