

Curing Dualistic, Disembodied Patterns of Thinking in the Academy
(with Special Application to the Contemporary Cognitive Science of Religion)

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This paper will analyze the project of William H. Poteat's career, especially in terms of embodiment and of the dualistic, discarnate Enlightenment "picture" of human nature and of reality that he found troubling and, indeed insane. Focusing on several key themes/ideas/metaphors, it will make reference to his 1950 dissertation and to the so-called four "canonical" thinkers that figured most prominently in Poteat's teaching and scholarship. I should note that the term "canonical" was used by Poteat and his graduate students in Religious Studies to refer to the four thinkers he focused on in his teaching at Duke, namely, theologian Soren Kierdegaard, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein, and philosopher of science and epistemology Michael Polanyi. It will conclude with an application of Poteat's concerns to the so-called "cognitive science of religion," which has gained much currency in recent years.

In "Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility," Poteat does not directly address issues of (dis)embodiment. However, in this Duke University dissertation, he does expound upon some Cartesian Enlightenment conceits that would drive his future scholarly endeavors. In homing in on Descartes as the "fulfillment" (i) of Renaissance and Enlightenment conceptions of reality and human nature, Poteat emphasizes the "exteriorization of sensibility," whereby all is reduced to mathematical abstractions of space and time (for example, i-ii, 31-32). Here humanity has achieved autonomy with respect to God, yet the upshot of this high accomplishment is merely that humanity can exercise technical reason to purportedly control a

machine-like universe (83-85). Relative to Cartesian subject-object dualism, Poteat here emphasizes the object side. While acknowledging the “high humanism” of the Renaissance), he characterizes the Enlightenment simply as skeptical (83), seemingly overlooking the god-like optimism of Descartes and his strategy of cultivating doubt and Descartes separation of the human ego from extended substances subject to manipulation and control. Humanity has already fully become an external object to itself, reduced to a meaningless machine attempting to control a machine whose only possible meaning might have resulted from the projection of our own meaning (83-85). This should not surprise us, as his principal interlocutor was Pascal, whom Poteat quotes at the beginning of Chapter 1: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me” (1). Pascal presciently anticipated the ultimate issue of the Cartesian paradigm of mathematical and physical space in relativism and nihilism.

The motif of the loss of the human self continues in one of the four canonical thinkers, Kierkegaard. I confess that Poteat on Kierkegaard was the only “canonical” course I did not have opportunity to take. To my knowledge, Kierkegaard did not explicitly deal with the issue of (dis)embodiment. However, an important connection between the Pascal of the dissertation and Kierkegaard has ramifications for the embodied nature of life: the centrality of time and decision for the existential self. As Poteat notes in the dissertation, Descartes reduces “time to a mode for measuring motion in space . . . obscuring” that time in “creaturely existence” is “irreversible and decisive” (350). Kierkegaard, reacting against Hegel’s timeless abstract essence, writes of the aesthete who can contemplate infinite possibilities without ever having to decide. Although Poteat in the first two books of which he is sole author specifically refers to Kierkegaard less than to any of the other canonicals, temporality figures heavily in his expounding upon our embodied existence. His analysis of a musical melody in particular and of the temporal nature of

existence more generally with his frequent deployment of “pretension,” “retrotension” constitute a quintessential component of this effort.

Temporality also figures prominently in another crucial Poteatian theme, the contrast between the Greek proclivity to engage the world through vision versus the Hebrew tendency to do so through orality/aurality. Vision tempts us to imagine that we can cognize reality in a timeless instant, while the written text obscures the reality of time, because we can view a whole page or more at once, because of its physical fixity and permanence, and because of its transportability across time and place. Orality/aurality, on the other hand, entails personal engagement and responsibility in a particular context, a particular space and a particular passage of time.

