

Comparing comparison: Smith and Davidson

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Abstract

Comparison, as a method in the study of religion, has received considerable criticism in recent years. Much of the discussion addresses what we call the dilemma of religious comparison: either similarities between the cases compared are real and the differences accidental, or the differences are real and the similarities merely apparent. The first path is held to artificially impose similarity by wrongly privileging one of the things being compared, which imposes an essentialist view, taking its characteristic as the measure of all comparable cases. The other path exaggerates differences between comparands, undermining the very premise of comparison. We argue that this apparent dilemma presupposes a representational conception of meaning, namely that the task of comparison is to discover what kind of *thing* is represented by the cases being compared. However, there are other conceptions of meaning that might potentially avoid or resolve the dilemma, by reorientating the basic conception of comparison, as opposed to entering into details of recent critical debates. This article argues that interpretationism, an approach to meaning associated with philosopher Donald Davidson does just this. JZ Smith did not explicitly adopt any semantic theory. But we demonstrate that he implicitly endorsed all of its main elements in his work on comparison. Smith's writings represent a rich and detailed model of how comparison can be carried out under an interpretationist semantics. This article has two important implications for the study of religion. First, it dissolves the dilemma of religious comparison, suggesting a firmer theoretical and methodological basis for comparative studies. Second, it underlines that Smith's work serves as a powerful and practical model of comparative method, as constructed on this basis. As a corollary, an interdisciplinary side-benefit, reading Smith in light of Davidson also makes important contributions to philosophy of language.

Keywords: comparison, methodology, interpretationism, semantic theory, Jonathan Z. Smith, Donald Davidson

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Comparando a comparação: Smith e Davidson

Resumo

Nos últimos anos, vários autores têm criticado a comparação, como método na ciência da religião. Grande parte da discussão aborda o que chamamos de dilema da comparação religiosa: ou as semelhanças entre os casos comparados são reais e as diferenças acidentais, ou as diferenças são reais e as semelhanças meramente aparentes. No primeiro caso, o ato da comparação impõe semelhanças de uma maneira artificial, privilegiando erroneamente uma das coisas a serem comparadas, o que pressupõe uma visão essencialista, afirmando que as suas características servem como medida de todo caso comparável. No segundo caso, as diferenças entre os casos a serem comparados são vistas como uma barreira insuperável, minando a própria premissa da comparação. Argumentamos que este aparente dilema pressupõe uma concepção representativa do significado, ou seja, que a comparação tem como meta descobrir qual tipo de *coisa* é representada pelos casos que estão sendo comparados. Entretanto, existem outras concepções do significado que podem potencialmente evitar ou resolver o dilema, reorientando a concepção básica de comparação, ao invés de entrar em detalhes dos recentes debates críticos. Este artigo afirma que o interpretarismo, uma abordagem do significado associada ao filósofo Donald Davidson, faz exatamente isso. JZ Smith não adotou explicitamente uma teoria semântica. Mas demonstramos que todos os seus principais elementos em seu trabalho de comparação se sustentam na base de uma visão interpretarista. As obras de Smith representam um modelo rico e detalhado de como a comparação prossegue sob uma semântica interpretativa. Este artigo tem duas implicações importantes para o estudo da religião. Primeiro, ela dissolve o dilema da comparação religiosa, sugerindo uma base teórica e metodológica mais firme para estudos comparativos. Segundo, sublinha que o trabalho de Smith serve como um modelo poderoso e prático do método comparativo, construído a partir desta base. Como corolário, oferece um benefício colateral interdisciplinar: a leitura de Smith à luz de Davidson também faz contribuições importantes para a filosofia da linguagem. **Palavras-chave:** comparação, metodologia, interpretação, teoria semântica, Jonathan Z. Smith, Donald Davidson

Comparing comparison: Smith and Davidson

Resumen

La comparación, como método en el estudio de la religión, ha recibido considerables críticas en los últimos años. Gran parte de la discusión aborda lo que llamamos el dilema de la comparación religiosa: o las similitudes entre los casos comparados son reales y las diferencias accidentales, o las diferencias son reales y las similitudes meramente aparentes. El primer camino se sostiene para imponer artificialmente la similitud al privilegiar erróneamente una de las cosas que se comparan, lo que impone una visión esencialista, tomando su característica como la medida de todos los casos comparables. El otro camino exagera las diferencias entre los comparandos, socavando la premisa misma de la comparación. Argumentamos que este aparente dilema presupone una concepción representacional del significado, a saber, que la tarea de la comparación

es descubrir qué tipo de cosas representan los casos que se comparan. Sin embargo, existen otras concepciones de significado que podrían potencialmente evitar o resolver el dilema, al reorientar la concepción básica de comparación, en lugar de entrar en detalles de debates críticos recientes. Este artículo argumenta que el interpretacionismo, un enfoque del significado asociado con el filósofo Donald Davidson, hace justamente eso. JZ Smith no adoptó explícitamente ninguna teoría semántica. Pero demostramos que implícitamente apoyó todos sus elementos principales en su trabajo sobre la comparación. Los escritos de Smith representan un modelo rico y detallado de cómo se puede llevar a cabo la comparación bajo una semántica interpretativa. Este artículo tiene dos implicaciones importantes para el estudio de la religión. Primero, disuelve el dilema de la comparación religiosa, sugiriendo una base teórica y metodológica más firme para los estudios comparativos. En segundo lugar, subraya que el trabajo de Smith sirve como un modelo poderoso y práctico de método comparativo, construido sobre esta base. Como corolario, un beneficio colateral interdisciplinario, leer a Smith a la luz de Davidson también hace contribuciones importantes a la filosofía del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: comparación, metodología, interpretacionismo, teoría semántica, Jonathan Z. Smith, Donald Davidson

Comparison, as a method in the study of religion, has fallen on hard times. Once a preeminent methodology, over the last thirty years or so has “been surrounded and put on the defensive from several sides” (PADEN, 2004, p. 78). The critical literature shows three main attitudes: that comparison in the study of religion is simply not possible; that it is possible but yields little of value; and that it is possible but carries so much risk as to be better off abandoned. The third line is enjoying a particularly strong run, which Paden further breaks down into two strands: that comparison “has been historically allied with various religious interests and assumptions”; and that it perpetuates illicit “ideological, sociopolitical functions” that have served the interests of “a particular culture, class, religion or gender” (PADEN, 2004, p. 78). Michael Stausberg remarks that the question of whether religion can or should be compared is inexorably linked to the question of which political or other interests doing so would serve (STAUSBERG, 2011, p. 22; forthcoming).

