

Revisiting the Insider-Outsider Debate: Dismantling a Pseudo-problem in the Study of Religion

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Abstract

In the study of religion, the ‘insider-outsider’ problem seems to remain a stubborn issue. As self-evident and reasonable as that distinction may seem is it theoretically dubious and methodologically worthless. Rudolf Carnap would have dubbed it a ‘pseudo-problem’ that obscures more than it discloses. At most, it demonstrates the plain fact that knowledge is unevenly distributed among subjects. This article argues first, that several topics become mixed up in the ‘insider-outsider’ debate: empathy, the ‘emic-etic’ distinction, cultural essentialism and differences, privileged discourses and epistemologies and second, that there is no theory behind the distinction. Inspirations from Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson explain how the ‘insider-outsider’ distinction rests on a ‘myth of the subjective’ and so is no problem.

Keywords

insider-outsider, study of religion, Ludwig Wittenstein, Donald Davidson

The insider-outsider problem seems to continue to be a thorn in the side of the academic study of religion.¹ That the study of religion is not the only academic discipline to suffer from this predicament is also perceptible, for anthropology does too, and a number of other fields do so in each their own way, but I think it can be argued that in no other field has the issue been so crucial as in the study of religion.

At a first glance, the insider-outsider issue would seem to be a problem that concerns methods and theories in the relevant fields and so one that practitioners in those fields should show consideration for. In the following I

¹ An issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* amply testifies to this (Vol. 74, No. 1, 2006). I shall refrain from quoting individual contributions, but a perpetual anxiety seems to persist concerning the discipline’s relation to “the Other”—and whether this involves aspirations to “superiority” of the field of study over that which is studied. In my view, however, the study should be epistemically superior to the “object studied”—otherwise the study makes no sense.

shall argue that this distinction, as self-evident, innocent and reasonable as it may seem, is troublesome to the study of religion as a scholarly respectable discipline. By “respectable” I mean a discipline in which the ontologies and epistemologies respect the standards of other academic disciplines so that the specialists in those other fields may respect what scholars of religion promote as evidentially based knowledge. Further, I will demonstrate why it is that the insider-outsider distinction is primarily a politically expedient construction of no methodological value and how we may see that it hinges on premises that are philosophically deficient. It seems likely that the insider-outsider problem is what Rudolf Carnap dubbed a “pseudo-problem” (2003, [1928]). The distinction obscures more than it discloses and for that simple reason it should be evident that it does not belong in a scholarly repertoire of useful concepts and issues.² There is no theory behind the distinction, which at best demonstrates the plain reality that knowledge is unevenly distributed among subjects. In addition, the methodologies accompanying the distinction are typically bound to outmoded subjectivist notions in hermeneutics and in the philosophy of mind. All in all, it seems that the insider-outsider distinction should not attract much support. It does, however, continue to exert a heavy influence in many areas. Below, some of these will be surveyed and discussed, but only such that are of direct importance to the study of religion, and especially so in relation to comparative and generalizing studies.

Outside the academic world the issue attracts attention and agreement in many ways. The press and media in the modern Western world abound with modes of discourse in which the insider-outsider mystique is perpetuated. I call it a “mystique” because the insider-outsider contrast is normally advanced without any shred of evidence as to its ontological status or significance. That is: is this distinction something that really exists or do we simply imagine that this is how things must be? What could the nature of that distinction be? It probably does not really have a “nature” as it mostly resembles an abstract metaphysical postulate, one that says that there is privileged information or knowledge that is known by a given individual or collective only. But, then again, that is not at all “mystical” and not something that should make us think of that condition as in any way special; it is nothing more than the fact that something is known by some and not by others. In that sense one could at best say that the insider-outsider distinction refers to a gradient and not a rift, but that is simply the way the world is.

² As Carnap said “For if it were considered permissible in science to make a statement whose correctness can neither be definitely confirmed nor refuted by evidence, then the intrusion of obviously meaningless (pseudo) statements could not possibly be prevented” (2003: 326).

Or one could consider the distinction an epistemic condition. Then it might come in two versions and these are sometimes combined. The first version stipulates that only sense-based and subjectively experienced knowledge is real knowledge. If that is so, then it is but another version of the problem of induction and it will not be worthy of much further investigation (e.g., Chalmers 1999: 1–11). The second version, which is more widespread, at least in the study of religion, says that only certain people have special privileged information or knowledge and that they have this because they themselves are special and only people who are in this way special may then truly know, etc. The necessary epistemological condition then seems to be that *only* people with a certain nature or essence (innate or acquired, ethnic or religious) may be or become the possessors of whatever special information or knowledge is in question. This is where the idea of there being a deep qualitative abyss between insiders and outsiders begins to resemble a genuinely “mystical” postulate. More often than not, when this idea is being referred to, the criteria for acquiring that special quality and the workings of the mechanisms responsible for just what it is that happens remain elusive when judged from a more stringent scholarly or scientific perspective. Thus, the “mystique” mostly appears as a simple “given” fact of this world, one that says that “insiders” have special kinds or privileged modes of access to experience, information and knowledge that “outsiders” do not and cannot have. In the study of religion the mystique commonly comes and is associated with the question of whether one must be religious in order to understand religion. Apparently, this also depends heavily upon what one means by “understand.” We shall return to that below.

