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THE METAPHYSICAL REALITIES OF THE
UNPHYSICAL SCIENCES: OR WHY VERTICAL
INTEGRATION SEEMS UNREALISTIC TO
ONTOMATIC PLURALISTS

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In the spirit of academic debate I am going to assume the role of the Pyrrho
respect to the most distinctive and probably the most provocative (because it is
alistic sounding) aspect of our conference mission: namely, the invitation to
egrate the humanities into the biological and cognitive sciences. My skeptic
will revisit (and at times recapitulate) discussions from the distant and not so
past, including a quip by Woody Allen, parts of an address I delivered to years ago
ating a similar unity of knowledge agenda proposed by the Harvard biologist E.O.
(his so-called consilience program),1 and including, as well, a pertinent 1868
the English physicist John Tyndall concerning mind-body dualism that I diso
notorious (famous and infamous) essay "The Limits of Natural Selection as
to Man," written in 1870 by A.R. Wallace, one of the two most significant creators
tory of evolution by means of natural selection.

Woody Allen asks in one of his books: "Can we actually 'know' the universe" God," he replies, "it is hard enough finding your way around in Chinatown." In
conference volume invites us to contemplate a less ambitious but noneve
1. I wish to thank my friend and colleague, the University of Chicago geophysicist Frank
for the expression "the un-physical sciences" and for raising many searching questions over
about the distinction within the academy between the physical sciences and the un-physical
(including mathematics). Parts of this essay were written while the author was a Rosanna
Jaffe Founders Circle Member of the School of Social Sciences at the Institute for Advanced
Princeton, New Jersey.

2. That address was titled "A Polytheistic Conception of the Sciences and the Virtues of
Variety" and was delivered at a millennial year conference on the topic of "Consilience" of
the New York Academy of Sciences and subsequently published in the Annals of the New York
of Sciences 355, 2001 (and reprinted in R.A. Shweder, Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for
drew heavily on that address as well as on some of my writings on the foundations of cul
ology. See for example, R.A. Shweder, "John Searle on a Witch Hunt," Anthropological
The cacophonous, faction prone, paradigm laden Tower of Babel that has been home for the humanities (and the more humanistic social sciences) has finally entered a progressive stage and is becoming more intellectually unified. Included proviso: among those putative recent advances in the cognitive and brain sciences is the posited empirical demonstration that mind-body dualism is untenable. In fact, such putative advances the consilators argue that it is no longer reasonable to think that there is an inherent disjunction between the languages and methods of the humanities (who study "consciousness" and the mind of the life) and the languages of the biological scientists (who study the workings of the brain). The reason is that, at least those who fully understand the implications of their own program, have visions of the day when everything mental and ideational can, and will be explainable in physical terms using a theoretical language developed by the biological sciences.

The vertical integration project has also sought ways to incorporate the study of religious and moral consciousness into the cognitive and biological sciences. In that the project has been an invitation to explain the existence and persistence of religious morality, either by evaluating the extent to which, and the manner in which, the beliefs, motives, and behaviors associated with religious and moral consciousness make functional sense in the struggle for existence, that is, in terms of the direct and very survival of human beings, or. alternatively, arguing that religion is simply an accidentally evolved and functional or a neutral correlate of some other species typifying functional adaptation. Here the knowledge/vertical integration program begins with the observation that religion morality is universal (or at least widely prevalent) aspects of human consciousness. For example, of religious consciousness, then proceeds on the assumption that such distinctively and widely distributed human notions as the idea and experience of soul, the idea and experience of the sacred, and the idea and experience of super or non-natural forces and processes animating and motivating human beings and making the world go 'round are essentially cognitive illusions or at least that is in the direct service of reproductive success. In other words, religious consciousness is re-described and explained (or, as some humanists might complain) as a shadow or projection of the human mind whose only potential to fame (if such a claim to fame can be advanced at all) is its utilitarian value from the fitness point of view.

Regard to the study of religion, consilience research is thus founded on the claim that the intellectual products of the world's religions are themselves objective or rational foundation, and, if viewed on their own terms, as intel-lectual claims about the existence and role of souls, the sacred and supernatural forces and affairs should be judged to be either illusory, even if functional (as Sigmund Freud suggested long ago in his famous book The Future of an Illusion), or as delusional and Dawkins proclaimed more recently in his popular book The God Delusion).

Assumptions here is that, although the objects of religious thought do not exist, the religious impulse that seems so distinctive of human beings (and has to so many humanists to place human beings somewhere between the angels and beasts, in part because of the human capacity to forego utilitarian calculations and to believe things—truth, virtue, and sanctity—for their own sake) can be ultimately tied down, or hitched to a utilitarian theory about the natural evolution of the brain.

