

On the Cosmic Humanities

Re-Enchanting the Academy

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Canterbury Christ Church University

May God us keep

From Single vision and Newton's sleep!

William Blake

I take it as our task this weekend as twofold: to reflect on the conceptual flattening or disenchantment of the humanities over the last century or so; and to try to imagine a more positive and hopeful way forward. These anyway are the two tasks I wish to take up here. I want to take this opportunity to state my views as clearly as I can. I have chosen not to ventriloquize these views primarily through a textual or ethnographic case study, that is, through an object of study. Instead, I want to speak more simply, from the heart, out of my own life experience in the American academy. I want to speak, that is, as a subject. Such a mode of speaking, of course, is itself a humanist argument, an argument that certain types of truth can only be known in and as embodied forms of subjectivity.

Origins

I did my undergraduate work in a Benedictine monastic seminary in the early 1980s, over thirty years ago now. We were a community of young men claiming that we wanted to be celibate for the rest of our lives, a most unusual conclusion, to be sure, and one that called for serious and blunt psychological analysis around human sexuality. It was here, in this cauldron of young male bodies and religious vocation, that I first learned the key psychological concepts of

the unconscious, repression, sublimation, projection, transference and sexual orientation. It was an enchanted space, partly because of the sublimated *eros* that enlivens so much of Catholic male piety and its “love of Christ,” but also because for the monks the intellectual life was no secular pursuit or professional choice. It was a vocation, a “calling” from God.

My own sublimated *eros* was not sublimating so well, though. I was suffering from an obsessive-compulsive disorder manifesting as anorexia that had been consuming me since puberty. The American pop-singer Karen Carpenter would die of “anorexia” in 1983 at the age of thirty-two, while I was in the seminary suffering from a similar condition. The culture barely had a name for what I was suffering, then, and only females were supposed to suffer it. In my own mind, of course, I did not have a disorder. I was fasting. I was being holy. By my sophomore year, I was a walking skeleton. Formal psychoanalysis and classical oedipal theory cured me, of both the anorexia and of the holiness. Freud literally saved my life. Put differently, if it were not for Freud’s hermeneutic of suspicion and the powerful modes of disenchantment that came with it, I would be dead.

But it wasn’t just Freud. It was Jung, too. These two men’s radical affirmation of the fundamental reality of subjectivity and their key insight that religious myths and symbols are psychological signs or crystallizations of forms of consciousness to which we do not normally have access and not objective or historical truths opened vast new intellectual vistas. They gave me my first hermeneutic, my first way of reading religious texts and people on multiple levels.

It was at this same time that I also first encountered what I would now call a “realist impulse,” by which I mean a particular undercurrent of some types of scholarship that whispers a particular secret, the secret that certain types of religious experience might actually tell us profound things not only about ourselves, *but also about the cosmos*. I picked up this realist impulse in many places, but I especially remember two linked books: Elaine Pagel’s *The Gnostic Gospels*, which had just come out, and her late husband Heinz Pagels’ *The Cosmic Code*, an introduction to quantum physics and cosmology. In my reading of these two books, a very imperfect understanding of Christian gnosis and quantum physics became my first *atman* and *brahman*, my first “as above, so below,” my first introduction to the paradoxical unity of the Self “in here” and the physical universe “out there.” I was hooked. Although I had no names for any of this, it was this realist impulse, this intellectual Gnosticism as I would come to call it later, that I was after now.

When I entered the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1985, the psychology of religion was a prominent conversation partner. Within the study of Indian religions, psychoanalytic writers like Gananath Obeyesekere and Sudhir Kakar were widely read and celebrated. Today thinkers in this lineage are more often harassed, censored and forced to withdraw their books from publication, as we saw last spring so dramatically in India with the work of my mentor Wendy Doniger.