As someone who happens to be a university teacher in a department dedicated to the study of religion, a subject that is global and cross-cultural in its orientation, I have continually witnessed my students’ concerns with this “problem.” Not least because it gradually dawns on them that the problem is directly related to the degree of academic competence that they are able to achieve. That is, if it is really true that only insiders can “truly” know, what can a poor student do? Or what might an able scholar achieve? What is it all worth? And why listen to your “outsider” teacher? Most of my own students (at least) give the impression that they begin with a very benign appreciation of the distinction and it looks as if the idea that insiders are privileged (in one way or another) appeals to their humanistic stance and their concerns for “subalterns,” “the Others,” etc. It also appeals to their own ideal of getting a taste of things exotic and “different.” One of the most spectacular instances of the power of that “mystique,” that I have witnessed, was when a student once asked the question in class of how a Danish convert to Islam could write a book about that religion—could it be at all reliable then? This is the

full-blown mystique, which would suggest that only Muslims (and literate in Arabic, too) can talk about Islam and only Jews write about Jesus. Or, how far does this go?

In the media, on the grander scale of public discourse and opinion, the privileging of the “insider” is a function of the self-conferring of authority to the media themselves, such as in “reporting from the spot,” etc. and then coupled with the general idea of visibility as not just necessary but the adequate condition for veracity: The “I-saw-it-myself”-syndrome and therefore “I know.” On the smaller, individual scale of the mental, the privileging of “insiders” over “outsiders” is an idea that appeals *intuitively* (in a cognitive sense) to us all. Don’t we all best know our own experiences, thoughts and motivations? The naïve psychologism implicit in the privileging of insider experience and knowledge comes naturally with our own evolved epistemic competence as a function of the private first-person perspective as the most salient, relevant and plausible.

Returning to the larger, inter-subjective and social scale the problem is also obviously linked to widespread notions and practices of Political Correctness and “multiculturalism.” This is especially prevalent in the study of religion and in anthropology, where the “cult of difference” seems to perpetuate this mystique.³ One common consequence of methodological importance is that the “cult of difference” leads to the view that comparison and generalization are suspect enterprises: for how does one legitimately compare matters that are different without ironing out the differences and how does one generalize without extracting all that which is specifically different. Both activities disregard, so it is maintained, all that which inheres in the “difference.” On closer inspection, the respect for “difference” often appears to be a post-colonial act of “atonement” and post-colonial critics have repeatedly cast doubts upon the idea of constructing politically disinterested knowledge of the (so-called) “Other.” All this, however, only discloses that the problem is highly normative and political in “nature”: it is about protecting some against others and not really about epistemological problems in the human and social sciences. It should be remembered, also, that the “cult of difference” is for the most part about differences between *groups* and their socio-cultural edifices. Taken to the extreme, the “cult” suggests that only spokespersons of the groups themselves or any other who is willing to become so “get it right”—that is: to have their discourse checked and approved of by “insiders.” Thus, it is a

³ As Adam Kuper states: “Another problematic aspect of multiculturalism is the cult of difference, which seems at times to be the one undisputed value” (1999: 242).

job for caretakers, prophets, and Public Relations officers and not for critical scholars with a view from afar. If that is the case, then the “outside” scholars’ job is nothing more than reporting what the “insiders” say, and for that task no university degree is needed.

On another note, one might ask why it is that linguistics and psychology do not seem to face the same problem. Maybe linguists and psychologists have for so long been universalist in their outlook, that they fail to understand why *group*-differences should matter so much that they become the overriding epistemic concern. Group-differences are, if anything, items to be studied in “emic” and “etic” linguistic or psychological terminologies, models, and theories and *not* simply to be reproduced as they are articulated in their own local discourses.⁴ Linguistics “gone local” is very rare. In that respect it could also serve as model science for the study of religion. Psychology is, as its history demonstrates, a blatantly Western construction and most psychologists either do not notice this or are simply convinced that as their theoretical object is human *nature* then cultural differences are an issue for those specializing in those differences, but by no means does this imply that psychologists should speak in “native tongues” about their subject matters. Linguists and psychologists are professional outsiders and they teach their students to become the same. Why, then, the qualms among scholars of religion? One should think that the division of labour be reasonably clear: let religions and traditions speak for themselves and let the study of them speak *about* them. It is only as long as we are under the impression (or spell?) that it is the obligation of the study of something to propagate the self-image of that something and be responsible for its survival that we seem to have a problem.⁵ We do seem, however to continue to have a problem and as it is a complex and composite one it is beneficial to break it down into some of its constituents, some of the sub-issues.