From the first time Poteat shared with me and others in a class session Renaissance paintings where everything is crystal clear in foreground and background,¹ I was struck with the pregnancy of his observation. The picture of human nature these paintings convey clearly involves God-like (transcendent) cognitive powers, where all is fully known immediately—at least this becomes obvious as Poteat interprets its significance. This picture disembodies and abstracts us from our bodies and our convivial natural and social worlds. The desire to know all with certainty and without mediation becomes philosophically explicit in Descartes. Moreover, Poteat notes in his books how this standard for truth and reality, where the fullness of Being must be immediately present without any alleged slippage of time, continues to haunt deconstructionists and poststructuralists like Derrida and de Man. Thus, for them the sign never really signifies and meaning remains ever undecidable—except for the arbitrary decisions we cannot help but make. Poteat pinpoints the standard of truth and reality that haunts them:

¹ Suggested to Poteat by Merleau-Ponty (Poteat, 1985:59).

When, however, under the blows of philosophic criticism, ahistorical Truth is exposed as a chimera and we are left, so we suppose, with “only” the realities that are disclosed amid the pretensions and retortensions of time—when, in short, we are left “only” with history, by definition devoid of an ahistorical truth—the perfectly ordinary relativism that can be overcome in practice, now viewed through the afterimage of the doctrine of an ahistorical Truth and therein showing itself destitute of any mark of truth of this kind, becomes the relativism, so heavy with pathos, that for us henceforth attests to the absence of *all* truth (1985:64-65).

In e-mail exchanges about this conference, I discovered Poteat’s intriguing lecture, “The Banality of Evil: The Darkness at the Center.” In this lecture and in *Recovering the Ground*, which has many references to Kierkegaard, Poteat ruminates further about the modern loss of self and its possible recovery. In the lecture, he begins with Enlightenment pretensions (in the everyday sense) to transcendent God-like perfection, as we subject everything to mechanistic and bureaucratic scientific rationality. However, we inevitably end up becoming part of the machine and the bureaucracy—the type of problem Poteat identified in his dissertation. Thus, the banality of evil, which results in losing ourselves in the finite, in refusing spirit, in refusing transcendence, which results paradigmatically in the Holocaust. While the objectivist, materialistic, relativistic, nihilistic sides of modern disembodiment have the upper hand in how we humans picture ourselves and undoubtedly explain why many Germans cooperated with the Final Solution, I think Poteat missed or at least under-emphasized in the context of the Holocaust the continuing influence of the other side: that is, the absolutistic, idealistic, transcendent aspects

of the modern picture.² Tellingly, Paul Tillich, who lived for a while under Nazi rule before escaping to America, explains the attraction of fascism to European youth: alienated by “the emptiness of adjustment to the demands of the industrial society” and “the emptiness” of “playing with cultural goods,” they longed for “something *absolutely serious*” (even if demonic) (152). In separating themselves from Jews and other undesirables, it’s probably no coincidence that the Nazis harped upon the alleged disgusting physical bodies of these others. Additionally, participating in the projected glories of the Third Reich—as the ultimate consummation of history—served as a means to transcend death. So here, I think, Poteat misses the relevance of Kierkegaard’s category of absolutizing the infinite.

In any case, Poteat and Kierkegaard’s recipes for recovering the human self are similar: claiming my givenness, my embodiment, as a self in community, as received from a divine source, in such a way that I take responsibility for who I am, what I say, what I do. That constitutes accepting oneself as spirit before the Spirit, as achieving the transcendence possible and appropriate for a finite human being.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is the canonical thinker who most explicitly identifies the dualism inherent in the Enlightenment discarnate picture, as idealism and empiricism form two sides of the same Cartesian coin. In splitting us from our world and from ourselves, that picture assumes an either-or between a disembodied mind that finds meaning in abstract conceptions and mental images or material objects, including our own bodies, whose only possible meaning

² This is not to say that Poteat misses or downplays the infinitizing, absolutizing, idealistic side in other contexts. He does refer to modern “gnostic apocalypticism.” In particular, in an interesting but somewhat cryptic reference, he calls “militant Marxism” the “most cruel and unforgiving of all forms of gnostic apocalypticism” (1994:xiii). As I interpret this comment and Marx, I think Poteat is right: For Marx claims that we are God, as we have alienated ourselves from our noble qualities and projected them onto an illusory supernatural God. And despite his materialistic focus on economics, Marx saw communism, by satisfying our material needs, as freeing us to realize our divine creativity and artistry.

is merely physical or physiological. In either case, internally or externally, reality is already determinate, rather than becoming determinate in the mostly pre-reflective bodily engagement with the thing. The sense of Poteat's distinctive coinage of "mindbody" aligns with the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenal," experiential, habit, or lived body. The surd for our living, being, knowing is the on-going correlation of our attentive, embodied effort to make sense with the things, the world, which call us into a mutually constitutive relationship. In Poteat's words:

My mindbody as imagination—as, that is, the pretension toward order, meaning, coherence, closure, logos—devises, that is, defines and arrests, an articulation within the hitherto indeterminate. . . .