The censoring of Wendy's *The Hindus* had been in the works for almost two decades. I was the first American Indologist to be targeted by Hindu fundamentalists for my Chicago dissertation and first book, *Kali's Child* (1995), a psychoanalytically informed study of the Bengali saint and Tantric mystic Ramakrishna. I do not think it is accidental that many of these fundamentalist censors and internet hate-mongers came from the computer and tech industries. These were men—and, yes, they were men—who approached religious texts like binary computer code that can only have a singular or literal meaning. Whereas my work delighted in the both-and paradoxes of erotic mystical experiences that is so fundamental to Indian Tantric practice and iconography (a kind of erotic enchantment), they fought for the angry God of the either-or. In their computer-conditioned forms of thinking, the saint was either spiritual or sexual. He could not be both.

I suffered these campaigns for about seven years, from 1996 until around 2003, before leaving the study of Hinduism. I left not because I thought that there is anything fundamentally wrong with a psychoanalytic approach or my Tantric both-and readings (I have changed none of my positions), but because the postcolonial and relativist assaults on cross-cultural theorizing and comparativism were well underway, and I was convinced that I would never be heard in an American academy that was attempting to erase any and all sameness for the one and only truth of total difference. Consciousness was being completely conflated with culture. So I left.

Materialism

But it was not just religious fundamentalism and the denial of any base from which to do comparison that nearly killed the humanistic study of religion. Another force, far more sophisticated and far more powerful, was also at work. That force was the underlying ontological commitment of the academy itself: materialism. Hence the present more or less absolute reigns

of historicism, constructivism, localism and reductionism in the humanities. All of these extremely powerful, extremely useful tools are too often used not as pragmatic methods, which they are, but as absolute truths, which they are not. Materialism has become our jealous god, a god who thunders from his stormy mountain that the human psyche is nothing more than its local historical, social, economic, cognitive and neurological networks. At the end of the day, we are just matter. And matter is ultimately mindless and meaningless. It's all math. It's all mechanism. There is no larger meaning. Here consciousness has become completely conflated with cognition.

The digital revolution, which constantly mistakes information for knowledge even as it connects us in more and more dramatic ways, has supercharged this process. The result is a series of metaphors and ways of thinking that further radicalize the conflation of consciousness with culture and cognition, if not the computer itself now. In this view, we are all essentially “moist robots,” to quote the cartoon series *Dilbert*. Any notion of “spirit,” “soul,” even “experience” itself is to be deconstructed down into neurological froth, mere bits of information to capture and, some day, download in an AI fantasy that is really more of a nightmare.

This is how we got to our present situation, where words like “soul” and “spirit” are dubious words that no decent academic should utter and where everything is “constructed,” by whom and out of what it is never quite explained (the metaphor of a “construction,” in short, is never itself deconstructed). The result is a kind of neo-behaviorism gone mad. Such madness, of course, has been a long time coming—about a hundred years now. I am always reminded here of the joke I once heard about the two behaviorists who had just had sex. One turned to the other and said: “I could see that it was good for you. Was it good for me?”

In brief, the present disenchantment of the humanities flows from the materialist assumption that there is no psyche as such, that consciousness is “a product of chance configurations of matter, driven mechanically by the pressures of natural selection,” pressures which themselves are without meaning, agency, or direction.¹ Our intellectual cultures are committed to a physicalism so pervasive and so deep that we often no longer even recognize this materialism for what it is: an ideology. Much less do we acknowledge that this ideology might be a very serious obstacle to developing an adequate theory of religion.

None of this, please note, should be construed as a rejection of any historical, social, feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, ethnographic or cognitive method. In all due humility, please

remember that I was the poster-boy for the harassed psychoanalytic Indologist for years, and that I was saved in the seminary by disenchantment of a Freudian sort. I *love* these methods. I say, then: “Use all of these tools, and use them robustly, but *use* them. But please do not believe them. Do not bow down to the jealous God of the Either-Or. And always ask: Just *who* is using these methods? *Who* knows things across the centuries, the cultures, even the light years now?”

That is my complaint in a nutshell. Basically, I think the general materialism of the academy is gradually killing off the humanities, and that it is time to write back. Let me back up a bit now and explain how I came to this conclusion after I left the study of Hinduism around 2003 or so.