⁴ The “emic-etic” distinction is often brought in to the debate as being analogous, or even identical, to “insider-outsider,” but that is a patent (and unfortunately perpetuated) misunderstanding of the distinction as originally proposed by the linguist Kenneth L. Pike (Headland et al. (eds.) 1990). See also Jensen (2003a: 108–112) on this issue in relation to the study of religion.

⁵ The volume *The Insider / Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, edited by Russell McCutcheon (1999) amply demonstrates this as well as the longevity of the discussion. Berger & Kellner’s little, but instructive book (1982), tackles some of these issues in enlightening ways.

I. How Not To Confuse the Issues: Difference, Empathy and Cultural Essentialism

A few cultural sub-issues roam large in the discussion: the first is the already noted question of difference, the second the problems concerning the status and practice of empathy and then, third, the intuitive “folk”-notion of what I choose to call “cultural essentialism” (for want of a better and more acknowledged terminology). The first issue, that of cultural differences is as straightforward as that concerning languages: There certainly are differences. They do exist and they can be difficult to master or “transcend,” but it is also true that learning works wonders. There really is nothing mysterious about differences between languages and concomitant differences in cultural constructions of the human habitats, whether they be manifested in the material (houses, tools, etc.), the social (kinship, authority, etc.), the mental (cognition, emotion, etc. . . .) or the symbolic (values, language, etc. . . .) worlds. Those differences are factual and to a large degree they provide the raw materials, the “subject matter” of the study of religion. But—they are the *explanandum*, not the *explanans*, that is: they do not explain anything by their very presence. On the contrary, they constitute the subject matter that is to be explained.

Empathy is a prerequisite for much human behaviour. Anyone who has travelled and found herself in situations with limited linguistic competence will agree to the idea that it is possible to communicate on a very basic level without the use of language. However, even competent language users employ massive amounts of shared background information, tacit knowledge and non-verbal communication in combination with explicit verbal exchange. It all enhances the possibility of understanding others, and often even without the intervention of explicit language use. Apparently, there is some amount of human universals involved. These may, again, be grounded in special features of human brains (such as, e.g., the existence of “mirror cells”), which allow us to make reasonable inferences as to what others may be up to. Humans are trained in intention detection from their birth and so it is no mystery that we are sometimes able to guess what others have “in mind.” That is, very briefly, what we mean by empathy: The state of being emotionally and cognitively “in tune with” another person, particularly by understanding what their situation is like from the inside, or what it is like for them. Empathy may or may not precede sympathy” (Blackburn 1994: 118). So, if we want to continue using an established terminology we may surely talk about empathy. A very frequent assumption is that it helps if you have tried it yourself, “falling in love,” or having a toothache, for instance. This is obviously not an unreasonable assumption, but there is a long way from

assuming similar pains with toothache to the idea that religious persons should by definition have similar religious experiences. For, as innocent as it may appear it does involve some very problematic metaphysical beliefs as well as some very unwieldy epistemological postulations. Empathy is simply not a genuine scholarly tool.⁶ But even if we were to concede to the use of empathy in some sense or to some extent, the crucial questions would remain of demonstrating “how much” empathy is involved and how that “amount” would be validated? When does the empathist know that she is “empathic enough”? And, just to complicate the issue, how empathic are insiders among themselves?⁷

The third question concerning “cultural essentialism” is as age-old as most of the other problems in the study of religion and culture. The notion goes at least as far back as to the Romanticists in the 18th century and their nostalgic coupling of ethnic histories, mythologies and identities. Very briefly stated, the idea was (and still is) that “members” of any given culture share traits that make them consider themselves to have more in common than they have with members of any other group. Of course, it is quite understandable that a group of individuals may exhibit certain behavioural traits if they are being socialized under similar circumstances, and if that was just the issue, then it would not be a problem. The more problematic assumption is the one that says, that members of a social group, who entertain a specific set of values and views with associated forms of behaviour (“culture” for short) also share certain essential features, something that is their peculiar “nature” which makes them almost a species of their own. They may therefore consider themselves unable to enter into any exchange with other social groups and if they did, it could be to the detriment of their survival and lead to social pollution.⁸ Larger groups of individuals often come to view themselves as being one “kin”—that is, to the external observer, “fictive kin.” The major way in which this fictive kinship is being reproduced and enforced is through the deployment of a common ideology (with associated practices), and one very

⁶ It is interesting that the entry “empathy” does not appear in the MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences, (Wilson and Keil (eds.): 1999). Perhaps it is becoming an obsolete term—like “phlogiston” or “élan vital”? However, the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy offers a comprehensive article, see <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy/>

⁷ This must be the place to refer to the now classic article by Clifford Geertz: “From the Native’s Point of View” (1983: 55–70) where he discussed the use of “experience near” and “experience distant” concepts (as formulated by the psychologist Heinz Kohut).