In time and through habituation, what Merleau-Ponty calls *sedimentation*, these and untold others become *usages*: what and the way in which we do and say; what and the way in which we are given to doing and saying; the repertoire of instruments and gestures that are their means—words and concepts, by what they exclude and what they include, establish one existential environment rather than some other. . . .

. . . . Our mindbodies as imagination in its pretension towards meaning and coherence shapes and articulates the world and ourselves in it (1994:165-66).

Canonical thinker Ludwig Wittgenstein obviously focuses on language. He does not explicitly dwell upon embodiment or disembodiment. However, he does sometimes refer to the biological underpinnings of language. Poteat recognizes that, for Wittgenstein, language use or any "language game" is always and necessarily embedded, ensconced, embodied in forms of life. So Wittgenstein's philosophy supports that language arises from our bodies, stems from our embodiment, not merely instrumentally but substantively. But Poteat makes that truth explicit.

Here is my favorite quotation from Poteat on language:

For I claim that language—our first formal system—has the sinews of our bodies, which had them first; that the grammar, the syntax, the ingenuous choreography of our rhetorical engagement with the world, the meaning, the semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world, which is their condition of possibility (1985:9).

At one point, Poteat notes that prior to the Enlightenment reading typically involved moving one's lips, if not actually pronouncing words out loud. Enlightenment sensibility, regarding language as strictly mental, looks down upon such benightedness. Poteat, though, realizes that the bodily medium of language cannot be neatly and absolutely separated from its message: "We cannot take possession of words by our "pure" intellect, since, quite simply, there is no such thing. We apprehend them through our integral mindbodies; and "moving our lips as we read" is a mark of this fact. Why would this ever happen, if it were not a condition of the comprehension of a text? (1990:98). Here lines between medium and message, instrument and substance, blur. Neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, author of the popular trade book *Descartes' Error*, supports the bodily roots of all linguistic—and other—meaning, insisting that all human signs and symbols must involve some connection with bodily sensorimotor or feeling imagery to be comprehensible, to come into existence in the first place: "both words and arbitrary symbols are based on topographically organized representations and can become images." Moreover, Damasio continues, if our words "did not become images, however fleetingly, they would not be anything we could know" (106). Poteat recognized that, even when we read silently keeping our lips still, words on a page would mean nothing if we did not cognize their oral/aural bodily provenance.

Wittgenstein critiques the misuse of language by philosophers captured by the Enlightenment picture of atemporal language realism. Such philosophers fail to use common sense, fail to observe how people actually speak and listen. Instead, he notes the embeddedness of language use in particular contexts, within a plenitude of language games and within multiple forms of life. Rather than conforming to absolute, static categories, similar words and things bear a “family resemblance.” Wittgenstein’s “dissolving” of miscast philosophical problems definitely bears relevance to Poteat’s hope to cure the insanity of modernity. Nevertheless, as I reflect upon Wittgenstein’s useful contribution to a cure, I find that some of his own use of language, his employment of metaphor, may underestimate the seriousness, the severity, of the problem and the radicalness of the required cure (though undoubtedly this was not his intention). While “language game” effectively highlights the tacit agreement of participants to use language in particular contexts, rather than in abstract, timeless ways, it can connote a lack of seriousness in our convivial employment of our native tongue. Furthermore, the neutral “forms of life” does not suggest that there may be something sacred, something spiritual, in even our quotidian lives. Finally, while the term “dissolving” does convey that a misleading picture leads people to create unnecessary problems, problems not rooted in the nature of reality, at the same time it can connote that the cure may be relatively easy. It obfuscates how deeply that picture controls the way we see the world. It obscures how that picture, though its explicit forms arise within the academy and though it disproportionately affects the academy, nevertheless powerfully affects the wider culture.