This is very neatly suggested in the editors' introduction to this volume. There the and unflinching contention— the one I referred to earlier as distinctive and provocative—is that the biological and cognitive sciences have now advanced to a point where only feasible to produce a systematic and disciplined scientific account of "human realities" (morality, religion, literature, emotions, aesthetics) but also (and this is the provocation begins) to treat those subjects of humanistic scholarship as realities without "ontologically fetishizing" them.
CONCERNING ONTOLOGICAL FETISHES AND THE REALITY OF NON-NATURAL PROPERTIES

Now the verb phrase "to ontologically fetishize" is not a household expression (nor for that matter is the notion of "emergent" realities), but I think I know what the expression means. And I think I can guess how it is going to get applied to one of my main areas of humanistic research, namely, to the study of moral consciousness, with special attention to moral disagreements between members of different cultural communities. 8

To ontologically fetishize is to treat something as real that is not real. 9 It is to invest something with sanctity or inherent value that, in and of itself, is not deserving of respect. The very use of the expression itself reveals the metaphysical assumption of its use, and carries with it the implication that anyone who actually thinks that unphysical realities exist or subsist as objective features of the world is under the thrall of a superstitious, primitive, and irrational devotion to an outdated dualistic ontology. In making explicit this aim of the vertical integration agenda—the preemptive reduction of human level realities (classified as fetishes) to some level of reality (genetic, hormonal, neurological) viewed as more basic—one discerns how the consolation mission is far less conciliatory than the abstract idea of integrating the science and humanities may suggest.

Now, for the sake of the historical record, one might actually ask: Precisely how outdated is ontological dualism? By ontological dualism I have in mind a belief in the objective existence of both unphysical things (mathematical relationships, logical truths, objective values, abstract ideas, mental states—knowing, feeling, wanting and valuing, etc.) and physical things (neurons, hormones, genes, the particles of particle physics, etc.). I also have in mind the closely related belief that the unphysical realities are things in themselves and not simply or only complex emergences out of physical realities. As far as I can tell, ontological dualism is, and always has been, quite contemporary. Certainly it is the kind of metaphysical devotion that is characteristically embraced by normal, reasonable and morality-sensitive folk in all the cultures with which I am familiar. Indeed, that particular ontological commitment may well be precisely the kind of ontological faith that defines our common sense and makes human beings moral in the first place—the basic idea being that, beyond the physical, there is something more and that something more has value that is deserving of respect.

Dismissing that way of thinking as old-fashioned seems rather hasty and preemptive, given that it is also the way some very reflective and quite modern moral philosophers, for example W. David Ross, who was one of the great moral realists of the twentieth century, reasoned about the moral domain. As noted in Philip Stratton-Lake's brilliant introduction to Ross's classic account of moral intuitionism The Right and the Good, 10 "believed that rightness and goodness are objective features of the world in just the same, size and mass are." Morality, according to Ross is not an emergent reality, but a fundamental and autonomous reality that is not reducible to something mental or something material.

Ross was not only a moral realist; he was a realist in a way that is highly relevant to our current proceedings. He was a "non-naturalist" realist, which is one way for a humanist to say "not so fast" to the project of vertical integration. 11 Paraphrasing and quoting Ross on "Non-Naturalism in Ethics" means that Ross thought that moral properties such as good, ought, valuable, duty, or merited (properties connoting the "something deserving of respect") cannot be understood in wholly non-moral terms but to say, psychological, sociological, or biological evolutionary terms. The non-natural terms of psychology, sociology, and evolutionary biology, Stratton-Lake notes, are such as desire, approval, society, or survival of the fittest. He goes on to say: "If you say "right" as meaning what is approved by the community you are putting forward a non-naturalistic definition. If you define "good" as meaning "such that it ought to be desired," you are putting forward a non-naturalistic definition." 12

To avoid misunderstanding, it is important to note, as Stratton-Lake points out, that consequence theories of morality also may be either naturalistic or non-naturalistic. If, as a consequence theorist, you define "right" as "productive of the greatest pleasure," or "productive of the survival of the group" you are putting forward a naturalistic definition. If, as a consequence theorist, you define it as "productive of the greatest amount of good", you are putting forward a non-naturalistic definition.

(Parenthetically I would remark that, although I have been a critic of many aspects of Lawrence Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development I believe Kohlberg is quite right that a fully developed understanding of the meaning of goodness and rightness by human beings requires that goodness and rightness be defined in non-naturalistic terms—as that something more to which one shows respect because it is worthy of respect) 13

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9. This is sometimes also called "reification," especially in the social construction of reality literature.
Notice that to seek an emergent account of the human level reality called morality (and to do so without ontologically fetishizing the domain of moral values) is to underwrite moral properties in wholly non-moral terms—the supposed ontological fetish in the instance being the very idea of objective moral values. This amounts to the substitution of a reductive naturalistic re-definition of what is good (e.g., as any norm that promotes the survival of the group) for the non-natural properties (e.g., objective goodness) characteristic of everyday moral beliefs. It is to interpret everyday moral realism as or at the very least as intellectually absurd. It is basically to advance what Stratton-Lake calls an “error theory” about values and everyday moral judgments, based on a physical presumption that there are no objective value properties in the universe (as the theistic human declarations of value), and, that, none of our everyday moral judgments have truth-value. It is to presume the universe is devoid of objective values despite the fact that almost all human beings think that when they make moral judgments they are saying something that is true about the objective world; for example, when they assert that it is good to treat like cases alike and different cases differently.