⁸ The former Indian caste system would be an example of this. Pascal Boyer has some incisive remarks on the cognitive bases of these beliefs and how they operate in coalitional psychology. Should be required reading for anyone with an interest in religious fundamentalism (2001: 292–296).

old and powerful form of ideology is precisely “religion.” This is not the place to investigate why it is that precisely those social formations and practices, which we habitually call “religion” are so powerful (emotionally, cognitively, socially, politically), but let us for the moment content ourselves with the “evidence by existence,” so amply provided by history and current worldly affairs.

The main belief in the “cultural essentialism”-package is thus that members of a culture, also known as “insiders,” share certain specific traits that warrant their being treated as having a distinct nature and qualities that other, “outsiders,” do not possess. Insiders are, again, privileged. It has recently become a widespread practice in the modern Western university, especially in humanities departments, to hire “natives.” Not only in language departments (where hiring “natives” may make a lot of sense) but also in studies of religion and cultures where they are then expected to represent their “own” religion and/or culture. To my own best knowledge this practice is precisely due to that certain mystique, a kind “spiritualist essentialism” (more about that later). It does not work that way, however, for although a Dane, I am no expert on the philosophy of Kierkegaard whereas my Canadian colleague of Muslim origin certainly is. These forms of essentialism seem linked to a set of problems that involve privileging discourses, cosmologies and epistemologies. That deserves a brief look on certain features and mechanisms of “privileging.”

II. Epistemologies, Cosmologies, and Privileged Discourses

A privileged discourse is one that speaks from a position of authority, without having to legitimate itself in the given context. It is quite often expressed as “what goes without saying” or as truths that are held to be self-evident. Throughout human history this has been the position of traditional religious and cultural discourse and knowledge. Over the last few centuries, more recent changes in “world culture” have led to states of diversity where multiple and contending discourses strive for hegemony. Critical theory and analysis have disclosed the multiple power aspects of discourses, as these are mostly constructions of knowledge for some and not for others. Discourses come with privileges attached to them; they have value, can be used for purposes, may function like currency and are thus instrumental. Discourses are *not just words* and privileged discourses are for the most part privileged because they are backed by some kind of power and influence, e.g., economic or political, but the power aspect may be more subtle than that. Just the fact that his essay is written in English is in itself a manifestation of this. There is much irony in this situation in the contemporary world, e.g., that claiming to be a deprived

minority or victimizing oneself is a way of gaining power and so be able to say what one wants without being held responsible by common standards. The privileged position may be highly symbolic (and not at all backed by any political force) as when a large audience in the West is highly respectful of the Dalai Lama without understanding much of what he says. In fact, precisely *that* may contribute to the elevated status ascribed to his discourse... Many assume that what he says reflects his access to a realm of knowledge and insight that is humanly valuable but inaccessible to most, i.e., he has a privileged insight into a special cosmology.

Any decent cosmology or “world-view” comes with the in-built opinion that it *is* right, whether the rightness be descriptive or normative, so in that (quite trivial) sense they all privilege themselves as cosmologies (no cosmology has ever pronounced itself wrong, as far as I know). In traditional societies there is, or was, usually one over-arching cosmology, the “sacred canopy,” suspended over the entire socio-cultural world. Cosmologies are useful as they simplify the world, rule out contingency, support and sustain classifications, back current social practice as being “the way it ever was.” As long as that situation is relatively stable (i.e., no wars, invasions, etc.) there is no little choice of cosmology because the cosmology is privileged in its own context. Again, the “modern turn” provides the multiplicity and then cosmologies and “worldviews” may become more a matter of choice, as a kind of “heretical imperative”. Some of the more recent ideological worldviews and their execution have come with very high costs as history has proven. Today, the most dominant view of the world is probably the capitalist market economy. It seems to cross all borders and when or if at all contended, then mostly so by religious (or religiously derived) world-views.