In turning to Michael Polanyi, we invoke the only canonical thinker with whom Poteat engaged face to face, body to body, as well as the one who influenced him the most. It is no coincidence that *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, constitutes Poteat’s

first and longest book of which he is sole author. In the first instance, the post-critical paradigm refutes the picture of certain, immediate knowledge where we see all from a non-human, god-like perspective. For Descartes knowledge had to be critically evaluated in order to meet the standard entailed by that picture. Relying acritically on any presumed knowledge was anathema. The post-critical paradigm reverses the Cartesian program of systematic doubt, where any and all truth and meaning must find explicit justification, must stand up to critical reflection. It recognizes that there are some things upon which we must primordially rely acritically (and thus tacitly or prereflectively) to know anything at all.

While Polanyi does not often write of embodiment, he leaves no doubt that the inalienable root of our tacit knowing, of what we attend from as we attend to, is precisely our bodies. We tacitly rely upon our bodies for all practical and intellectual knowledge. He writes that “when we make a thing function as the proximal term of tacit knowing, we incorporate it into our body—or extend our body to include it—so that we come to dwell in it” (1966:16; see also x). Here, like Merleau-Ponty, Polanyi recognizes that inside and outside one’s body always depends upon the context of our knowing, of that upon which we acritically rely. For Polanyi this tacit grounding of all articulate knowledge in our inarticulate powers of engaging the world in company with our fellow human beings precludes any dualism between the subjective and objective. Our knowing always engages both our personal commitment and, despite its fallibility, a universal intent. The centrality of the tacit for Poteat led some of us graduate students to coin the phrase, “tacit attack,” where in focusing on normally tacit subsidiary elements we lose the ability to do something we normally do quite easily and quite well. And we might occasionally act out a tacit attack as we devolved into stumblebums in our walking.

For Poteat the post-critical paradigm entails our grounding in something prior to and beyond critical, skeptical reflection. He metaphorically employs ground and place to point to that which is primordial. For example, from *A Philosophical Daybook*: “My mindbody is the absolutely radical and prior—at the root of and antecedent to absolutely everything (!)—*here and now: the primordial place*; whence all times and places are pretended; that every time and space retrotends. There being this place is not the *condition* of my mindbodily integrity; it *is* this integrity” (1990:68). Or a phrase from *Recovering the Ground*: “the unimpeachable ground of Being in which we are grounded in our lively convivial mindbodies in the world” (1994:141). This prereflective ground of all meaning, this thick temporal engagement of our sentient, feeling, motile bodies with our social and natural world, forms the basis for all reflection and rationality, for all judgment of what is real, what is valuable. Thus inheres the insanity of allowing a discarnate, visual, atemporal, abstract picture of human nature to set the explicit or implicit standards for the real, the true, the good.

Note that a crucial part of Poteat’s post-critical paradigm is that meaning—and here I am including both making sense and affording value—is primordial with our convivial mindbodily engagement with the world. We begin and live our lives embedded, ensconced, embodied in meaning. Meaning in the first place is part and parcel of our embodiment in our natural and social world; critical reflection helps us make sense and determine value when certain problems arise. But critical reflection in the mode of Descartes or Derrida is helpless in establishing from scratch, from nowhere, out of nothing, that something or anything has value. Traditions constitute a key element of the social world in which we are embodied. As Poteat argues, tradition and critical thought do not stand on the same logical plane; we cannot criticize our traditions whole cloth. He continues: “If tradition as that which is handed over, *given*—whether

as one's native language, a practice, inherited analogies, metaphors, imaginative pictures—exerts its force on us in such a way as hardly to be felt by us, though not less potent on this account, it is that within which we dwell at ease” (1990:47).

This recovery of meaning, of the ground, of common sense, of a genuine human self, suggests another Poteatian theme: that we are at home in the world; or at least we can be if we overcome an insane discarnate picture. This contrasts with a Cartesian world where thinking and extended realities never cohere, a Heideggerian/Sartrean world into which we are indifferently thrown, or a Derridian/Foucaultian world where we can never be present nor mean what we say.