Everyday human moral judgments are essentially meaningful and interpretable moral judgments per se (rather than as, for example, aesthetic judgments or as expressions of feelings) precisely because they are about a supposed objective and non-natural order of goodness. The analytic generalization can be put this way: A semantic analysis of everyday moral judgments on a worldwide scale suggests that when a Hindu Brahmin says “It is wrong for a widow to eat fish and meat” or an American feminist says “It is wrong to deny women the right to vote” they are not simply or only reporting about the state of their personal feelings or the collective opinion of members of their group or a norm that works to promote genetic fitness. Those who subscribe to an error theory about everyday moral judgments—for example, sociopaths and emotivists in philosophy and psychology—view those everyday moral judgments as a kind of sham. The sociopaths apparently lack any dualistic ontological intuition that could make room for the sense that there exists an objective order of goodness. Most emotivists in philosophy and psychology undoubtedly do have that quite fashionable (because nearly universal) dualistic intuition, but for theoretical and metaphysical reasons they reflectively subscribe to the belief there are no objective properties “out there” to be represented with such terms as good or bad, divine or evil. According to the writings of the emotivists, moral judgments are neither true nor false, but merely expressions of personal or collective choice. Judgments of good and bad, they aver, do no more than express non-moral properties, likes and dislikes, positive and negative feeling states, tastes, and aversions. Moral terms are merely labels for our feelings, they write, although, of course, the emotivists only argue that way when they are wearing their academic hats, because, for the most part, they are not sociopaths. In everyday life they do not act as if they believed that consensus makes logical deductions true, that might makes right, and that non-natural properties (such as goodness or mathematical and logical truths) do not exist except for our saying they do.

In other words the particular type of vertical integration in which human level realities “emerge” by being recast or re-defined in naturalistic terms implies (here again quoting Stratton-Lake) that the kinds of moral disagreements I study in my research (an example of which I will discuss in a moment) “are like disagreements about what color something is in an

world.” Rendered and interpreted within the framework developed by moral arguments both within and across societies must be viewed as empty or intellectually absurd, and analyzed exclusively in emotive terms (for example, a rhetorical political ploy in the contest for power or domination), for if there is no moral universe, no transcendental realm of goodness out there, no basis in reason of right and wrong, what precisely is there to reasonably argue about?

HAS BABEL REALLY BEEN UNDONE? OBSERVING PHYSICAL AND UNPHYSICAL SCIENTISTS DISCUSSING BRAINS AND MINDS

I confess that I have a place in my heart (and in my mind) for that (perhaps not dualistic ontology, it is good and right to be curious about the current intellectual scene in the biological and cognitive sciences, which I have observed to be far less than many conservators suppose. To cite one example, for the past three decades we have perhaps done the most creative work interpreting the thoughts, feelings, and values of non-human animals are not humanists (philosophers, poets, and writers) but rather a group of cognitive ethologists (naturalists, biologists, zoologists, and psychologists) who are convinced that monkeys, apes and other non-human are persons too (very much like human beings) and that Rene Descartes was wrong when he said that only human beings have a conscience, a mental life, and a They have embraced the languages of consciousness and of the mind rather than the language of a physical system for understanding the behavior of non-human (but, in the humanistic languages of consciousness, person-like) animals. Yet it is quite the that the academic field of cognitive ethology has become quite popular in the biological sciences at precisely the moment when other cognitive and psychological scientists (especially those working on the topics of artificial intelligence and networks) have become convinced that our own all-too-human minds can be harnessed by a machine and fully understood in the languages of the physical sciences that, if we could actually experience the way our own brain functions, we wouldn’t be a person, a soul, a self, ideas about goodness, or a free will there at all.

In any case one should be curious about recent developments in the cognitive and biological sciences, whether they are consilient or not. So, while residing in Germany a decade or so ago, I attended a major interdisciplinary conference held in Bremen on the subject of “Voluntary Action.” It was an illuminating experience that typifies for me the way vertical integration actually works (or more precisely does not work) in practice. The conference featured philosophers, cognitive neuroscientists, psychologists, anthropologists, and legal scholars. All were there ostensibly to explain the apparent fact (or is it just an illusory phenomenal experience! That was the question!) of “voluntary action.”

15. The conference proceedings were published as a book edited by Sabine Massen, Wolfgang Prinz, and Gerhard Roth (Eds.) and published under the title Voluntary Action: An Issue at the Interface of Nature and Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). My observations on the conference were published there as well.
"Voluntary action" is a really nice topic for an interdisciplinary meeting aimed at integrating the sciences and the humanities. As the conference organizers (Wolfgang Prinz, Gerhart Roth, and Sabine Maasen) brilliantly pointed out in their invitation, voluntary action poses a severe challenge to scientific attempts to form a unitary picture of the working of the human mind and its relation to the working of the body. This is because the notion of mental causation, inherent in the received standard view of voluntary action, is difficult to reconcile with both dualist and monist approaches to the mental and the physical. For dualist accounts, it has to be explained what a causal interaction between mind and matter means and how it is possible at all. Conversely, for monist approaches the question of mental causation does not arise and therefore appears to denote a cognitive illusion [they might have said an "ontological fetish"] at best. Dualist and monist accounts can be found in all the disciplines... (cognitive psychology, neuropsychology, philosophy, etc.), albeit in different phrasings and/or theoretical frameworks. Moreover, in virtually all disciplines this seemingly insurmountable opposition is [a] subject of ongoing debate. 