Gnostic Pedagogy

My intellectual travels after I left Indology were diverse and, occasionally, quite wild, as I attempted to recreate myself professionally and spiritually. I had given my life to India and Bengali Tantric literature for a decade and a half. I now had to leave all of that. I wrote two Blakean books, partly as a means of engaging in this process: *Roads of Excess*, on the homoerotic structures of male mystical literature in the world religions; and *The Serpent’s Gift*, on the implicit gnosticisms of the study of religion and why it is why so transgressive with respect to the orthodox traditions. I was now relating the hermeneutics of suspicion to traditional forms of apophatic mystical thinking and re-imagining the study of religion as a potential form of academic gnosticism. In this same spirit of embracing rationalism and disenchantment while also moving beyond it, this latter book also advanced the notion of a “gnostic classroom” in a third epistemological space “beyond reason” and “beyond belief.” It also introduced what would become a major motif for me: the Human as Two. This is a meta-concept for me that I do not have time to explain in this context, but suffice it to say that it incorporates everything from the Freudian unconscious to historical cases of human deification, that is, the sense of being human and divine at the same time. Perhaps most relevant for our present gathering, the Human as Two helps me to explain not just why we are enchanted, but also why we are usually not enchanted.

All of this, in turn, has major pedagogical implications. Let me give you two examples.

A graduate example. The dual structure of graduate mentoring in our GEM program. Seong. Looking for the X-factor. Or, like Professor Xavier, I am looking for mutants. And we

find them. Or they find us. Superman and Clark Kent.

An undergraduate example. The initiatory structure of *Comparing Religions*. Faithful re-readings, rational re-readings, reflexive re-readings.

The Impossible

While I was writing *The Serpent's Gift*, I was also researching and writing a history of the human potential movement in the counterculture of California and beyond. This latter ethnographic and textual project brought me face to face with individuals who told me stories that I knew could not have possibly happened, which I knew happened. Often, these stories tended to involve some traumatic state—a serious illness, a death, a birth, a car accident, a psychedelic assault on the brain—that was accompanied by a state of transcendence and, oddly enough, strikingly empirical parapsychological phenomena: say, an accurate telepathic or precognitive cognition of a loved one's death. Other stories involved fantastic encounters with exotic non-human or transhuman life-forms: conscious plasmas, floating balls of light, and wild invisible species in the environment that engaged human subjects in super-sexual and super-spiritual ways. There was the erotic and the mystical again. The paradox has never left me.

Take three of my most recent American cases—the science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick, the horror novelist Whitley Strieber, and the cell biologist and feminist social critic Barbara Ehrenreich. In each case, the author describes a life-changing encounter with what any earlier culture would have recognized as a deity, djinn, demon, or angel. Each engages these earlier religious interpretations but finally moves outside of them to posit an actual invisible species, a life-form dependent not on carbon-based chemicals like our own bodies and brains, but to some sort of intelligent plasma or conscious form of energy. Each author suggests in his or her own way that these energy-creatures "feed off" of human emotion and engage human beings in order to tame, domesticate or evolve us via sexual union and some kind of "interspecies symbiosis" or "communion." Such shockingly realist speculations point to an emergent mythology that I have called the new "biological gods." These biological gods are part of a new set of evolutionary animisms, erotic ecologies and biological polytheisms that have come to dominate much of American popular culture and pose a dramatic, if largely unnoticed, challenge to the reigning materialisms of the academy.

The traditional humanities, of course, reduce all of these strange encounters with the wild and the invisible to anthropomorphic projection and local social and historical processes, effectively conflating all such forms of consciousness with local culture and, of course, with human beings. Conventional science, on the other hand, conflates consciousness with cognition and the brain and reads these encounters as neurological hiccups, hallucinations, or—my favorite sleight of hand—as “anecdotes,” which of course explains exactly nothing. The invocation of the anecdotal, of course, is part of a mathematical or statistical strategy that effectively erases every extraordinary event into the flatness of the large set, that is, into the ordinary and the banal.