As Poteat pens,

We are *at home* in the world insofar as we dwell in our lively mindbodies in the matrices of our form of life. To suffer from bad conscience because of this—as is the Enlightenment's way—to, alternatively, talk in Heideggerian terms of our being “thrown” into the world does not alter the *fact* of our having been “handed over” to ourselves precisely by that which has formed and continues to sustain us. It serves only to fashion an *Enlightenment* myth in the light of which we are declared to be homeless. And so we have taken ourselves since Descartes handed us our deracinate *cogito* (1990:47).

I've already tipped my hand, as far as answering the following question posed by Dale Cannon for this session: “When speaking of an ‘existential recovery of oneself,’ ‘a return to the ground,’ ‘a post-critical paradigm shift,’ and ‘a recovery of commonsense,’ was [Poteat] talking about the same thing or different things?” I submit that all these phrases represent inter-related angles of a very coherent project; all these began as or became ways of speaking about overcoming an insane dualistic, disembodied picture of humanity in relation to the world. While

the disembodied nature of the Cartesian view of human nature and the world does not appear to be explicit in his dissertation, it is certainly implied, and it became explicit and central to all his later work.

When it comes to the prospects of overcoming this insane picture in the academy and beyond, I have to say I am more pessimistic than in my younger days. The absurdity of the picture when it becomes focal rather than tacit and the ubiquity of the “postmodern” contributed to my earlier optimism. Of course, the above mentioned extreme forms of postmodernism won the branding wars for the term, rather than a more moderate or common sense postmodernism. While deconstructionism/poststructuralism has passed its heyday, various forms of constructivism still hold sway in much of the humanities and social sciences. I have found that the American Academy of Religion’s Body and Religion Group seems to be just about how the body is constructed, rather than how one’s body in the first instance constructs. While such constructivism takes the idealistic side of dualism, to use Merleau-Ponty’s terminology, many natural scientists adhere to the empirical side in the form of a reductive physicalism, which in its own way alienates and disembodies us from our lived body and its inherent meaningfulness. The influence of this reductive physicalist picture extends beyond the academy, as non-academics sometimes wonder, “Am I just the synapses of my brain”

In “The Banality of Evil,” Poteat notes Descartes’ rhapsodizing about human transcendence, “even to the point of perhaps one day overcoming death.” Poteat goes on to clarify, “I’m not making this up. These were his very words.” Yet today, some scientists look forward to preventing the aging and the regeneration of cells such that we might indefinitely postpone death. Furthermore, some futurists, Ray Kurzweil having garnered the most fame,

foresee a time when human consciousness as information will be uploaded to a great computer, thereby totally eliminating the human body in our ultimate consummation.

And then there is the so-called cognitive science of religion. On the one hand, cognitive scientists of religion assume a reductive physicalism as their own metaphysical or ontological stance. As indicated earlier, from a Poteatian perspective, this simply opts for one side of Cartesian dualism. Meaning and value pertain only to the idealist, subjective side of the divide, making them unreal, illusory for the physicalist. So we are left with meaningless physical processes, thus alienating ourselves from our meaning-laden embodiment in the world. In brief, for these scholars, reductionism comes in the form of unconscious mental mechanisms or processes that cause humans to detect supernatural agency when none exists. While undoubtedly in immediate processing of stimuli from our environment, we do have a prudent tendency to assume agency. Better a false alarm when there's a rustle in the bush than to ignore a dangerous predator. But they utilize this truth to oversimplify things. Something I learned from Poteat is that our attempts to orient ourselves in more abstract realms have some continuity with our most primordial attempts to orient ourselves in our environment. This desire involves a concern for truth and accuracy. We breathe a sigh of relief when the rustle isn't a tiger. Our concern for truth involves both our prereflective and more reflective efforts. CSR presumes that human reflection regarding possible extraordinary, supernatural, or ultimate causes must always be overridden, overwhelmed by prereflective mechanisms.