Jeppe S. Jensen was one of the first scholars of religion to recognize that the nature and problems of comparison are closely tied to issues of *meaning*: “I am firmly convinced that comparison and ‘comparative religion’ may become legitimate businesses through scholars’ heightened attention to language use and issues of terminology—and, of course, through attention to the theories involved in the language use and the terminologies” (JENSEN, 2004b). More recently, Wouter Hanegraff directly ties the “problem of

comparison” to the question of meaning, specifically to the danger of essentialising religion through definition:

What it means is that “religion” was much more than just a Christian theological concept arbitrarily imposed on the rest of the world. Additionally, and more crucially, *it was a necessary technical requirement of the comparative enterprise*. What makes it problematic is not so much that enterprise as such but the very logic of prototype thinking, which proceeds by comparing the new and unknown to what is already familiar and thereby ends up privileging the latter as the norm for everything else. This prototype logic caused “religion” to emerge and get consolidated as a deeply ethnocentric concept grounded in monotheist, more specifically Christian, and even more specifically Protestant assumptions and ideologies. The difference between scholars such as Saler and their radical deconstructionist counterparts is that the former are willing to accept such ethnocentricity as unavoidable in the study of “religion,” while the latter are not. The former are saying, “If that is what ‘religion’ really means, well . . . then that just happens to be what it means, doesn’t it”? The latter are saying, “If that is what ‘religion’ really means, then clearly we cannot continue using it for scholarly purposes!” (HANEGRAAFF, 2016, p. 589).

However, the dangers of illicitly essentializing are much more prevalent under certain theories of meaning than others. Virtually all of the literature devoted to the “problem of comparison” implicitly assumes a particular model of meaning, namely what philosophers of language have dubbed representationalism. Our aim of this section is to re-examine that “problem” through the lens of a different model of meaning, namely that developed and defended by philosopher Donald Davidson and which we dub interpretationism. We find a prototype of what comparison might look like under an interpretationist framework in the work of J.Z. Smith, although it is not clear whether he intended his work be read in that light. Rather, we present Davidson’s views on meaning as providing further articulation of Smith’s view, filling in details that he himself left implicit. To the extent that Smith offers a way past the impasse that is the “problem of comparison”, interpretationism’s value to the study of religion is further revealed.

Preliminaries

At base, ‘comparison’ is the act of putting two things—comparands—side-by-side in order to highlight similarities and differences. Comparison is grounded on the view that comparands both share something in common and

yet are not exactly the same. Despite the common saying, you can compare apples and oranges: they are both fruit, yet oranges are citrus while apples are not. There is virtually no limit on what we can compare. We find it unavoidable. To be of interest to scholars of religion, however, constraints must be placed on the comparands. We highlight the fact that comparison is intended as a methodology—i.e. it is a *process*. Processes are purpose-driven, and their success is best measured by how well they achieve their purposes. However, even limiting ourselves to scholarly use, we do not find a unified conception of what the purpose of comparison in the study of religion might or should be. Michael Strausberg, in describing some of the earlier uses of comparison, mentions these (STAUSBERG, 2011, p. 22-27; forthcoming):

- James G. Frazer and Edward B. Tylor: to find the necessary and sufficient conditions that delineate ‘primitive’ from contemporary religion.
- Friedrich Max Müller: to establish a scientific taxonomic scheme that can be applied to new cases.
- William James: to delineate the core experiential dimensions of religiosity.
- Émile Durkheim: to put religion on a scientific sociological footing.
- Max Weber: to show how religions embed an economic ethics.

This list is not exhaustive. More recent scholars have suggested different purposes. Clifford Geertz, for example, can be understood as employing a comparative method to show that religious institutions are continuous with other, non-religious, ones (Geertz, 1973 (1993)). Each can be and has been critiqued. It has not hard to see how each can be seen as implicated in the “problem of comparison”: namely that they take the supposed point of commonality in the sample comparands as *essential* to religion itself. Each underscores an assumption that the purpose of comparison is to give us knowledge of the kind of *thing* that religion is or how ‘religion’ should be correctly understood. In other words, they view the theory of religion that comes out of comparison as model of the reality of religion, and that the method is a route to that model. Put into semantic terms, the purpose of comparison, they suppose, is to reveal the meaning of ‘religion’ and related terms, where those meanings are given by what they actually represent. This is the core of representationalism: meaning is

given by what it *represents* or *stands for*. Religion is what each of the religious comparands have in common, and the meaning of ‘religion’ is what intersects each of the instances to which the term applies. For representationalists, meaning is primarily a relation between words and things in the world. The point of comparison, on this model, is *ontological*. As such, a comparison is successful if it *correctly* identifies what religious comparands have in common.

However, that view immediately gives rise to a problem: there are any number of ways two things may be thought similar. The plucking of the Golden Bough by the Roman priest of Nemi and the Norse myth of Balder have several things in common, including many trivial ones: they both are mentioned by Frazer (FRAZER, 1922), by Smith (SMITH, 1973), and by us (just now). A lot more is needed to move past the bare possibility of comparison to its usefulness as a methodology in the study of religion/s. Using comparison in scholarly work requires that points of commonality have epistemological value, especially in terms of supporting some theoretical stance. The same holds for points of difference. It is tempting to insist that the points of similarity and of difference, if they are to play the methodological role required, must in some sense be *genuine* rather than *contrived* or *imposed* by the comparator, as well as be capable of supporting the desired inferences.

However, comparison works with parts not wholes, with selected characteristics or aspects of the phenomena to be compared. We do not compare phenomena taken as wholes, but by choosing certain comparands, certain similarities and/or differences from among a universe of other possible ones. But how and why do we select *just these* similarities and/or differences? If the goal of the comparison is a model of the world (an objectively real and accurate representation of relations between phenomena), then we run into a difficulty. Selected aspects of comparands must meet two criteria, on this view: they must be real (not projected or imposed by the comparator); and they must be relevant (revealing a useful result, something of theoretical significance). How can we meet these two criteria? One approach would be to use a comparative method itself to select relevant aspects, to select features that seem relevant on the basis of what we already know about the two proposed comparands. This raises the possibility that the aspects of the comparands are not real but are rather projections of the theoretical or conceptual frame used to ‘operationalize’ them. More problematically, this would guarantee their relevance only at the

price of a vicious circle—every comparison would start by assuming what it supposedly aims to establish and so be methodologically unsound. The other approach would be to choose aspects of comparands both shown to be real and selected on the basis of evidence that has nothing to do with the proposed comparison. But if we choose them with no reference to our comparative agenda, it would be impossible to know whether they are relevant. There is an effectively infinite number of possible comparable aspects, and the only way to be sure that we choose relevant ones is to keep in mind what it is we seek to achieve with the comparison. And that leads us back to the vicious circularity. In sum, comparison fails as a method if we assume that its purpose is to give us a model that represents reality in a straightforward manner.

The vicious circularity is based on two assumptions: (i) that the purpose of comparison is semantic (i.e. to uncover the correct meanings), and (ii) that meaning is given by what the terms represent in the world. We think that (i) is correct, but that (ii) is problematic. In the next section we show that the problematic nature of (ii) is implicitly assumed by the critics who regard comparison as illicit essentializing of religion\,s, but we argue that those scholars draw the wrong conclusion from that: namely, that comparison is cannot be rehabilitated. We conclude, instead, that it needs to be recast along a different semantic axis. In the remaining parts of the article we lay out what the alternative model for meaning might be, and then use Smith as a rich example of what comparison in the study of religion under such a model would look like. We are not suggesting that Smith consciously intended this.¹ Our interest is not exegetical; at best we suggest that that model of meaning is implicit in his thought, and that it helps us see that such an approach is not a firing of just another salvo in the comparison-wars, but a way to reorient the entire debate.