In any case, as I listened to and read hundreds of these “anecdotes,” I realized, with some surprise, that I had studied mystical literature for a quarter of a century and could not recall reading a single essay or book on how to think about such things. I realized that the study of religion had essentially marginalized these perfectly historical events because of its implicit or explicit commitments to monotheism and science. Ehrenreich’s fury is perhaps worth calling on here. She despises monotheism as a form of “deicide” that insisted on killing the gods and that led eventually to modern science, which killed off everything else. When it comes to what she calls “living with a wild god,” monotheism and science are our problems, not our solutions.

Whatever the reason for our present incompetence before the uncanny, the wildly alive, and countless parapsychological events that give ample witness to the presence of an immense web of life and being, I realized that our fields could not even bring themselves to put such experiences and events on the academic table, much less try to understand them. Oh, we could put them on our table as long as they are framed as “representations” or “constructions,” that is, as long as they are dead, but we cannot relate to them or speak of them as if they are alive and present. Such living presences certainly did not fit comfortably into any religious *or* conventional scientific box of which I was aware. Having read my Foucault, I began to suspect a disciplining.

I decided to write about my perplexity and this disciplining. I wrote *Authors of the Impossible* in an effort to try to understand what happened to our fields in the twentieth century, a century which began with nearly every founding figure of our disciplines fascinated with psychical phenomena (including William James, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, and, a bit later, Mircea Eliade) and ended with no one willing to talk about any of it, not at least in public.

I eventually came to the conclusion that these sorts of anomalous experiences should be central to any adequate theory of religion. We do not know what they are, but we know that they

happen, and we know that people who experience them tend to experience them as deeply meaningful and quickly convert them into stories. As Ann Taves might put it, these are the “building blocks” of folklore, mythology and, eventually religion itself. They are not yet religion, not at least in any institutional, political or social sense that scholars would recognize (and deconstruct) as religion. They are inexplicable private little revelations that, for the most part, are repressed, humiliated and shamed by the elite gate guards of our cultures. But taken together, remembered and retold over years, decades, and then centuries, these same impossible experiences tend to “build up” into basic religious ideas, like the globally distributed belief in a separable soul, the varied beliefs in immortality and reincarnation, the magical powers attributed to shamans and religious prodigies, and so on.²

The Nature of Mind

I realized something else. I realized that the only reason these events are “impossible” is because of our own philosophical assumptions, and more particularly our philosophy of mind. The academy generally assumes that mind is purely a function of brain matter, that it is contained in a skull, and that it blips out when the brain stops. These views, of course, are all perfectly understandable, given our sensory systems and cognitive make-up. But there is nothing all-knowing about these senses or this cognitive make-up. Quite the contrary, as we now know, these systems filter out immeasurably more than they allow in. They occult more of the world than they reveal. Clearly, cognition is *not* consciousness, and what we see is *not* all that is there.

Again and again, I was confronted with the same simple idea. What if the brain is not the producer but *the reducer* of consciousness? What if mind is not in the brain? What if the brain is in mind? Or better, what if these metaphors of “in” and “outside” are simply a function of our inadequate three-dimensional imaginations and do not, and cannot, reflect what already and always is? Suddenly, all those people who tell us that they knew what was happening, or was about to happen, to their loved ones no longer sound so impossible. Their reports cease to be statistical flukes or “anecdotes” and become some of our most precious access points to the natures and workings of mind, body, space and time, that is, to human history. Suddenly, moreover, we can also imagine forms of consciousness, agency, and mind that are not human at all, that is, that have not been “stepped down” by a human brain into a social ego. We can think

more ecologically and less anthropocentrically.

Please note: I am not arguing for an either-or here. “We were once all materialists. Let’s all be idealists now” (although I confess great delight in meeting an idealist now and then³). Nor do I wish to suggest that consciousness is one “something” or “someone” manifesting through different life forms (although many of my mystical sources give witness to exactly this common experience and philosophical claim). Rather, I am suggesting something more humble. I am suggesting a serious thought experiment, a paradoxical way of re-imagining mind and body, space and time, so that we can re-imagine and renew the humanities in an age in which they are being consistently derided, demeaned, defunded, even “abolished,” as the education minister of Japan requested in an official document two weeks ago.