Privileged epistemologies are well known in most religious traditions and cultures. They are a species of esoteric teaching, lore or practice, access to which may require specific initiations or are restricted to some as a birthright. Privileged access to information (or power) is commonly based on socio-culturally defined descent, in the sense that the members of one group or community (nation, tribe, caste, race or religion) are believed to have or share some essence or quality, which makes knowledge accessible only to them and not others.⁹ The privileging explicitly serves the purpose of exclusion. In

⁹ Recently, prospective contributors to an encyclopaedia were given these instructions (just to demonstrate that I am not making this up): “Please find below outlines of what the entries are expected to look like. Importantly, contributors for entries (Discipline or Religion-Tradition) will be writing as representative voices for a given discipline or religious tradition. As such, contributors will offer perspectives from within a given discipline or religious tradition, and not be asked to speak from outside of their own discipline (field of expertise), or from outside of a given religious tradition. As a consequence, contributors need not have any specialized

social psychological terms it is clearly a matter of in-group vs. out-group coalition formation and management. As an example, let me refer to one that I have often included in a reading-package for an undergraduate course in Maori religion (New Zealand): There is literally a world of “difference” between the views of cultural authenticity presented by the “insider” Tawhai (1988) with his catalogue of gnostic verities and that of the anthropologist and “outsider” F. Allan Hanson (1989) with his Derrida-inspired deconstruction of the postcolonial constructions of eternal truths. Philosophically speaking, privileged epistemologies are a variety of “Privileged Access” or the “Privacy of mind” and on closer inspection that turns out not at all to be some unassailable metaphysical mystery—as summed up by Simon Blackburn:

One of the more obvious, yet baffling, features of the mind is that I alone am privy to my experiences and thoughts. I have them, whereas you must go through some process of interpreting my utterances and actions in order to know, or guess, what they are. Philosophers of mind have either celebrated this privacy or sought to downplay its importance. To downplay it one might argue that what I know about myself, and you do not, may be simply a question of what words I am about to use or what actions I feel like performing. But in that case there is then no deep metaphysical gulf between what I know about myself and what you know, for it is merely a matter of my reports more quickly and accurately registering the state of my own system. There is no special knowledge displayed on a special inner screen, but only the natural upshot of self-monitoring functions of the brain (1994: 303).

Thus, the Insider-outsider problem appears to be nothing more than a species of “protective political mechanisms.” It is not a “given” problem—it is a manufactured problem that primarily serves as a technique of exclusion. That some tend to *think* that it is a serious problem does not *make* it a serious problem. The serious problem is rather the continued propagation of an outdated subjectivist philosophy mixed with a mild version of the Romanticist celebration of the “Spirit” of the individual. It also appears to be a result of the conflation of discourses, in the sense that exclusivist strategies from the socio-political realm are carried over and transformed into epistemic or ontological problems. One could imagine that in principle the guru’s insights could be offered to anyone (given adequate education) but they are not—for reasons that have to do with hierarchy, power and not for epistemic reasons.

background or knowledge concerning so-called ‘Science-Religion’.” The really important issue to note here is how an academic field of expertise is being equaled to a religious tradition in terms of epistemic validity.

III. Distinguishing Modes of Discourse

One way of getting around this problem is to distinguish among three most common modes of discourse on the basis of their interpretive and epistemic relation to “the world” (Murphy 2000). Murphy advises us to keep in mind the differences between meta-languages as languages which “speak” (or speak about) another language.¹⁰ The three meta-languages of interest to us here are: (1) the religious; (2) the scientific; and 3) the public media meta-languages. The first, the religious meta-language is characterized by being simultaneously fixed and interpretable and by its claims to tell the truth about all of “reality.” The “ultimate sacred postulates” of a religious meta-language cannot be manipulated and its semantic extensions govern the ways in which adherents interpret their worlds. The second, scientific “meta-language” is quite different from the meta-language of religion. As Murphy notes: Where science differs from religion is not in the fact that its constraints are “external” as opposed to internal, but that the nature of the internal constraints is different, not only in content but in kind. Unlike religion, science’s axioms *demand* the critical investigation of those very axioms, along with each and every result produced by the axiomatic constraints (2000: 185).

As for the third, the public “meta-language” of the modern media, this must be characterized as a special and (post-)modern phenomenon, not least because it is a language game that may often be have more persuasive power than the former two. The domain of public discourse determines the position and power of the other two (TV talk shows being the epitome of this), for:

Its principles and system of classification *predetermine* where any and all of the statements of either will “reside.” That is, public discourse *translates* the contents of religion and the results of science into its own terms. When either says something that cannot be stated in the terms of public discourse, it simply does not get said. Both scientists and religionists have had the frustrating experiences of either having their words “twisted around,” or, of completely failing to call attention to something they think is of vital importance. This is, again, because public discourse has a built-in taxonomy which decides in advance what is or is not important (Murphy 2000: 187).