Comparison under a Representationalist Semantics

Most critiques of comparison start with the assumption that the comparator occupies the territory of one of the comparands, and peers at

¹ He does acknowledge his being deeply influenced by Cassirer's form of structuralism at number of points: e.g., linguistic symbols are modes of thought; language, in an important sense, 'creates' the human world rather than merely reflecting it; all language use, including myth, presumes its rationality; and no instances of human behaviour ('ethnographies') are outliers or 'exotic', but rather should all be 'taken as quite ordinary data for interrogation and constructive inquiry' (SMITH, 2004, p. 3-4).

the other from that perspective.² In other words, one of the comparands has a privileged relationship to the comparator: it embodies the classificatory system that enables the possibility of the comparison.

A post-structural critique gets traction when the privileged comparand is hegemonic and imperialistic, such as Christianity—i.e. when subordinate, often marginalized, religious traditions get classified, and hence evaluated, by the categories of the oppressor. Such comparisons serve to perpetuate power imbalances, and are complicit in many of the world's injustices. But notice that the foundation of this critique is the illegitimacy of treating the hegemonic comparand as an objective standard, i.e. as correctly modelling or representing an abstract religious reality *as such*. It has less force where the comparator has a privileged relationship with a subordinate or oppressed comparand. For example, J. Lorand Matory critiques Marx' and Freud's 'anti-African trope of the fetish' and prioritizes instead 'the making and the meaning of the real-life 'fetish' in West African and Afro-diasporic religions (2018, p. 15, p. 171). He turns the table on European social theory by arguing that "even by the standards of Marx and Freud, the paradigmatic 'fetishists' are no fools about the nature of value and agency. In fact, they have a great deal to teach Marx and Freud about both" (2018, p. 284). His argument is premised on an assertion of both sameness and difference in the two cases, but he inverts the prioritization.

Even in such inverted cases, though, an objection remains. At least one of the comparands must be presumed to be paradigmatic, correct, faithful, *true*, in at least one of its aspects, allowing that aspect to serve as the point of commonality that enables comparison. All things that can be compared to it must share this point. As a result, this point becomes *reified* or *essentialized*, standing apart from all historical-cultural particularities. The critique of this Eliadean or Ottoean stance is well understood by scholars of religion today. However, the notion of theory as a model of reality and of method as a route to theory in that sense also lies at its root of this critique itself.

The rejection of all essentializing leads to the view that there is nothing to religion beyond a given historical-cultural particularity. At its extreme, this view results in the claim that historical-cultural contexts are pure particularity, lacking in any sort of generality. Therefore, there cannot possibly be any point of real commonality between any two instances—i.e.

² Paden critiques this view, arguing that the 'new comparativism' 'should be a bilateral, two-way process' (PADEN, 2000, p.184).

that there literally cannot *be* any comparands. Nor can there be any correct meaning of ‘religion,’ at least of any scholarly use. Any appearance otherwise must be due to impositions or fantasies of the comparator. Any general or abstract noun which purports to name more than one instance, like ‘religion,’ must therefore be suspect. Its connotation must be contrived by the comparator, and its denotation consequently ‘manufactured’. Note that the same assumption about the nature of theory, and consequently of method, comes into play: there can be no real point of commonality between any two instances classified by the scholar as ‘religious’, and so there can be no theory of *that thing*—i.e. no model or true representation of religion as such. And certainly comparison could never be a route to such a ‘thing,’ even if one were possible.³

Table 1 illustrates the two main ‘camps’ of basic attitudes to religious comparison among scholars of religion/s.

Table 1. Two views of comparison in the study of religion/s

‘Religious’ Comparands	Realism	Constructivism
Similarities	Similarities are real.	Similarities are constructed and imposed by the scholar.
Differences	Differences are accidental or inessential.	Differences are real.

The key point here is that both perspectives agree on the assumption that the debate can only be settled by determining what is real, i.e., what the terms of comparison truly refer to. The dilemma of religious comparison reduces to the following: Either similarities across religious comparands are real and the differences accidental, or else the differences are real and the similarities merely apparent. As we will show, Smith’s attempt to rehabilitate comparison as a method in the study of religion/s defended neither of these options: it dissolved the dilemma altogether.

³ Critiques of comparison along the lines noted in the last few paragraphs include (MCCUTCHEON, 1997; DONIGER 2000; HOLDREGE, 2000; PATTON, 2000; SMITH, 2000a; JUSCHKA, 2004; SHEEDY, 2019).

Interpretationism

Twin assumptions – that a theory of religion is a representation of what kind of thing religion is and that comparison is a route to that sort of theory – underlie both horns of the dilemma of religious comparison. That view of theory smuggles in a representationalist model of meaning: the meaning of something is given by what it represents; one grasps the meaning when one knows what it represents. In its place we offer a model of meaning, interpretationism, that is most closely associated with the work of philosopher Donald Davidson. Our choice of interpretationism is not an arbitrary one—a growing number of scholars of religion have been fruitfully mining Davidson’s thoughts for some time.⁴

At base, Davidson holds that there is nothing more to the meaning of a linguistic performance, whether spoken or written, than what is needed for neutral ‘observers’, e.g. listeners or readers, to understand it: “What a fully informed interpreter could learn about what a speaker means is all that there is to learn” (DAVIDSON, 1983 (2001), p. 148).⁵ As a result, the meaning and meaningfulness of particular bits of language are necessarily entwined with the *method* used to uncover them. The meaning of an utterance or a passage and the means by which a listener or reader comes to understand it are two sides of the same coin. Following Davidson, ‘interpretation’ refers to the process by which meaning comes to be understood, and ‘interpretationism’ as the name of this sort of approach to a theory of meaning. Some terms, so understood, may later be seen to represent some aspects of the world, but the important thing is that that is not necessary in order to understand them; grasping meaning is not a matter of looking to see what aspects of the world they represent. To understand what ‘religion’ means is to understand how that term is understood by those who use it, not by being able to point to the sort of *thing* in the world ‘religion’ names.

Davidson’s fundamental theoretical question is this: What factors must be in place in order for an interpreter to come to understand the linguistic performances of others? In particular, what do they need to know or do in

⁴ For a representative sample of the intersection of philosophical semantics and the study of religion/s, see the following: Godlove (1989, 2014), Penner (1994, 1999), Frankenberry (2014), Schilbrack (2014), Davis (2012), Jensen (2003, 2004a, 2014), Gardiner and Engler (2016), Bush (2014), Levy (2012), Albinus (2018), and the essays collected in Frankenberry (2002) and Bagger (2018). (BAGGER, 2018)

⁵ The main sources for Davidson’s theory of meaning are the essays collected in (DAVIDSON 1984).

order to successfully interpret? Davidson proposes the method of ‘Radical Interpretation’ (RI): essentially that the interpreter is allowed no prior semantic knowledge of the speaker’s language, and that all they have to go on initially is observation of how the speaker is moving their body in relation to the larger environmental context. This follows and extends W.V.O. Quine’s approach, which he called radical translation, to naturalizing, de-reifying, de-essentializing, and de-mystifying meaning (QUINE, 1960).