Humanists have participated in their own abolishing. Isn’t it strange that scholars of religion have been whipping people like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade for decades now for their allegedly ridiculous ideas about the “sui generis” nature of the sacred when, in phenomenological fact, consciousness itself is exactly that: “sui generis”? Consciousness is entirely its own thing. We know of nothing else like it in the universe, and anything we can know about that universe, including any and all mathematical and scientific knowledge, we only know in and through this same consciousness. This consciousness may well be “groundless,” of course, as the Continental philosophers have it. Indeed, it cannot be reduced to or explained by any cultural, linguistic or cognitive framework. It is “empty,” to use the Buddhist language. It is *nicht* or “Nothing,” to invoke Meister Eckhart. But this hardly means that it does not exist, only that it is not a “thing” or “essence” that can be perceived, objectified and measured by the senses, reason and number.

As a single hopeful sign of where we might go if only we had the courage, consider Jacques Derrida’s acceptance of telepathy at the end of his life.⁴ He was confessing his own multiple telepathic experiences and reading Freud, who wrote six papers on the same subject.⁵ Derrida notes that Freud ends his “Telepathy and Psychoanalysis” with a vision of the figure of Saint-Denis walking and holding his own decapitated head. It is only the first step that is costly, Freud wryly observes, “But what a step beyond it would be,” adds Derrida. That is to say, it is only the presupposition that we are locked down into our heads, that we *are* only those heads, that needs to be overcome. After that, the field is wide open. Telepathy is, after all, only possible if communication can take place *between* heads separated at great distances in space and time.

As Derrida so accurately puts it, telepathy is “outside-the-subject.” Which is to say: it is not simply subjective.

Frederic Myers, who actually coined the term in 1882 just west of here, understood things telepathic better still than Freud or Derrida. The word is a Greek derivative that means “pathos or suffering at a distance.” By the new word, the poet, Cambridge classicist, and education reformer meant to signal the deeply relational, deeply emotional bonds that result in telepathic experiences. Telepathy seldom occurs between complete strangers, after all, but it is quite common among entangled loved ones, including between human and non-human loved ones, hence the elaborate psychical folklore around humans and pets, particularly dogs. Myers was very clear what he himself thought about telepathy. As a devout reader of Plato’s *Symposium* and the lover of a woman who had been dead for years and with whom he communed through a medium, he thought that telepathy was ultimately about *eros*, about a kind of cosmic love at the root and base of who and what we are.

Almost no one, of course, reads *this* Freud or celebrates *this* Derrida. And almost no one even knows who Frederic Myers was. Moreover, pretty much everyone thinks that the tabloids invented telepathy, not a Cambridge humanist.

Why?

The Secret Criterion of Truth in the Present Humanities

I think I know. A few years ago, I stumbled upon the secret criterion of truth in the humanities. Do you want to hear it? Here it is: “If a truth is to be declared in the humanities, it must meet one fundamental criterion: it must be depressing.”

Try it out on your own experience in your own field. My bet is that if you say something that is deconstructive or negative, you might well be challenged, but you will also be heard, and maybe even celebrated. If, on the other hand, you are foolish enough to say something constructive, positive, even, God forbid, cosmic, you will almost certainly be labeled a dilettante, an “essentialist,” perhaps “pseudo-scientific.” Maybe, if you are lucky like me, you will even become a promoter of “New Age woo-woo.”

Go ahead. Try it.

Alas, it is not only the case that we are depressing. We are also boring. Louis Menand offered a most potent, and humorous, observation a decade ago now.⁶ He observed that humanists have surrendered the big ideas to the physicists, who can say any crazy damned thing they want and get away with it. The physicists go on and on about Big Bangs, ghost universes, holographic universes, multiple dimensions, entangled telepathic particles, God particles, nonlocality, retrocausation, you name it. The wilder, the better, it seems. And us? We allergically avoid all our remarkable stuff, all those religious experiences that strongly suggest that quantum effects *do* scale up into human experience—all that mystical interconnectedness, all those entangled people who somehow instantly know what is happening to a loved one (or a beloved pet) a thousand miles away. Instead, we go on and on about how we are all locked into our historical contexts, how religion is only about power, or colonialism, or economics, or now cognitive modules and evolutionary adaptations, how these stories are all just “anecdotal” statistical flukes or perceptual delusions—*anything*, as long as it is depressing and boring.