So "voluntary action" is a challenge for both mind/body monists and mind/body pluralists. At such conferences, the monists always seem to turn up as materialists. Apparently the monistic idealists are either hard to find or are not invited. The monistic idealists are those who argue that the real world does not consist of physical particles in fields of force but rather consists entirely of mental states and that there is no reality aside from human consciousness. That monistic idealist stance is just as counterintuitive to common-sense dualism as the monistic materialist opposite, but why do the idealists hold such a view? I think a typical idealist might say that it is because all sensory or perceptual experiences and all representations of reality (including representations picturing reality as made up exclusively of physical particles in fields of force) are themselves mental states or forms of consciousness. There is no way to transcend your own consciousness they might say, with solipsistic smiles on their faces.

Idealism aside, monism means materialism at these conferences, and if you are a mind/body monist of the materialist variety, then the voluntariness of "voluntary action" must be an illusion—another one of those ontological fetishes. That, of course, is the spectacular and breathtaking (or should we say dis-spiriting) counterintuitive implication of mind/body monism of the materialist variety, namely, the renunciation of all common-

dualism and the claim (voluntarily arrived at and offered, I suppose robotically, according to mind/body monists who are materialists that mental states existing ones own truth claims about mental states) are epiphenomenal and have to do with the chain of objective events that is the real cause of behavior.

raise your hand in a classroom in a situation where you thought that your intention to signal the teacher was the reason that you deliberately, willingly, or voluntarily raise your hand. In a common-sense sort of way you thought that symbolically communicating your intention to answer her question was what your hand-raising action was about. "Not so," says the mind/body monist of the materialist variety. Your hand raising was the end product of material determinants at the neural level, where a human (and indeed even a human self) cannot be observed, and where ideas qua ideas do and, hence, can play no causal role in the movement of your hand. Given our temporary received understanding of the nature of the material world that is how monists think they must talk about so-called voluntary action. They talk of it as an epiphenomenon, an ontological fetish in the extreme.

It leaves the mind/body monists (it's all body, no mind; mind is brain) with a whole explaining to do. Why should such a complex epiphenomenal system (amounting all of human consciousness and its products) exist at all? How could it evolve if it plays a causal role in behavior? Are the humanistic ideas of agency, virtue, value, and human ability then incompatible with the teachings of the physical and biological sciences? Should the common-sense or folk psychology of everyday life be viewed as little better than error, ignorance, and a superstition in the causal powers of an ontological or, at most, as a functional illusion that carries benefits for the survival of the individual or the group, as long as one does not abandon the illusion?

Mind/body dualists fare no better when it comes to making sense of voluntary action. As an aside, I would point out that almost all cognitive neuroscience research programs tacitly dualist as soon as they treat something mental as an independent variable something neurological as a dependent variable, or vice versa. In other words, just to forward their research agenda, they implicitly, usually un-self-consciously distinguish (or ideas) from things (neurons, hormones, blood flows) and differentiate the functional things they are going to study (typically thoughts and feelings expressed and through language or other symbolic forms) from the physical things they are to study (inferred events in the brain) using ontologically distinct types of criteria.

In any case, if you are a reflective mind/body dualist, you must explain how something that is immaterial (e.g., the mental state associated with choice, planning, free will, and rationality) can influence or have an effect on something that is physical (the movement of one's hand). So there is a real and deep problem here with our current understanding of voluntary action, and, at Bremen, an interdisciplinary conference was organized to make some progress on resolving it, in the light of recent research in cognitive neuroscience, psychology, and philosophy, with some assistance from the anthropologists and lawyers. Here is the way unification and vertical integration operate in that context.

The philosophers were really good at defining the mind/body problem. Each philosopher was terrific at arguing in favor of just one of the several incompatible solutions (dualistic mind-body interactionism, psychophysical parallelism, eliminative manner...
alism, etc.) that have been contenders, while advancing compelling criticisms against other solutions. Not much convergence took place among the philosophers, but at least they knew what the mind-body problem was and they tried to address it.

The neuroscientists, on the other hand, came armed with lots of colorful slides, showing this or that brain part lighting up when this or that kind of action took place or sentence got spoken. They named lots of brain parts and they spoke with confidence and with a sense of pride and excitement about the technological revolution that had taken place on their watch, which had finally made it possible, or so they thought, to empirically solve the mind/body problem. After about ten slides, one began to realize that they seemed to think that, because Descartes had committed some grave error, he would be surprised if he were alive today to find out that when something happens simultaneously somewhere in the nervous system. After about 20 slides, one began to realize that they did not really know what the mind/body problem was in the first place and had almost no sense of its intellectual history or even of the history of the brain sciences. However, they had an imagined solution to the problem, which seemed to excite them a great deal. Upon examination this “solution” was simply a form of question-begging in which the very real puzzle of how a non-material thing and a material thing can causally interact at all is “solved” by simply substituting a very thin causal temporary co-occurrence or correlative notion of causation for the deeper sense of objective causation that makes the mind-body problem a problem in the first place.