Pure observation or description will of course be insufficient. Davidson argues for a number of additional methodological assumptions which the interpreter must make to get things off the ground. These assumptions can be overturned or modified during the process of interpretation, as it expands. Three are particularly important:

Principal of Charity: the interpreter must presuppose, as an initial starting point, that the speaker is as rational and as sensitive to context as they are.

Shared Environment: the speaker and the interpreter are situated, and can know themselves to be situated, in a shared environmental context.

First Person Authority: the interpreter knows, within reasonable limits, the content of their own mental states, and the meanings of the language they would use to express them, relative to particular contexts.

Davidson later comes to describe radical interpretation (RI) as a form of triangulation. From knowledge of what the interpreter believes in a given environmental context (First Person Authority), they can begin to postulate that the speaker is likely to also hold those beliefs (Principal of Charity) when situated in the same context (Shared Environment). To use Quine’s famous example, if the interpreter observes the speaker saying ‘gavagai’ when and only when rabbits appear, they are warranted at least to some extent to think that the meaning of the utterance has something to do with rabbits.

RI is, of course, a *comparative* methodology. The interpreter compares what they believe to what the speaker believes in order to figure out what the latter’s words mean, and they can only do that by comparing what they believe relative to what they observe in a given context, and then inferring that the speaker will likely believe similar things in similar contexts. Something is similar between the speaker and the interpreter—two things, in fact: the environmental context, and their cognitive states relative to that context. But there are also

differences: the words or language each would use to express those cognitive states, and the perspectives from which the shared context is apprehended.⁶ This already suggests the value of comparing Davidson to Smith.

By tying RI to a shared external environment, interpretationism qualifies as a form of *semantic externalism*, which holds that meaning depends, in part, on mind-independent considerations. It stands opposed to *semantic internalism*, which holds that meaning is entirely fixed by human intentions alone. Realisms are one type, but not the only type, of the former view; radical, relativistic constructionisms are an example of the latter view. It is this external aspect that allows interpretation to have an empirical grounding. Another consequence is that linguistic units—usually words—do not *contain* their meaning, at least not intrinsically. Representationalism tends to assume *semantic atomism*, i.e. the view that meaning is something found in individual units of language, usually words; as a methodological consequence, terms can be explored on a one-by-one basis. By contrast, interpretationism is committed to *semantic holism*, where the meaning of any given linguistic expression depends, in part, on its relations to the meanings of many other expressions. This leads to very different methodological orientation. The point of comparison under an atomistic model is to find the thing in common across the comparands, safely ignoring other considerations. Under a holistic model, the point is to see how the comparands help us understand the interrelationship of a range of concepts. Under representationalism, only the similarities count—the differences are accidental or inconsequential. Under interpretationism, both similarities and differences play a role in tracing the holistic interconnections.

Semantic holism often invokes the metaphor of a web of significance, where each node (e.g., word) is identified and constituted by its relations to others. Semantic holism is a direct descendent of Quine's confirmation holism, where he notes that no single sentence is ever confirmed in isolation—it is only entire groups of sentences ('theories') which are tested 'not individually but only as a corporate body' (QUINE, 1951 (1953), p. 41). If meaning is a function of interpretation, if interpretation is a process of testing proposals, and if testing must involve multiple linguistic expressions, then semantic holism follows. An immediate consequence of confirmation

⁶ For Davidson, observations aren't 'given', nor are they linguistically neutral. The observations that we have are tied to the descriptions we will give of them, where the meaningfulness of those descriptions are themselves based on the prospects of being interpreted by someone else. They can also include cultural elements.

holism is that coherence rather than truth (i.e. correspondence to fact) plays the more fundamental epistemological role. In terms of Davidson's RI, the upshot is that a proposed meaning-theory is tested for its maximal consistency in explaining the overall behaviour of the speaker, not for whether it 'corresponds' to some objective state-of-affairs. Bits of language, then, get their meanings in terms of their role in explaining intentional *behaviour*. Quine and Davidson owe much more to James and Pierce than to Frege and Russell.

In addition to the non-representationalist, externalist, and holist aspects of interpretationism, there are four other consequences that we argue resonate strongly with Smith's view on comparison.

First, *interpretations will always be incomplete*. Accepting this view rebuts many criticisms of comparison (of a type not made by Smith). RI generates proposals that need to be tested against further interpretative encounters. Each attempted interpretation produces what Davidson calls a 'meaning-theory', or which Quine called a 'translation manual'. Meaning-theories get modified, supplemented, re-configured, or even eliminated all-together as the interpretive evidence mounts. At no point can the interpreter ever stop, being content that 'the one final and true' meaning has been found. Meaning is dynamic, never static. What a speaker means by a word at one time may not be the same as they mean at a later time, though it is necessary both that an interpreter have the resources to be able to establish this, and that nonetheless, on pain of outright equivocation, there must be considerable overlaps in meaning across the various usages. The aim of interpretation is to give the interpreter a better understanding of the total behaviour of others, not to become fluent in their language. Interpretation, for Davidson, is a relation between two languages—the speaker's and the interpreter's: interpretation is closely related to translation. Again, RI is a comparative methodology, involving comparison between two different languages.

Second, *interpretations will always be imperfect*. The speaker's knowledge of the environmental context is coloured by their perspective, which does not float free from their language and historical-cultural placement. The same holds for the speaker's knowledge. Davidson insists that we do at some fundamental level share a world, that meaning and meaningfulness are a function of the speaker's and interpreter's knowledge of that world, and that those knowledges cannot be forced to coincide. Still, for Davidson, the similarities across those knowledges must vastly outnumber the differences, on pain of failure of interpretation and hence of meaningfulness itself.

Third, *interpretations will always be indeterminate*. Davidson accepts Quine's argument that any amount of interpretative evidence will always under-determine a meaning-theory. For any finite amount of interpretative evidence, there will always be more than one incompatible meaning-theory equally consistent with that evidence. Recalling Quine's example, no amount of evidence will decide that 'gavagai' has to do with rabbits as opposed to undetached rabbit parts or Platonic Rabbithood manifested locally (1969). This is not radical relativism. There are better and worse interpretations, just no way to determine one absolutely true or best one. Any number of proposed meaning-theories can simply be discarded as being inconsistent with the evidence. Of those that survive, it doesn't matter which one the interpreter selects—there is no fact of the matter as to which one is 'correct' in the sense of giving the fixed, pre-determined meaning. There is no meaning in that sense—all that there is to meaning is the means by which it is uncovered.⁷ That can be done poorly or wrongly, but the idea of a single perfect interpretation makes no sense.