Cognitive scientists of religion find an avenue of support for their position in the supposed proclivity of young children to believe in supernatural agents. Deborah Keleman has concluded that children are natural teleologists and even intuitive theists, because they theorize

that inanimate natural objects have an intended purpose. Olivera Petrovich goes further in holding that young children possess innate “core religious concepts,” since they overwhelmingly answer that plants and animals have been created by God. Of course, the fly in their ointment is that young children have encountered the concept of God from adults. No evidence exists that young children have on their own, *de novo*, invented the idea of a powerful supernatural agent. Indeed, one study purports to show that young children do not invoke animistic or magical thinking to explain natural events (Orem). Moreover, at least two studies cast doubt on how much of a tendency children have to teleologize or ascribe intentionality to phenomena: a 1932 study of tribal children by Margaret Mead and one by contemporary psychologist Frank C. Keil. Mead concludes that Manus children, despite growing up in a very animistic culture, “not only show no tendency towards spontaneous animistic thought, but that they also show what may perhaps legitimately be termed a negativism towards explanations couched in animistic rather than practical cause and effect terms” (186). As part of a series of experiments on categorizing life forms with children in grades kindergarten, 2, and 4, Keil mentioned and asked questions about a “thing” that could enter a human body and cause harm. Subgroups were given alternative descriptions of the thing: 1) functional or teleological where the things has to get inside people’s bodies and use parts of their bodies, or it won’t last long (123-24) 2) simple mechanical where the things causes abrasions 3) intentional “that directly attributes goals and desires” to the thing 4) artifactual where a human designed the thing, or finally no description at all (124-25). “Children at all ages thought that the ‘teleological’ thing did not know what it was doing any more than the mechanical one, attributing knowledge roughly three times as much to the intention/desire entity,” Keil concludes (126). If the human propensity to ascribe intentional agency were as pervasively strong as CSR generally holds, one might expect that at least the

youngest children would attribute such to the “functional/teleological” thing. After all, blaming evil spirits for disease is rather common among tribal peoples. While Kelemen has parenthetically mentioned the Mead and Keil studies, she does not specify let alone engage Keil’s results, while only briefly engaging Mead’s study in a footnote (101-102, 111 n. 1).

CSR also attempts to support the decisiveness of prereflective mechanisms, which involve rather crude anthropomorphizing, by claiming that they override more abstract theologically correct conceptions in normal processing. That is, agency detection favors “minimally counterintuitive” rather than more maximal supernatural concepts. The experiment used involves reading stories involving supernatural agents and then asking participants questions about said stories. My take is that the researchers were much too picky in holding their test subjects to the standard of a quite literal remembering or retelling of the story, rather than allowing the participants to go with the gist of the story, even allowing for employment of some metaphor, before judging that the participants really believed the anthropomorphic rather than theological ideas.

Magic, mentioned just above, represents another area where CSR appears narrow in its outlook. In short, they ignore magic. James Frazer famously distinguished between magic and religion, consigning them to different eras of human prehistory. Scholars of religion since then have corrected Frazer in that both appear in indigenous religion and that some beliefs and practices combine both. Yet there is little room for doubt that some ritual practices of indigenous peoples involve the belief that, if the ritual is performed correctly, a certain magical result will eventuate apart from the intentions of any supernatural agent. This absence of agency fails to fit into CSR’s paradigm.

This sole focus on *personal* agency figures into CSR's inability to allow for any overall directionality to the universe. Edward Slingerland for his part dismisses the possibility of any larger meaning: Some modern Westerners harbor "a more diffuse, non-theistic sense that what we are doing 'matters'—a conceit that makes no sense unless we project some sort of abstract, metaphorical agency onto the universe" (396). He attributes this projection to the sphere of social interaction, specifically the human need for social approval. I would mention that our basic biological drive for orientation to our world involves both the social and physical—and perhaps in the human case orientation and explanation beyond our physical and social universes. Slingerland's dismissal appears to apply not only to those with the vague sensibility he cites, but many Eastern believers as well as some Western religious naturalists who see the universe or aspects of it as divine, as involving some non-theistic directionality. These folks do attribute precisely some metaphorical agency or causality to the universe or to the overarching (traditionally more Western) or underlying (more Eastern) source of the universe. That these Eastern believers and Western religious naturalists have deliberately rejected metaphors of personal agency for their version of ultimate reality constitutes an argument against Slingerland's assumption that our need for social approval must lie behind all belief in an ultimate or overall direction or meaning to the universe.