If one steps back into the nineteenth century for a moment and reads discussions of this topic, it becomes readily apparent how little progress has been made in solving the mind/body problem and how misguided are the bold claims that ontological dualism has been empirically laid to rest. Consider for example the following remarks made in 1868 by the physicist John Tyndall in his presidential address to the Physical Section at the thirty-eighth meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (and quoted by A.R. Wallace in his essay “The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man”):

The passage from the physics of the brain to the corresponding facts of consciousness is unthinkable. Granted that a definite thought, and a definite molecular action in the brain occur simultaneously, we do not possess the intellectual organ, nor apparently any rudiment of the organ, which would enable us to pass by a process of reasoning from the one phenomenon to the other. They appear together but we do not know why. Were our minds and senses so expanded, strengthened and illuminated as to enable us to see and feel the very molecules of the brain, were we capable of following all their motions, all their groupings, all their electric discharges, if such there be, and were we intimately acquainted with the corresponding states of thought and feeling, we should be as far as ever from the solution of the problem. How are these physical processes connected with the facts of consciousness? The chasm between the two classes of phenomena would still remain intellectually impassable. [my emphases]

In other words, the neuroscientists at the conference in the year 2000 had solved the mind/body problem by simply begging Descartes’ question (of which Professor Tyndall seems quite informed in 1868) because for them mind/body causation to nothing more than the observation that the brain lights up here and there a person does this or that—an observation that John Tyndall in his own way a matter of fact over 150 years ago while also recognizing that such matters of fact do not solve, let alone even address, the issues raised by Descartes and the mind-body problem. Of course, is not quite the issue the great philosopher had in his mind, and it is a theoretical advance over Descartes or Tyndall; it does not solve the mind/body problem. It simply evades it. But they kept going, slide after slide supposedly demonstrating that the mind-body problem had been empirically solved.

there were the psychologists and the anthropologists. They generally presupposed that too much granted the ontological reality and the causal powers of human beings and their ideational content (as in the case where they had not expunged complete folk psychology and ontological dualism from their scientific work), and they believed that the operation of that folk psychology in some detail. One psychologist did present evidence, all of it equivocal, trying to prove that mental states are (merely ontological fetishes) and have no causal powers. In the end, the mind/body problem remained unsolved, when acknowledged, or it remained untouched, but it is tentatively thought to have been solved by the new technologies for mapping the mind. In the end, the everyday experience and/or reality of voluntary action remained as us and fascinating as ever. I was led by this conference experience to draw the tentative conclusion.

believes, as do all normal human beings, that mental causation is really real, not a logical fetish, then it would seem to follow that either (1) our current scientific knowledge of the nature of the material world (including the human brain) is incomplete, or (2) there is more to reality than just the three-world pluralistic ontology of the real.

(1) amounts to a denial of any fundamental division between the physical and mental (or between the mental and an independent ontological domain of concepts and ideas, including logical and mathematical truths). Those who opt for option (1) will be on trying to revise our current understanding of the physical world so that one day it moves seamlessly within a language for describing matter directly to human concepts and offer a plausible causal account of how all the things that matter to people at a human level of reality are merely emergent products of physical things at some

16. That very thin notion of causation relied on by the neuroscientists is reminiscent of David Hume’s radical empiricist claim that the very concept of real causation is itself an ontological fetish or projection of the mind beyond the evidence of the senses, since the senses provide us with nothing more than the perception of events coinciding in time and space. The ontological chasm mentioned by Sider is thereby bridged by simply ignoring it. Repeating the same kind of facts about temporal succession that Tyndall reported in the nineteenth century and that Descartes was aware of as well. In fact, it does not advance the discussion and surely does not refute ontological dualism, as Tyndall clearly
really real (not ontologically fetishized) level "down below" (the vertical metaphor is irresistible).

Those who go for option (1) will surely reject the metaphysical claim that the intellec-
tual objects of our mental states (including mathematical and logical truths) exist in
some observer dependent realm or "Platonic heaven." They will be inclined to agree
that logic and mathematics (and morality and religion) are about nothing other than
how people think (rather than about true realities about which human beings find
themselves capable of thinking) and that logic and mathematics (and morality and religion)
can be subsumed within the realm of the mental, which will one day be shown to
be contained within the realm of the physical.

My own working view is a bit different, for it inclines to option (2), that there
is something more, let's call them the unphysical realites, to which one should show
respect because they are worthy of it. Here I will try to be self-conscious about some of
ontological assumptions that are philosophical foundations for the type of human
anthropology I practice, which also goes by the name romantic pluralism.19 Basically
the romantic pluralist tradition in cultural anthropology seeks to affirm (to the extent
affirmation is reasonably possible) what the philosopher John Gray (writing about
Berlin) describes as "the reality, validity and human intelligibility of values and forms of
life very different from our own."20 Here is a brief example, with special attention to
practice of caring for the dead, a universe practice, which perhaps as much as any other
presupposes a dualistic ontology (the distinction between the self or soul and the body) and
gives exquisite expression to the view that there is something more to human na-
than just physical reality and it is deserving of our respect.