Finally, there is *no difference in kind between radical and ordinary, between foreign and domestic, interpretation*. The difference is merely one of how it *feels*. When two old friends are in the normal fluidity of ordinary conversation, it seems strange to say that they are doing the same thing as the field linguist encountering a previously unknown cultural group, but that is only because the speed of mutual-understanding is so quick as to seem instantaneous. Yet, the sense of easy and transparent communication can be quickly broken by 'incongruities', as when a friend suddenly stops making sense, or says something puzzling. When that happens, we start to deploy deeper forms of interpretation. Are they making a joke? Do we detect a slight smirk? Are they just confused? Are they being deliberately evasive because someone is eavesdropping? Did we hear them correctly? Are they using an unfamiliar word? It is when such

⁷ Patton and Ray (2000) critique traditional forms of comparison in the study of religion/s for drawing overly sharp boundaries that disguise religion/s true messiness and complexity. They praise Smith's version for recognizing that "comparison is an indeterminate scholarly procedure that is best undertaken as an intellectually creative enterprise, not as a science but as an art" (PATTON; RAY, Ray 2000, p. 4). Hughes (2019, p. 20) echoes that point. Luther H. Martin, on the other hand, sees that as a failing: "[C]omparison as scholarly inquiry should not be relegated to some artistic but finally 'indeterminate' magic of the imagination, however impassioned that pursuit may be, but should be disenchanting, that is, formulated precisely as a science..., however 'boring and sterile' such a disinterested 'arrangement of facts' might seem to some" (2004, p. 37).

‘incongruities’ arise that we notice we are in the territory of the unfamiliar, and we look to what is familiar – context, environment, body language, etc. – to help us understand or make sense of things.

In summary, for Davidson and similar approaches to philosophical semantics, interpretability is the precondition for meaningfulness. Our words mean something, and we mean something by them, only if it is possible, in principle, for any language user to understand them, granting the limits of incompleteness, imperfection, and indeterminacy. Language is not a tool for mirroring or representing the world; it is a device for navigating it, for pragmatic behavioural success. Comparing language to a map, its primary function is to guide us, not to accurately represent the topography. Obviously, navigation is aided by an accurate representation. Representation is often *part of* the interpretive process, but the representation should be understood as subordinate to the navigation. What counts as accuracy of representation—of *truth*—is a function of its contribution to pragmatic success, not some sort of correspondence with an independently existing ‘reality.’

Smith on comparison

Perhaps the most important aspect of Smith’s views on comparison is how differently he conceives of its purpose from those who came before. In the list of classical theorists above, we remarked that each sees the purpose of comparison to reveal the sort of *thing* religion is or ‘religion’ names. In other words, for them, the aim is epistemological or ontological, which makes sense if meaning is assumed to be representational. It is that assumption that forces the “dilemma of comparison” which underwrites the “problem of comparison.” For Smith, however, the aim of comparison is neither epistemological nor ontological. The point of setting comparands side-by-side is not to reveal a shared essence that atomistically resides in them prior to and independent of the act of comparison. In other words, it does not aim at a theory of the ‘real’ nature of the comparands. As a method, comparison is not a route to such a theory. Similarly, highlighting differences in the comparands does not play the role of establishing *differentia specifica* in a ‘real’ definition or objective classificatory framework. By seeing comparison as neither epistemological nor ontological, Smith side-steps both horns of the dilemma of comparison. For him, the fundamental aim of comparison is hermeneutic: when done right, it can advance in scholars’ understanding of religious phenomena of interest. Comparison, in Smith’s hands, is a method of interpretation.

Here is Smith's line. The scholar is first struck by some aspect of a religious phenomenon that they don't understand. Smith calls this a "situational incongruity" (SMITH, 1976 (1982), p. 90). The scholar then seeks to understand that incongruity by finding other aspects of the phenomenon that strike them as similar to other, more familiar, phenomena. Understanding the familiar can then be used as a heuristic to understand the unfamiliar: "Here the meaning and function of a particular motif, symbol, or custom in one culture may be used as a key to interpret a similar motif, symbol, or custom in another culture by moving from what is known to what is unknown" (SMITH, 1971, p. 71).

This compares significantly with Davidson's idea that we interpret the speech of others by triangulating it through our own. Just as in Davidson, where there is no requirement that the interpreter's sentences or utterances be 'true' in the sense of corresponding to reality, there is no requirement in Smith that the comparator's understanding of the 'familiar' phenomena be 'true' of or represent external objects, real or imagined. All that is required is that the comparands be similar in a respect that helps the scholar better understand. Those respects are not atomistically self-determined by the phenomena themselves—that would be to resurrect a questionable essentialism. Rather, for Smith, they are simply those selected by the scholar as being of personal interest relative to what they have selected as the object of study:

Comparisons are not given; they are the result of thought....[C]omparison does not necessarily tell us how things 'are'... [L]ike models and metaphors, comparison tell us how things might be conceived, how they might be 're-described'... A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance, expressed in the rhetoric of their being 'like' in some stipulated fashion. Comparison provides the means by which *we* 're-vision' phenomena as *our* data in order to solve *our* theoretical problems (SMITH, 2013, p. 52).⁸

To this extent, Smith accepts a form of constructivism: there is no independent fact—that is, independent of the act of comparison—that can guarantee that two comparands are similar in an appropriate way to methodologically ground the comparison. We take this to be the meaning behind his most quoted passage:

⁸ Jensen iterates this point nicely: 'We never compare the things 'in themselves', only the stories about them' (JENSEN, 2004b, p. 56).

[While] there is a staggering amount of data, of phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious—*there is no data for religion*. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no independent existence apart from the academy. (SMITH, 1982b, p. xi)

Too many cite this passage in isolation, taking it merely as a clever advertising slogan for a radical constructivism—that scholars of religion just make things up, or ‘manufacture’ it for their own purposes. However, read through an interpretationist lens, a very different idea emerges. If the purpose of comparison is hermeneutic, and meaning is tied to methods of interpretation, then there is a clear sense in which comparison, as a form of interpretation, ‘creates’ the semantic content of religion. Just as meaning has no independent existence apart from the processes of interpretation, religion—that which religious comparands have in common—has no independent existence apart from the academy's imaginative acts of comparison and generalization.