¹⁰ The distinction can be traced to the notion of language-game introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein: “To truncate a long theoretical history, to say that X is a language-game is to say that a term within it is used according to the rules of that particular language-game. To use the same term in a different language-game is either to change its meaning or to equivocate. The age-old “picture theory” of reference overlooked this point and so was not capable of discriminating between differing uses of terms but, but insisted rather that they be tied to their extra-linguistic referent (Wittgenstein 1958: 2–21). However, subsequent linguistics has shown that the referent is *another term* within the system of language” (Murphy 2000: 183). Note: The reference to Wittgenstein (1958) is identical to (2001 [1951]).

Murphy's distinctions involve interesting descriptions of the relations between those languages—and I adopt it here because many of the problems with the insider-outsider distinction seem to originate in confusions of these three modes of discourse that he holds to be “incommensurable.” Murphy puts it this way: “The regime of truth is different in each. They cannot be subsumed by one another, though they can be spoken by one another” (2000: 186). Now, this last modification is interesting, as it flatly contradicts the presumed “incommensurability” among them. That is so, because in spite of all difference and incommensurability (differences in their “regimes of truth”), these languages may also speak *about* one another, they may be used for criticisms both internally and externally. It is also a fact that these criticisms *must* all be “in language.” Shared representations and discourses are social facts and they are *only* social facts because of their fundamentally linguistic nature. There is a base semantic level, a linguistic “substratum,” which permits the semantic *comparison* of them. For, as Murphy's own analysis demonstrates: they are *no more* incommensurable than that he is able to tell us what each of them does and does not.

Holistic philosophical and linguistic reflections tell us that the multiple semantics of different “frameworks” rest upon a largely shared knowledge about the world and that although there may be marked interpretive differences among frameworks, discourses and meta-languages such differences do not entail that they are epistemically incommensurable or mutually untranslatable.¹¹ So, to suggest that such differences between modes of discourse should be considered “multiple frameworks” or even different “worlds,” appears to be an exaggeration.

We should bear in mind, however, that these languages or modes of discourse come with very different reasons for their validation: (1) the public meta-language of the media is justified by “what-goes-without-saying” in the global or local community; (2) the religious meta-language is justified by tradition, “old books,” priest and other modes of traditional authority vested in “Ultimate Sacred Postulates;” and (3) the meta-languages of science and philosophy are the relentlessly self-critical un-anchored discourses of the scholarly community, where all propositions are subjected to ever-present procedures of verification and falsification. In consequence, any blending of these modes of discourse should be used, detected and reflected upon with care.

¹¹ These semantic issues have been developed in the philosophy of language. I particularly rely on the views of Donald Davidson (e.g., 2001; Jensen 1999; 2003) and the further developments of his views for the study of religion by Penner (1995), Frankenberry and Penner (1999), and Godlove (1989).

IV. The Problem of Other Minds—Once Again

Essentially, the insider-outsider problem is a variation of the well known (if not perennial) philosophical problem of “other minds”: How do I know what is in someone else’s mind, or, as the more radical version goes: how do I know that they have a mind at all and what is it that makes me think that theirs probably resembles mine in many ways? Minds are usually considered private “property” and the intuitive expectation is that we each know our own mind better than others ever could. This idea also has a long and firm academic foundation for as Matthew Day points out: “It was once a given in the philosophy of mind that each of us has privileged, unmediated first-person access to the contents and workings of our own minds” (2004: 242). If this were really so then therapists and analysts might as well close their businesses right now. But, they do not do so for the very good reason that we have learned and accepted (over the last century or so), that humans are also driven, fuelled, governed, etc. by motives that are hidden and subconscious. We do not know ourselves as well as we think. The truly paradoxical part of the story is that we can only get to know our private selves through public and collective media such as language and other symbolic activities. Thus we have to allow for a certain amount of the old hermeneutical idea that an outsider or an analyst may know “better.” One may here think of the anthropologists who go to Papua and such places and over a fieldwork period of, say, six months come to know about local secret societies—including translations of languages with no dictionaries available, etc. This is impressive to say the least; having a philological background I tend to think of learning languages as something really difficult and painstaking. Sometimes the anthropologist may even return and inform us that the “natives” have a cosmology, etc. that is incompatible, incommensurable and perhaps even in untranslatable in comparison to “ours.” That is truly impressive, for how in the world did they find out then?¹²

What saves us from this vortex of privileges and esoteric lore are some of the lessons to be learned from the *linguistic* or *semiotic* turn in philosophy, and in the related epistemology of the human and social sciences.¹³ Philosophers have taught us that even the most individual of self-knowledge (*auto-noesis* is the neologism for this) is mediated by language or other symbolic items. Ludwig Wittgenstein is one of the originators of this “discursive turn.”

¹² This may evidently serve to boost the professional status of the anthropologist among peers.

¹³ See Clifford Geertz’ classic article “From the Native’s point of View” (1983) where he demonstrates that empathy does not do the trick. If there is any “trick” at all it is a tough one: You’ll have to learn languages etc.