Toward the Cosmic Humanities

Why do we want to be so small? Why can't we be cosmic, like the physicists? Is not our human nature an evolved expression of the cosmos itself? So how could we be anything other than cosmic? Why can't we imagine a new comparativism grounded in a new realist philosophy of mind, one that can entertain the possibility that mind is something more than brain; that consciousness is not just culture, cognition or computer. Why cannot we take up David Chalmers suggestion and think of mind as *real* and as something fundamental to the cosmos itself, like gravity or force.⁷

Chalmers is hardly alone. The Cambridge paleontologist Simon Conway Morris has just written a book called *The Runes of Evolution: How the Universe Became Self-Aware*. After arguing for three hundred (double columned) pages that consciousness is not unique to humans, that evolutionary convergence is common, and that the evolution of life and mind is likely neither contingent nor random, he ends the book with five extraordinary stories involving the religious inspiration of a modern mathematical genius (Ramanujan), two apparitions that signaled their otherwise unknown deaths to the visionaries (that is, two telepathic experiences), a British RAF pilot time traveling four years into the future on a strange flight, and a case of

apparent levitation in a lunatic asylum. In short, he ends his book with what I have called “the impossible.” His very last lines, moreover, playfully suggest that this may well be where the adventure of evolution is heading, that “the journey has only just begun.”⁸

I think Chalmers and Morris are pointing us in the right direction, which I would reframe very generally as the cosmic and evolutionary nature of embodied consciousness or mind, be it human, non-human, or transhuman. What would become of the humanities if we were to take up such a pointing and re-imagine the humanities as the study of consciousness coded in culture? What then? With respect to the study of religion, what if we stopped trying to discipline reality into our little depressing materialist boxes, refigured the sacred as consciousness itself, and looked again to extreme, uncanny, “impossible” experiences as keys to human nature, as Mind winking back from the light through the refractions of body, brain, history, culture and cognition? In what sense would we be studying ourselves? And in what sense would we be studying someone else, the Wholly Other of our intellectual ancestors? If we were to embrace both this epistemological paradox and this realist impulse, would we not have something crucial to offer the future of knowledge? Here, at least, the humanities would no longer be what my Rice colleague Timothy Morton calls “candy sprinkles on the cake of science.” The humanities, now re-imagined as the study of a cosmic consciousness coded in human culture, would *be* the cake.

And these new humanities would certainly be re-enchanted. There is an understatement. Indeed, they would be super-enchanted with a form of consciousness conceived not as an emergent ephemeral property of brain matter but as the fundamental nature of who we are and how we come to know the cosmos. This, of course, would be a new day, the new day of the cosmic humanities.

¹ Bernardo Kastrup, *Why Materialism Is Baloney* (Winchester, UK: IFF Books, 2014), 15.

² Ann and I do not share the same philosophy of mind. Not surprisingly, I have put the matter a bit differently. I have suggested that such paranormal events are sometimes inherently meaningful, already storied, already semiotic or symbolic in some super-weird sense that we have no name for. I suggested that the paranormal is a kind of story or living myth that is acted out in the physical environment, by what or whom it is not at all clear. We do not speak these myths. These myths speak us.

³ Most recently, Bernardo Kastrup.

⁴ “Telepathy,” in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. by Nicholas Royle (Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁵ For more on this repressed psychoanalytic theme, see Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, in 3 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1957), vol. 3, ch. 14, “Occultism.” For the six essays themselves and a mid-twentieth century flurry of thinking around them, see Georges Devereux, ed., *Psychoanalysis and the Occult* (New York: International Universities Press, 1953).

⁶ Louis Menand, “Dangers Within and Without,” *Profession* (2005): 10-17.

⁷ http://www.ted.com/talks/david_chalmers_how_do_you_explain_consciousness

⁸ Simon Conway Morris, *The Runes of Evolution: How the Universe Became Self-Aware* (West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania: Templeton Press, 2015), 301-303.