‘Imagination’ connotes at least two different things. The first is a kind of fantasy, or a purported but ultimately nonexistent thing, as in the expression “you just imagined that.” That is the sense of ‘imaginative acts’ that constructivists see in Smith. The other is just as a way of thinking about something, of trying to form a mental picture of it in all its complexity and interrelated parts, to understand its holistic interrelationships. This connotation does not imply the necessity that the imagining purports to represent some *thing* in the world. This is the sense that harmonizes with an interpretationist model of meaning. The less-quoted passages just before and after the ‘no data’ chestnut evoke this sense:

If we have understood the archeological and textual record correctly, man [sic] has had his entire history in which to imagine deities and modes of interaction with them. But man, more precisely western man, has had only the last few centuries in which to imagine religion. It is this act of second order, reflective imagination which must be the central preoccupation of any student of religion... For this reason, the student of religion, and most particularly the historian of religion, must be relentlessly self-conscious. Indeed, this self-consciousness constitutes his primary expertise, his foremost object of study. (SMITH, 1982b, p. xi)

For the self-conscious student of religion, no datum possesses intrinsic interest. It is of value only insofar as it can serve as *exempli gratia* of some fundamental issue in the imagination of religion. The student of religion must be able to articulate clearly why ‘this’ rather than ‘that’ was chosen as an exemplum. His primary skill is concentrated in this choice. This effort at articulate choice is all the more difficult, and hence all the more necessary, for the historian of religion who accepts neither the boundaries of canon nor of community in constituting his intellectual domain, in providing his range of exempla. (SMITH, 1982b, p. xi)

The scholar is not interested in religion *per se* – as it is in-itself – nor in knowing what it denotes or the reality it represents. Rather, they are interested in *understanding* it, in *imagining* it in a way that is fruitful or has some sort of pragmatic payoff. Comparison plays a vital role—and Smith hints at an ineliminable role—in so coming to understand religious phenomena, and a comparand has value in this method only to the extent that the comparator can articulate that value. Theorizing religion is thinking about how best to understand particular phenomena described as religious.

Put it like this. We’ve mentioned two problems with comparison. The first is more pragmatic: that it tends to illicitly essentialize. The second is methodological: that the selection of comparands tends to be viciously circular. Both rest on the assumption that legitimate comparands have a point of commonality that represents an ontological reality (which we argue presupposes a representational model of meaning). The all too common reading of the ‘no data’ passage is taken (i) as a repudiation of that assumption, and consequently (ii) to motivate a repudiation of comparison. A deeper reading, including the passages before and after it, suggest rather a way of avoiding the vicious circularity: it can be avoided by adopting a semantic framework in which the comparator does not assume that the similarities and differences between the comparands are primarily of ontological or epistemological importance. Rather, they are taken as instrumental in understanding them.

But what exactly is it to *understand* a phenomenon in the sense Smith intends? If appreciation of an incongruity is the starting point of comparison, rectification of that incongruity is its end point: “The aim of such a comparison is the redescription of the exempla (each in light of the other) and a rectification of the academic categories in relation to which they have been imagined” (SMITH, 2000b, p. 239).

For Smith, rectification is not a matter of converging on an accurate description of the phenomenon, i.e. getting to its ‘real’ meaning in the sense of allow us to grasp the reality it represents. Rather it lies in maximally explaining why statements and actions take the form they do in specific contexts. ‘We are red parrot,’ said by the Bororo, initially strikes us as oxymoronic, but Lévy-Bruhl’s re-description as ‘We will become red parrots,’ understood by comparison with caterpillars becoming butterflies, is comprehensible (even if Smith ultimately challenges that interpretation on other grounds (SMITH, 1972)). Rectification involves giving a maximally consistent re-description of the phenomena in as large an environmental and historical-cultural context as possible.

Connecting Smith’s method and role of comparison to Davidson’s meaning-theories – and the former’s notion of understanding as we’ve described it to the latter’s notion of interpretation – allows us to see that a form of semantic interpretationism provides the foundations that Smith models. To understand, in a trivial sense, is to grasp the meaning, but anti-representationalism does not think of meaning as a mirroring of reality, and so does not hold that one grasps the meaning when one comes to see the thing-in-itself, or to see it as a correct model of reality. Rather, grasp of meaning is given holistically in terms of a practical ability to navigate the ‘web of significance’. For a semantic holist, we cannot grasp the meaning of a word or sentence in isolation from grasping that of others. The unit of meaning is not the word, phrase, or sentence, but, as a limiting ideal, the whole of language. Davidson does not conceive of language in terms of a fixed basic symbolism, vocabulary and grammar, but rather as the means by which intentional behaviour works itself out. The radical interpreter doesn’t interpret the words alone – vocalizations or markings – but rather tries to associate them with a (provisional) counter-part in their own language which will help them make maximal coherent sense of the totality of the speaker’s behaviour in observable circumstances.

‘Rectification’ is not, at least not always, an ‘explaining away’ of the incongruity for Smith. He also employs it as a proposal for demarcating the religious itself.⁹ He proposes that myth and ritual, in particular, can

⁹ It is important to note that, for Smith, the demarcation is only heuristic, there being no *sui generis* nature to religion or the religious, and so no objective or fixed way to separate it from the non-religious: ‘[there] is nothing that is inherently or essentially clean or unclean, sacred or profane. These are situational or relational

be understood as means by which insiders attempt to rectify their own incongruities, not in the sense of seeing that they are not mysterious or incomprehensible, but in the sense of learning to live with them as unresolved and unresolvable:

I should like to employ a simple stratagem in order to gain a point of entry. I would hope that the reader will be seized by an element of incongruity in each text, and that, thereby, he will be led to presume that the text is, among other things, a working with this incongruity (SMITH, 1976 (1982), p. 90).

The incongruity of myth is not an error, it is the very source of its power... [A] myth is a 'strategy for dealing with a situation' (SMITH, 1978, p. 299).

[Ritual] is not best understood as congruent with something else: a magical imitation of desired ends; a translation of emotions; a symbolic acting out of ideas; a dramatization of a text. Ritual gains its force where incongruity is perceived (SMITH 1980, p. 125).

Assessing this 'simple stratagem' would take us too far afield, but it underlies a very important idea in Smith, namely that religion must be understood as a type of *thinking*, which is itself the paradigmatic human activity. It is a form of intentional behaviour with a fundamental hermeneutic purpose:

[Religion] is an inextricably human phenomenon... [Culture] is understood as a symbolic process of world construction. It is only, I believe, from this humane, post-Enlightenment perspective that the academic interpretation of religion becomes possible... What we study when we study religion is one mode of constructing worlds of meaning.... (SMITH, 1978, p. 290)

Davidson argued that genuine thought requires recognition of the possibility of error (e.g. DAVIDSON, 1997 (2001)), and that this can only arise when we come to recognize that others believe differently (which we come to recognize by noticing that they behave differently in a given situation than we would—i.e. by a process of interpretation). In other words – in

categories, mobile boundaries which shift according to the map being employed' (Smith 1978: 291); ['religion'] is not an empirical category. It is a second-order abstract... It is we, that is to say, the academy, who fill these definitions with content or meaning, who give them status, who employ them as part of our language... [It] is the study of religion/s that created the category, is the study of religion/s that invented 'religion' (Smith 1988: 79-80).