While CSR adopts a reductive physicalist stance for itself, it views the benighted populace of humanity as inveterately dualistic. The dualism it so attributes is quite Cartesian and disembodied. In so doing, it interprets religion in such a discarnate way, thus reinscribing and reinforcing a discarnate dualism. To make sense of an indigenous shaman imagining he or she is flying in the body of an eagle, a shaman being possessed by the spirit of a mountain, or a modern movie goer following the transfer of bodies and consciousnesses in *Freaky Friday*, cognitive

scientists like Slingerland, Jesse Bering, and Paul Bloom, assume that the shaman or movie-goer must be a Cartesian philosopher who at some level is abstractly and logically explaining these strange happenings. The alternative would be to recognize that we humans are embodied beings who naturally imagine in bodily ways.

Despite CSR's claim that our agency detection anthropomorphizes, CSR also tends to claim that we humans over-detect *disembodied* gods, goddesses, and spirits. Primal and ancient animistic belief entailed embodiment in nature or in some kind of anthropomorphized—or animalized—body. Of course, these embodied spirits do not suffer all the limitations that humans and animals endure with their bodies. And their bodies may be hidden from us or even invisible to our ordinary vision. As some ancient religions developed, as in Greece, for example, some animistic beliefs gave way to a god or goddess who controlled a part of nature, like Poseidon and the seas. However, such ancient gods and goddesses were blatantly anthropomorphic in body. Not only did primal and ancient people typically depict deities as embodied, they believed the actual divine bodies bore some analogy to their representations. While ancient Judaism prohibited representation of God (the historical reality of which happened much later than depicted in Hebrew biblical narrative), it did not explicitly deny, and in some scriptural passages specifically refers to, God's body. The underlying rationale was that the greatness of God and the divine body in comparison to human or animal bodies would countenance no visual representations. The complete disembodiment and immateriality of God in learned Jewish and Christian theology resulted from a long journey strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, particularly of the Platonic and Aristotelian varieties. (Even Stoicism, influential in the ancient world and in some respects on Judaism and Christianity, affirmed some materiality to the divine, even in its pure state of Fire.) I would note that the argument of some

cognitive scientists that our unconscious supernatural agency detection usually overcomes abstract theological thinking contradicts the notion that religious imaging of supernatural agency is essentially discarnate.

Cognitive scientists regard belief in life after death as tantamount to a dualistic belief in disembodied spirits. Jesse Bering and David Bjorklund did an influential study on children's beliefs about what happens to a mouse eaten by an alligator. Bering in a major article begins with this assertion: "By stating that psychological states survive death, one is committing to a radical form of mind-body dualism" (453). While I have written at some length about particulars of the Bering-Bjorklund study (163-68), my main criticism is that young children typically believed that the mouse continued to exist in another body in another world. Unfortunately, that possibility was not tested for. Ten years ago at a reunion on this campus, I asked Paul Bloom whether any of the experiments with children supported the hypothesis that humans innately distinguish between disembodied souls and mindless bodies over the hypothesis that humans innately distinguish between animate, sentient, intentional embodied beings and inanimate things. He answered in the negative. In an e-mail from 2008, he indicated that he finds more "compelling" the thesis of mind-body dualism for interpreting the results of the most significant experiment(s), by Bering and Bjorklund, than the animate-inanimate distinction. Specifically he writes that the fact that most young children believe that a dead mouse's mental states continue while its biological states do not "strongly suggests that kids think it has no body but still has a mind." As suggested above, the lack of testing the possibility that the children believe other bodily states continue in another realm makes dualism less than compelling for me. Cognitive scientists have begged the question of afterlife belief entails dualistic disembodiment.

Furthermore, their assumption about afterlife belief flies in the face of evidence from the history of religions. Primal religions typically believe in an embodied world in some spatial relation to our present one—though unreachable until we die—and often better than our present one, without all the evils. The clichéd “happy hunting ground” represents one version of this. Moreover, the spirits of ancestors as they interact with this world, though without some of the limitations of our bodies, are hardly disembodied. Early theorist of religion E. B. Tylor reports that primal cultures, though often conceiving spirits as “vaporous,” most definitely do not regard them as “immaterial.” In one example, he notes how some tribal religions make sure an opening exists in a container where a spirit abides so that it could escape (410-13). When the Toraja of Indonesia are about to sacrifice a water buffalo, they warn the spirits to keep away lest they suffer injury (Eyre).