According to Meredith Williams, Wittgenstein's view entails that "understanding, belief, and meaning are states of a person *only within* a practice over time. Without the practice there is no understanding or belief, no matter what may be going on in the person's head" (Williams 1999: 242). Another example is the thought experiment by Wittgenstein on the idea of "private language," one known to only one person (2001: § 269, 275).¹⁴ Evidently it would not serve very well in communication and so private language is as useful and convincing as trying to print your own money. Language is public and social and even though we may individually invent private words then the use of them will follow rules that we do *not* individually invent (Wittgenstein 2001:§ 262).

This consequence of social coercion comes out clearly also in Scott Davis' reflections on the matter where he applies Donald Davidson's notions about the "inherently social aspect of language and thought": "If a mouse had vocal cords of the right sort," writes Davidson, "you could train it to say 'Cheese'. But that word would not have a meaning when uttered by the mouse, nor would the mouse understand what it 'said'" (2001: 127).¹⁵ The counterfactual mouse in question would be doing nothing more than responding to a stimulus. For a word to have meaning or, what amounts to the same thing, for a sequences of noises to express a belief, it must be part of a practice of communication, at least one part of the goal of which must be that the speaker intend that any second person hearers grasp the point of the speaker's attempt to communicate. Central to the practice of communication are the beliefs that there are second persons with whom to communicate and that they are similarly causally related to a shared world (Davis 2007: 202–203).

V. Shared Worlds, Experiences and Frameworks

Thus, there are good reasons to consider the insider-outsider distinction a gradient and not a rift. 'Insider' or 'outsider' is simply 'something' that there is more or less of. On a personal note: I have studied Islam and Muslims for so long that I am in some respects more of an "insider" than many a "lay"-person (that is: without a Muslim religious education). Although in no way a believer, I am familiar with many aspects of the Muslim tradition and the Islamic cosmology. I do not know how it *feels* to be in Mecca during the Hajj, but the study of religion is no longer about *reliving* subjective religious expe-

¹⁴ The literature on the subject of 'private language' is complex, cf. recent discussions in Mulhall (2006).

¹⁵ The essay referred to is the 1997 paper "The Emergence of Thought" (in Davidson 2001: 123–134).

riences, nor does it retrieve its primary epistemic grounding from such relived (or vicarious) experiences. In the “old days” of the study of religion, there certainly was a tradition for creating the boundaries between, on the one hand, social scientists who were deemed reductionist and therefore did not *understand* and, on the other then *real* historians of religions who *did* understand. What it was that they alone were able to understand, I am no longer so sure of—but they managed to set up appropriate academic boundaries by appealing to the intuitive idea of there being “insiders” and “outsiders” and juxtaposing this distinction to “knowers” and “not-knowers.” And so it has come about that universities and tax-payers would rather pay for “insiders” than “outsiders.” Who will pay for an “outsider” if you can get an “insider” for the same money? In this manner, the mystique is perpetuated, in hiring practices and other forms of academic discursive practice.

VI. Epistemes, Frameworks and Other Kinds of Difference

Certainly, the world being the way it is, there are profound cultural differences, radically different historical epistemes, crazy cosmologies and groups and individuals that will never come to agreements on each others’ points of view. Contrary to widespread opinion, however, such factual differences do not support the idea of there being principled incommensurability, incompatibility or untranslatability. In fact, I can only say “profound cultural differences, radically different historical epistemes, crazy cosmologies and individual minds that will never reach an agreement on each others’ points of view” because I *do* know that they are profound, radical, crazy, in disagreement and so on. This is what the philosopher Donald Davidson meant when he said that humans share a “massive” background. He also made a point of this insight, originally derived from W.V.O. Quine (1969: 26–68), in his ideas of “radical translation” and the “principle of charity” (Davidson 2001: 148–149). As humans, we always proceed in our interpretations of others from the premise that they are of “sound mind” and as we belong to the same species, the agreement that we will have in our view of the world must be much, much greater than the points of disagreement. Disagreement presupposes massive amounts of shared intuitions, information and background knowledge. I use a public language to convey this idea right here and I need to use that public language in the right manner. If I do not I shall run a serious risk of being diagnosed as mentally deficient by my peers, as many diagnoses of mental illnesses hinge on the patient’s defective or faulty use of language, i.e., wrong references to the world or to other words and concepts.