Smith's words – each thinker must, at some point, be struck by an incongruity which they rectify by internalizing 'I may be wrong'. If comparison can play a role in coming to understand in the sense we have been suggesting, it must be possible for comparison to get it wrong in the appropriate sense—i.e. other than failing to represent reality as it is in itself. Is this possible? Can one mis-understand? Can a scholar's comparison just fail? Absolutely. A comparison will only yield a limited degree of hermeneutic evidence when viewed in isolation; 'x resembles y' or 'x differs from y' yield minimal and brute information. Smith urges the comparator to look at a 'multiplicity of traits' and avoid 'singularity in comparison' (SMITH, 2004, p. 22), by which he means not just to look at many comparands, but relationally, holistically, and in more complexity:

[Rather] than considering a comparative statement as being dyadic, 'x resembles y,' it should be thought of as, at least, triadic, as a 'multiterm' expression such as 'x resembles y more than z with respect to ...,' or 'x resembles y more than w resembles z with respect to ... (SMITH, 2004, p. 23)

For example, drawing a hermeneutic conclusion from the mere fact that 'mana' and 'manna' sound alike would be worthless—"All they have in common is a partial accidental homophony across two unrelated language systems" (SMITH, 2002, p. 89-90), yet Smith argues that Frazer is prone to grasp at comparably superficial comparisons (SMITH, 2004, p. 23). Deeper, more complex, comparative statements give hermeneutic conclusions greater reliability. This recognition prompts scholars to consider comparands in broader contexts. Setting an unfamiliar behavioural phenomenon side-by-side with a familiar one is just the beginning of trying to understand it. The more complex comparative statements that the scholar might try to read into them are tentative proposals which need further 'testing' in light of the fullness of the contexts in which they are placed, and such further 'testing' might reveal mis-understandings. For example, Smith castigates many of the comparisons in *The Golden Bough* for putting great weight on selected passages while ignoring huge chunks of the same classical sources, arguing that the omitted passages tend to undermine Frazer's conclusions (SMITH, 1973). Smith pokes fun at reductionists who compare the Biblical manna to the entomological manna (excretions of scale-insects), noting the rampant dissimilarities between the entomological descriptions and those of *Exodus*,

as well as the precise linkages between when manna appears and disappears in the text to what is going on viz-a-viz the Israelite's varying commitment to the Covenant (SMITH, 2002). Lot-Falck's interpretation of particular bear hunting rituals among Siberian natives as 'designed to "insure the success of the hunt"' by means of a form of sympathetic magic (SMITH, 1980, p. 119) requires that the scholar "suspend his [sic] critical faculties, his capacity for disbelief" by imagining that the actual Siberian bear hunts resemble the main aspects of the ritualized hunts:

[If] we accept [that actual hunts unobserved by the scholar are substantially like the observed ritual], we will have accepted a 'cuckoo-land' where our ordinary, commonplace, commonsense understandings of reality no longer apply. We will have declared the hunter or the 'primitive' to be some other sort of mind, some other kind of human being, with the necessary consequence that their interpretation becomes all but impossible. We will have aligned religion with some cultural 'death wish,' for surely no society that hunted in the manner describe would long survive. And we will be required, if society is held to have any sanity at all, to explain it all away. (SMITH, 1980, p. 122)¹⁰

These sorts of critiques of particular theories in the study of religion/s are legion in Smith, forming the backbone of many of his essays.

The power of these critiques is revealed more sharply when seen through the lens of a holistic semantic interpretationism. The ostensive aim of Davidson's Radical Interpretation is to ground a meaning-theory adequate for the particular context, not a 'translational manual' that is static and presumed reliable at all times. Such meaning-theories contain, as theorems, statements about what means what that play the same role as Smith's dyadic comparative statements—they mark off nodes of a much larger web of significance. Methodologically they enter as tentative proposals, subject to revision and further testing. They are tested on the basis of whether they fruitfully contribute to a fuller, better understanding.

In short, Smith's views of comparison gains considerable support when its main elements – including the implicit nature of theorizing and method, the general nature of religious phenomena, comparison's role in critiquing theory, and the form of understanding that it aims at – are

¹⁰ Notice the role of the scholar's baseline beliefs, as well as her assumption of the essential sameness of the one being understood (=Principle of Charity). A tour de force of radical interpretation through a complex case!

viewed through an externalist, holistic, and non-representationalist semantic framework. Smith gives us a rich and clear model of what comparison under an interpretationist approach to meaning would look like, and an implicit adoption of interpretationism further justifies how Smith claims to have avoided the standard problems levelled against comparison.

Comparison as ‘familiar’ and interpretation as ‘unfamiliar’

Our last parallel takes Smith as the familiar in order to help us understand an incongruity in Davidson. Radical Interpretation – and more so its predecessor, Quine’s Radical Translation (QUINE, 1960) – is sometimes described in anthropological terms: “The recovery of a man’s current language from his currently observed responses is the task of the linguist who, unaided by an interpreter, is out to penetrate and translate a language hitherto unknown” (QUINE, 1960, p. 28). Perhaps ironically, Davidson’s main interests in the theory of meaning were epistemological and ontological, not anthropological, and his main targets were skepticism and relativism. As such, he employed the typical philosopher’s technique of talking in parables—i.e. using a simplified artificial example that eliminates everything other than what is necessary for drawing the moral. Where non-philosophers often see these sorts of examples as pure fantasies, philosophers tend to see them as essential.¹¹ Davidson claims a universality for his approach to meaning—there can be no meaningful phenomena that cannot be accessed, at least in principle, by the meagre resources of Radical Interpretation. Yet he utilizes only simple and often contrived examples where the linguistic behaviour is correlated only with observable changes in the environment to make his case; this is a typical example:

[In] the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences derive their meanings from the objects and circumstances in whose presence they were learned. A sentence which one has been conditioned in the learning process to be caused to hold true by the presence of fires will (usually) be true when there is a fire present; a word one has been conditioned to hold applicable by the presence of snakes will refer to snakes. Of course, very many words and sentences are not learned this way; but it is those that anchor language to the world (DAVIDSON, 1988, p. 45).

¹¹ ‘Gavagai’ has become a meme in our multi-disciplinary Humanities department. Some treat it as a joke, others roll their eyes at its overuse, and others consider it a brilliant example of efficient and effective cognitive offloading.

In other words, in all of Davidson's examples of RI, the shared external circumstances are simple observational (or empirical) ones, and the linguistic expressions are interpretable essentially as observation sentences. Quine's 'gavagai' example is paradigmatic. As soon as we move even slightly away from basic observation sentences, it is no longer clear that attending only to the external environment and the speaker's bodily movements will suffice for successful interpretation, even granted the Principle of Charity. RI suddenly becomes very hard when something unfamiliar arises—when an *incongruity* is struck. Above, we noted that it is the realization of such incongruities that make us talk of interpretation rather than conversation in domestic cases, but for Smith they are indicative of the religious and hence of religious language in general. Davidson was aware of this problem with at least respect to literary language (1978 (1984), 1993, 2005). However, religious phenomena present even deeper challenges, and the simplicity of Davidson's examples does not inspire confidence that the claim to the universality of his theory of meaning can be made good. This is a challenge we have been working on for some time, and Smith's comparative examples are especially valuable. They have become our *tour de force* examples of Radical Interpretation in real and complex religious cases.

As a final argument that our comparison of Smith and Davidson contributes to our understanding of both, we will look briefly at one of Smith's best essays, 'I Am a Parrot (Red)' (1972). Smith's aim is to understand the claim, first attributed to the Bororo of Brazil, that they are red parrots. Like Davidson's meaning-theory theorems, the article explores a number of competing interpretations of this claim, along with the theoretical assumptions and inferences associated with them, for example.