As ancient agricultural civilizations developed, afterlife beliefs typically changed: In some cases afterlife belief died, in many others an unhappy picture of the afterlife emerged. I attribute this change to the dominance of agriculture in these cultures and in their controlling pictures about life: just as dead plants, dead human bodies are buried in the earth. While new plants come from the soil and nourish new human life, human individuals do not revive from the grave. Typically, afterlife belief focuses on an Underworld, where people are mere shades or shadows of their former selves, as in the Hebrew concept of Sheol. Note that the dead do have a body, albeit a shadowy one. While they do not suffer complete disembodiment, I sense that the lack of full-blooded, full-bodied life constitutes precisely the most unsatisfactory aspect of existence in Sheol or Hades. The unhappy nature of such an afterlife takes some of the steam out of the argument for a human compulsion to believe that some (disembodied) part of us survives. Annihilation appears a better prospect than “life” after death in Sheol.

Additionally I would note that resurrection of the body represents the most original version of life after death in the Western monotheisms of rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The influence of Greek philosophy, especially (neo)Platonism, has complicated the picture in Western theology, introducing a disembodied soul—at least until the Judgment Day—with which to contend. Nevertheless, I suspect that for everyday believers in an afterlife from these religions, the vast majority imagine immediate presence in heaven with a perfect body, reunited with departed family and friends whose transformed bodies they immediately recognize.

While Slingerland shares the official ontology of reductive physicalism with other cognitive scientists of religion, innate Cartesian dualism ends up playing a peculiar role in his making sense out of life. Slingerland begins sounding rather Potetian, poking fun at poststructuralist types who maintain that our preferences are constructed apart from the constraining influences of our bodies and then declaring that “the mind is the body, and the body is permeated through and through with mind” (376-78). Nevertheless, he concludes that the fundamental nature of consciousness is the same as that of everything else in the universe—a configuration of matter and energy, just more complex than most: “human beings, like all of the other entities that we know about, appear to be robots all the way down, whether we like that idea or not” (392). But we do not like that idea! Here is where dualism re-enters. Part of us wants to know the truth, however unpleasant (a part which I view as continuous with our biological desire accurately to orient ourselves)—in this case, the alleged physicalist truth that we are just things (400-402).³ However, to quote Jack Nicholson’s character in *A Few Good Men*, another

³ Interestingly Slingerland cites the movie, *The Matrix*, where most humans live as brains in a vat but do not know their true state (400-401). Damasio contends that the absence of a body means that a brain in a vat could not duplicate embodied experience (228). Though Slingerland does not specify the disembodied state of such brains, I would opine that what the heroes fighting the Matrix, and viewers identifying with them, find unacceptable is not just the deception, but also the disembodiment.

part of us “can’t handle the truth.” For evolution has designed us not to think of ourselves and others as mere things—even though we are (392-404). Or as he puts it in a subtitle, “We are robots designed not to believe that we are robots” (395). So not to worry, since evolution has programmed us to believe our subjectivity and our meanings are real and to act as if we were valuable. This dualistic thinking consigns us to irreconcilable conflict between supposed scientific and metaphysical truth and what makes life meaningful. The poignancy of this conflict comes out for me in an interview of Ted Slingerland. He declares, “I love intensely” my six-year-old daughter. But then he confesses that this deep affection for his daughter is illogical, since he does not really believe in “love” (*Vancouver Sun*). This is indeed insane dualistic thinking, where the embodied love of a parent for one’s child is less real, less true than discarnate alleged scientific truth.

What is Poteat’s legacy in a world where the insane picture he saw, the insane condition he diagnosed, still exist and exert great influence? In responding to an earlier draft of this paper, Dale Cannon asked, “Who (or what) has been *cured*”? I would answer that Poteat was cured as have been many of his students—and students of those students (though, more than once in his books Poteat catches himself being influenced by the discarnate picture (for example, 1990:71-72); and so I also catch myself in some of my musings.) Currently there appears to be no identifiable movement within the wider academy to cure the insanity of this picture. Yet because of the insight—and the hope—that Bill Poteat has given us, we need to keep that hope and keep the faith, combatting the insanity and helping people find sacred grounding in their bodies in our convivial natural and social worlds.

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