I am going to briefly describe an encounter of the type I have frequently had in
research in comparative ethics and on moral reasoning in the Hindu temple town of
Bhubaneswar in Orissa, India. Warning: the type of account I am about to offer is likely
to strike those who choose option (1) and seek an emergent and fully naturalistic ac-
nal of human level realities as very soft on superstition (ontological fetishism) and all-too-
tolerant of alternative pictures of what is real.

"The day after his father's death the first-born son had a haircut and ate chicken." To
members of my own interpretive community21 (and probably yours, too) the claim
described in that sentence is not particularly noteworthy and is certainly not immoral.
Yet, in the judgment of men and women in the interpretive community surrounding the
Hindu temple where I do research in India, a first-born son having a haircut and eating chicken the day after his father's death is categorized as a "great sin" ("mahapapa"). Being a great sin, the conduct is not only scandalous and a departure from local social norms,
is also perceived as a profound and consequential violation of the natural and
moral ordering of things (of which the human social order, when properly
working, is but a part). It is anticipated that the conduct will be profoundly conse-
quent and that bad things will happen to anyone who commits a great sin. The antici-
pated consequences have nothing to do with secular criminal sanctions (there are none
type of case) and go well beyond the effects on one's reputation in the local
community (although reputation effects can be massive, including, shunning from all
of exchange, such as marriage arrangements, and, at least in the past, the risk of
being an outcast). That particular "transgression"—getting a haircut and eating
the day after your father's death—was the single most serious form of miscon-
duct investigated in my research, and it was judged to be an even more egregious
error than the refusal of doctors at a hospital to treat a poor man who was seri-
hurt in an accident, but was too poor to pay.

What I have just reported, one can easily imagine a typical morally sensitive
of my own interpretive community asking: "What type of moral cretins are
Oriya Hindus?" He or she would be thinking, "Why can't those Oriya Hindus see
is absolutely nothing wrong with having a haircut and eating chicken the day
your father dies?" (For the sake of this argument I will assume that this imagined
of my own interpretive community is neither a sociopath nor a philosophical or
logical emotivist who believes anything goes and is prepared to be totally non-
tal about everyday moral judgments on the grounds that all moral judgments, even
ones own, carry no truth value and are nothing more than fetishized personal
attitudes of taste, and thus hardly worth arguing about).

It follows I will try, however briefly and inadequately, to step inside this Oriya
form of life with the humanistic aim of giving an intelligible account of its reality
validly—thereby trying to achieve, however inadequately, a form of understanding
"native point of view" that is neither ethnocentric nor reductive.

is my non-reductive (humanistic) explanation for why the conduct in question is
fact of a very different sort for Oriya Hindus than for most American observers.

Oriya Hindus, or at least most of those who live in the interpretive community I studied,
that every person has an immortal reincarnating soul. They believe that when a
person dies his or her soul wants to go on its transmigratory journey but is initially
in the corpse and held back by the "death pollution" that emanates from the dead
and from its subsequently processed physical remains. As an act of beneficence
and reciprocity (all of which are assumed to be objective moral goods) relatives of
the dead (and especially the first-born son, for whom this is a major institutionalized
obligation in life) undertake the project of assisting the soul of the dead person
enabling it to get free of its ties to the physical form it once occupied. Thus, some of
the family do what they can to ensure that the dead person turn their own living bodies into what I shall label "death pollution collection sites," and essentially suck up the death pollution associated with the
(eyes, hair, organs) into themselves. They believe that the most effective way to do this is by keeping all other types of pollutions away from their living
thus providing maximal space for the personal intake of the death pollution.

The most commonplace competing types of pollutions that might interfere with
the project are sexual activities and the ingestion of "hot foods" (for example, fish and

89--111, from which this discussion is drawn.
21. By an interpretive community I mean roughly a group of people who share a set of understand-
ings about what is true, good, beautiful, and efficient and participate in a way of life they consider
normal, reasonable (in the sense of justified by reference to good reasons) and ethical precisely because
it makes manifest, reveals or expresses those understandings. It is what some anthropologists call a
"culture."
meat—the local classification of all ingested substances on a hot versus cool dimension would need to be spelled out here, but, the relevant social fact is that chicken is a “hot food”). Thus, for 12 days they stay at home fasting (maintaining a very restricted diet of “cool” foods) and abstinent. On the twelfth day they believe the soul of the deceased has been released from its bond to its bygone material form and is free to go on its journey to the world of transmigrating spirits. On that day they cleanse themselves of the death pollution, which they have absorbed into their own bodies and which has accumulated there. They believe that the pollution migrates to the extremities of the body, and is especially concentrated in their hair and under their fingernails. On that twelfth day of abstinence and fasting, the family barber cuts off nearly all their hair and the barber’s wife cuts their fingernails. Then they take a ceremonial bath and go back to the workaday world having fulfilled their moral obligation to the soul of the deceased.