The philosopher of religion Terry Godlove has applied Davidson's ideas in order to evaluate the all too common theory of religions being "frameworks"—an idea that has been with Western philosophy since Immanuel Kant (at least). Tracing the historical development of the use of the term Godlove demonstrates how the idea of the framework was amplified into one of epistemological importance (Godlove 1989). Godlove suggests that we take up Davidson's perspective in the study of religious and cultural differences and so we see that although religions and cultures are different, then it appears that they are not different in any deep epistemological way but "only" on the level of interpretation. My Muslim friends will agree with me (as will any Melanesian) when I point to a pig and say "pig" in the relevant language, but they may differ a lot in their opinions *about* pigs: the Muslim will quiver in disgust, the Melanesian may look forward to a joyful ritual and I may wonder if it has been organically fed. Thus, our frameworks have only interpretive and not epistemic priority.

Donald Davidson built the idea of the "principle of charity" (2001: 148–149) on philosophical arguments, but as ever so often we can see how philosophers' ideas are later confirmed by scientific investigations, in this case by the rapidly increasing amount of evidence from cognitive semantics in which, e.g., body-schematic mental and linguistic constructions play an important role.¹⁶ The fact that all developmentally typical human beings use languages that are all translatable make us human and a lot less different than the insider-outsider brokers want us to know.

VII. On the Ontology of the Subjective

As noted above, it is generally held that the mind is individual property, something enclosed within the confines of the individual organism. This view is quite logical, we might consider it our default cognitive intuition and therefore just obvious. But mental phenomena, such as that which we call "mind" may be more than the processes instantiated within brains. The "mind" can also be considered a hybrid entity, something that connects, or is an interface between brain and the external world.¹⁷ The philosophical position espousing this view is called "externalism." According to the externalist conception, the mind is a composite entity, which includes also external

¹⁶ The now classic exposition is Varela et al. (1991). Recent contributions are (e.g.) Gallagher (2005) and Gibbs (2005).

¹⁷ The theory of specifically human "hybrid minds" has been cogently argued by Merlin Donald (2001: 252–300).

props, activities, tools, etc. so that we are often in a position to simply observe what others are up to by monitoring their actions as a kind of mental and intentional activity. Our cognition is not solely internal to the brain but also external and part of our socio-cultural practice (e.g., Clark 1997, Tomasello 1999, Rowlands 2003). We learn to think with things outside and around us: words, concepts, signs, symbols, artefacts, tools, living organisms, etc. Thought is, in a very important sense, dependent upon our use of external materials, and thought is something we learn, for as Ludwig Wittgenstein remarked: “How do I know that this colour is red?—It would be an answer to say: ‘I have learnt English’” (2001, § 381).

Donald Davidson eradicated many of the trivial presuppositions surrounding (or supporting) the “myth of the subjective” (1989). Many of those “things” that we have normally considered private and subjective are to a very large extent collective, social and shared among individuals. In that respect, states of mind appear much more to depend on social and historical contexts and states of mind are “identified by causal relations with external objects and events,” this is essential to communication and “makes one mind accessible in principle to another.” This does not mean however, that first-person authority is not important, but it does become restricted. As Davidson concludes his essay:

What remains of the concept of subjectivity? So far as I can see, two features of the subjective as classically conceived remain in place. Thoughts are private, in the obvious but important sense in which property can be private, that is, belong to one person. And knowledge of thoughts is asymmetrical, in that the person who has a thought generally knows he has it in a way in which others cannot. But this is all there is to the subjective. So far from constituting a preserve so insulated that it is a problem how it can yield knowledge of an outside world or be known to others, thought is necessarily part of a common public world. Not only can others learn what we think by noting the causal dependencies that give our thoughts their content, but the very possibility of thought demands shared standards of truth and objectivity (Davidson 1989: 171; 2001: 52).

Thus the ontology of the subjective is, to my mind, much more public than we habitually consider it to be. Perhaps that is one of the wonders of being human: we are not confined to live solipsistic lives, locked up inside our brains. We are actually able to transcend the physical limits of those brains and religion happens to be a very old and tried medium for relating brains to one another. Religion, in a certain sense, can be said to be collective mind or collective intentionality.¹⁸

¹⁸ See e.g., Searle 1999 on “collective intentionality”.

Thus, I maintain that the widely respected and much propagated insider-outsider distinction is really a “pseudo problem” in epistemic and interpretive terms and therefore not important for developing methods and theories—not even in the study of religions. Let us get rid of it as a scholarly mystique. It is, however, a very potent social mechanism. It is something we should study, not something to respect or curate. In a very modest way I think this argument also refers to problems of conflict in today’s world: conflict begins with exclusion or exclusion is the very essence of conflict. And positing the insider-outsider distinction or divide is an act of exclusion. Let us also get rid of it both as a human practice and a scholarly practice. One of the true virtues of scholarship is open, free debate with full information. This is a long and complex philosophical point to elaborate on, but scholarship cannot accept any deep insider-outsider distinction as an ontological or epistemological criterion. At the most, we can accept it as a fact concerning the distribution of information. And that is all it is. It is not a genuine problem.

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