“The day after his father’s death the first-born son had a haircut and ate chicken.” To a legalist Hindu in the temple town that conducts signals a willful and horrifying renunciation of the entire project of assisting the soul of your father and places the father’s spirit transmigration in deep jeopardy. No wonder they are morally distraught at the very idea of such behavior, and judge it more severely than not treating the accident victim at hospital, who is too poor to pay. Wouldn’t you judge things that way too if that was your picture of the natural and moral order of things (including the world of moral values of social relationships, viewed as part of the natural moral order of things)?

The question immediately arises, of course, whether (within the bounds of what means for human beings to be rational and moral) a group of human beings might reasonably feel bound by that picture of the natural and moral order of things, to which would like to suggest the right answer is yes. Here I will simply conclude this illustration of forms of life different from our own by asking, which do you think is the worse transgression: (1) A doctor not treating an accident victim because he is too poor to pay or (2) a son tossing his father’s dead body in a trash compactor and holing no funeral service or memorial at all? Would you judge someone a moral cretin or to be lacking in moral maturity if he or she reacted to the second hypothetical as more horrifying transgression? Personally I think it is the more horrifying of those very serious moral transgressions.

I would also hazard the view that the meaning of the idea of a great sin or moral error not adequately translated when it is theorized and redefined in reductive naturalistic by reference to social sanctions, communal consensus or pressures toward conformity, cultural anthropologists have learned anything from the legacy of Emile Durkheim it that, from a “native point of view” the social order is thought to be part of the natural order of things; and thus when someone says “you have committed a moral error” or “you have sinned” they do not simply mean that some collection of individuals in interpretive community has decided to define some behavior as wrong. The natural order of things is something you discover (or have revealed to you), not something you invent, or at least that is the near universal consensus among the natives of the world.

I can only guess what vertical integrationists and those who define morality and religious as ontological fetishes might say about those death pollution practices of Oriya Hindu. Perhaps something like this: When you are dead you are dead! Souls don’t reincarnate!

people don’t have souls at all. I suppose they do have a “self,” but, take my word for it, “transcendental ego” does not go anywhere when you die and my colleagues in the neurosciences have not only empirically proved that ontological dualism is untenable, but they also promise me that one day very soon they will figure out the answer to the question Descartes and Tyndall were unable to solve, precisely how that “ghost in the machine” got into our physical body in the first place. Moreover, the only kind of pollution that exists in the world is not about spiritual purity or the sanctity of one’s soul but consists of nasty physical particles in fields of force and no one in their right mind would have the thought of taking these poor physical particles and inserting them into their body. Of course, there are many psychological benefits in having a defense against grief, loss, and the fear of death) to imagining that bodies are immortal souls that are thought to already be old souls when they enter our porary physical world and survive the demise of their physical form. Wouldn’t it be comforting if that were true, but scientific observation has taught us it is not true. Perhaps there are social benefits in endorsing the virtues that bind the generations of the moral drama of turning ones own body into a death pollution collection. But remember what Nietzsche once said: “Asia is a dreamy place where they do not know how to distinguish between truth and poetry.” No one’s soul is in jeopardy just because someone gets a haircut and eats chicken! And, by the way, there is no such thing as if such beliefs are entrenched among human beings it is only because believing such has worked in a utilitarian way to promote the genetic fitness of our species (or else correlated with something else that promotes our biological survival).

to me there is some kind of chasm there between two very different and not so reconciled ways of approaching one’s subject matter. Evans-Pritchard, the famous anthropologist who wrote a seminal ethnographic monograph about what it is like for a witch in Central Africa once offered the following sage advice to aspiring anthropologists: “You cannot have a remunerative, intelligent, conversation with people about something they take as self-evident if you expect them to play the role of a mediator. But this is a difficult problem.”" It is a good methodological starting point for the type of humanistic anthropology I practice, but it also at the integration of the sciences and the humanities is probably not the thing that there are divides in the first place. Reality testing is a metaphysical act, and thus precise assumptions characteristic of human level realities and of the human study those realities do not necessarily converge with the metaphysical program calling for conciliation and a unity of all knowledge.

it seems to me that, if you are a humanist, you ought to opt for option (2) the that (ontologically speaking) there is more to reality than the material world, and unphysical realities are best comprehended as, in some sense, objective realities of respect and not as “ontological fetishes.” That is one of the reasons I find Karl Popper’s view congenial when it comes to questions of ontology. Whatever one might of the practice of humanistic anthropology (or of the very idea of the unphysical), if I were able to spell out the philosophy of the real that informs my own work, I would end up with some kind of variation on Sir Karl Popper’s philosophy of

E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande (Oxford: Clarendon 1937). In a postscript “Notes on Method.”
the three real worlds: crudely stated, the world of material things, the world of mental states and, finally, quite crucially, the world of meanings, ideas, or concepts—the latter conjectured to be an observer independent realm of intellectual/unphysical objects that human beings are able to discover and grasp by means of their mental powers. In his philosophy of the real, Popper conjectures that besides physical objects and states ("World 1") there are mental states ("World 2") and that these states are real since they interact with our bodies” (here he is prepared to just assume the reality of mental causation, which always requires a good deal of question begging). Popper also conjectures that the content of our mental states (the ideas or concepts that we think with or about) form part of what he calls World 3. The intellectual objects in World 3 are not themselves mental states, yet are real, in part, because they seem to have something like an observer independent status as objects of discovery (for example, he would argue mathematical truths are neither physical nor mental but they are real), and also, in part, because the ideas or concepts that we are able to grasp by means of our mental powers can ultimately have an effect on our bodies and on the creation of material artifacts.

The details of Popper’s three-world philosophy of the real need not concern us here, and there is much in his formulation that I think is problematic and debatable. Nevertheless his three-world metaphysics is a philosophical conjecture about what is real that bears a striking resemblance to the common sense of the diverse peoples of the world studied by anthropologists, which is not a bad starting point when one is trying to develop some analytic tools for making sense of folk mentalities and forms of life different from one’s own.

I realize, of course, that by selecting option (2)—there is more reality than just the physical world—one ends up just reaffirming the division between physical matter and other types of real things ("states of the soul," the "soul" itself, transcendent concepts or ideas) without really explaining that division. Nevertheless, when it comes to the mind/body problem, the state of the art has not fundamentally changed since Descartes and Tyndall, and the choices remain the same even in our contemporary decade of the brain. One either denies the ontological difference between mind and body without accounting for consciousness (that’s option 1) or one affirms the difference between mind and body without explaining how unphysical things can exist (that’s option 2). Despite technological developments in the neurosciences in recent years, I don’t think that the state of the art has changed very much since 1973 when Emile Durkheim presented his paper on "The Religious Problem and the Duality of Nature" to the Societe de Philosophie in summarizing his famous book The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. As noted by Durkheim’s intellectual biographer Stephen Lukes, alluding to the apparent dualism and reconciliatory oppositions that were up for discussion at Durkheim’s lecture (dualisms such as the physical versus the mental, the body versus the soul, sense experience versus conceptual thought, the profane versus the sacred): "Philosophers had no genuine solution: empiricists, materialists and utilitarians, on the one hand, and absolute idealists on the other, simply denied these antinomies without accounting for them; ontologists dualists simply reaffirmed them without explaining them."

Skepticism has its limits and nothing I have said or implied in this essay should be construed as a critique of innovative interdisciplinary cooperation or of attempts to ask questions about the functional or dysfunctional consequences of human practices and beliefs. Rather, my aim has been to examine the need program of vertically integrating the humanities with the cognitive and social sciences and the reductive notion that one can fully explain human level real-world phenomena by understanding the human mind. Let me conclude with a small yet provocative example of what happens when World 3 (the world of meanings available to fully endowed human beings) enters our nervous system. The example comes from Lee Whorf and can be found in his writings on Language, Thought and Reality. He is famous for his work on linguistic relativity, but he was fully aware of the existence of universal human species-typifying affective or synthetic responses to stimuli of kinds. He notes that the semantically meaningless sound pattern "queep" elicits a set of affective or feeling-tone associations when it interacts with the human nervous system. Whether you are in the highlands of New Guinea or in Manhattan, you speak English, Guugu Yimidhirr or Russian, "queep," the nonsense syllable, to be "fast" (rather than "slow"), "sharp" (rather than "dull"), "light" (rather than "dark"), "narrow" (rather than "wide"). Our affective response to "queep" is automatic and may well be preprogrammed, a feature of our common biology.

I notice what happens when the world of language and culture-specific semantic (a World 3 unphysical reality) enters the picture. Whorf asks us to consider the pattern "deep." As a purely material thing (as a physical pattern of sound) "deep" is similar to "queep." For speakers of languages in which "deep" is a nonsense syllable (most languages of the world) the sound pattern "deep" elicits exactly the same set of or feeling-tone associations ("fast," "sharp," "light," and "narrow") as does "queep." However, "deep" is not just a physical entity (or pure sound) for English speakers.

A word in our language. It has semantic meaning. That meaning totally overrides its as pure physical sound (the sound merely becomes the vehicle of the meaning) completely reverses our nervous-system response. For speakers of English, and only such speakers, "deep" is judged to be "slow," "dull," "dark," and "wide." That is one of many examples of how many humanists are prepared to argue for the duality of human nature, mind and body and above mechanism and body, of the angel over and above.

It is what leads them to believe there is something more to our nature than just material realities that meet the ear (or the eye) plus the nervous system that is more or less common to us all. The challenge for the humanities and for the humanistic social sciences has always been to get ideas and our capacity to be sensitive to what things mean. The picture without completely reducing the mental to the material or matterings to things. Contemplating a human being as a hairless social being with a big brain does not do the trick. It leaves too much out of its picture of the really real as it tries to descend to the real and real levels as ontological fetishes.

23. Popper and Eccles, op cit, see footnote 16.