'I am a red parrot' as said by a member of the Bororo means that Bororo humans are identical in species to red parrots.

'I am a red parrot' as said by a member of the Bororo means that Bororo humans will transform into red parrots when they die.

What might evidence such proposed interpretations, and how can the scholar decide between them—or perhaps discard both in favour of another? This is not straightforward, but we will take it for granted that the interpreter can figure out that the expression 'red parrot' can be taken to be about red parrots—that red parrots figuring in the observable external environment

will play a big role in grounding that interpretative component.¹² The tougher part, it would seem, comes in with the copula, the ‘is’.

Because the interpreter starts with their own beliefs and language, interpretation is not a ‘neutral’ or objective enterprise. The principle of charity requires that the interpreter start off assuming that the speaker is as rational *as they are*—i.e. their assumptions about the nature of their own rationality come into play. For Davidson, meaning has a public or social nature. This is guaranteed by his view that meaning is tied to its method of uncovering, and that this method requires at least two people. The nature of rationality, then, does not float freely from cultural considerations. While Davidson argues that the commonality of the forms of our rationality must dwarf the differences, differences are nonetheless permitted. Smith notes that Lévy-Bruhl interpreted the Bororo as claiming an identity to red parrots and then used this alleged Indigenous view as a marker of a postulated difference between “‘primitive’ and ‘civilized’ thought.” Smith points out that Lévy-Bruhl had to rule out the alternative transmigration interpretation: “That a man should think of himself as simultaneously a man and a bird seems absurd, primitive, and hence worthy of comment. That a man should think of himself as becoming a bird after death seems ‘normal’ by comparison” (SMITH, 1972, p. 402). The following parenthetical supplement is revealing: “(whether because for positivistic scholars, all statements concerning life and death are incapable of empirical verification and hence equally nonsense or, for religious scholars, because they are used to the notion of Christians becoming angels)” (SMITH, 1972, p. 402). Background beliefs play an interpretative role, including semantic (nonsensicality of unverifiable claims) and metaphysical (human souls can transmigrate) beliefs.

Smith warns us against superficial formalist interpretations. von den Steinen translates the Bororo’s claim into German, ‘wir sind Araras,’ which

¹² So much interpretative work has already taken place with what we’re taking for granted. What do the Bororo take red parrots to be? Their term, already translated by von den Steinen as ‘Araras’, does not, according to interpretationism, get its meaning by a reference relation to red parrots. What the Bororo mean by it, rather, is holistically connected to a variety of beliefs they have about red parrots and other things. In the first proposal, Lévy-Bruhl concludes that the Bororo do not conceive of red parrots as a separate species, which he regards as the mark of a ‘primitive’ world view. In the second proposal, the Bororo might very well believe, of red parrots, that they are a species separate from humans. Smith questions the first proposal, as we note above, on the grounds that it does not cohere well with the observable fact that the Bororo do not try to mate with red parrots.

then gets translated into the English ‘we are parrots’ (Smith 1972: 392). We can critically ask whether the initial translation is accurate (and Smith gives a number of reasons to question it). While the translation from German to English *seems* okay, because of the ease of everyday German-English translation (and now easily checkable using google translate): “A literal understand of ‘I am a parrot’ has led to two consequences: they mean it and they are wrong, or they mean it, but we can never understand what they mean” (SMITH, 1972, p. 411).

For holists, meaning is not contained in the word itself: it faces the tribunal of RI. Smith warns us about the dangers of literal interpretations: “[The] interpretation of Lévy-Bruhl and his successors was based on a literal understanding of the sentence. The identification made sense, even though it is false, because the Bororo lack a logic of distinction. I may note, parenthetically, that the futuristic interpretation is equally literal, although it assumes that the Bororo do possess distinctions between actuality and potentiality and that this ‘Aristotelianism’ is the key to exegesis” (Smith 1972: 404). ‘Is’ is a tricky word, especially in English when it can be used to express an identity (e.g. ‘Bruce Wayne is Batman’), existence (e.g. ‘Batman is’), or predication (e.g. ‘Batman is grim’). Lévy-Bruhl just assumes that it expresses an identity, and uses that assumption to interpret the sentence. But this gets the interpretative order wrong, at least according to interpretationism: its sense is to be determined by the process of interpretation, and there is no particular reason to bet one way rather than another beforehand.

The ‘identity’ interpretation, given that humans and parrots are different species, must involve attributing to the Bororo an inability to differentiate species. The ‘transmigration’ interpretation, on the other hand, requires attribution of a belief in the non-fixity of species. RI would require, then, evidence for the attribution of those further beliefs, especially where they differ from those held by the interpreter. Smith points out that the Bororo do not otherwise seem to have problems distinguishing between species, and this weakens the first interpretation. He also notes that the Bororo seem to believe that *other* groups transmigrate into *other* animals upon death, which offers supports for the second.

In the history of interpretation of the Bororo, there has been a noticeable shift from *surface* to *depth*, from the placing of the Bororo within a contextless catalogue of illustrations of a *general* theory of primitive mentality to a depth

analysis of the underlying principles of a particular culture. In this process, the statement, ‘I am a parrot,’ has shifted from being an absurdity to be explained away or a puzzle to a serious statement, the truth of which might be empathetically entertained by a non-Bororo... (SMITH, 1972, p. 408).

On the other hand, Smith warns us away from a purely ‘functionalist’ method of interpretation. Functionalism, he says, tends to treat the ascription of rationality as inviolable, preferring whatever interpretation most preserves that rationality, regardless of other interpretative evidence. They tend to “beg ... the question as to whether there are universal, contextually invariable principles of logic, rationality, and truth...” (SMITH, 1972, p. 412).

Interpretationism does not preclude attributions of error or even of irrationality, but these can only enter *after* interpretation has gone on reasonably long enough—i.e. only when such an attribution is maximally consistent with all the available evidence. This is enough to ground Smith’s insistence that the scholar of religion be *allowed* to “raise the question of truth from which, as historians of religion, we have largely abstained” (SMITH, 1972, p. 412):

The discussion of this issue has become a lively one in both philosophical hermeneutics and anthropology, and it is essential that historians of religion join in this debate both to learn and to contribute. But the price of admission, to reverse the Steppenwolf formula, is the use of our mind. We must submit ourselves to the kinds of rigorous questions Hans Penner and Edward Yonan have been raising about the principles of intelligibility. (SMITH, 1972, p. 412)

This is just what we would expect under a Davidsonian interpretationist semantics.

In sum, a reading of Smith’s essay, “I Am a Parrot (Red), illustrates a fundamental harmony between Smith’s method of doing comparative work and the interpretive strategy that emerges from Davidson’s work on semantic theory. Moreover, it illustrates the symmetry – the mutual supplementation – that emerges from comparing Smith and Davidson. Where Smith wrote little of the particular type of interpretive work that underpins his comparative method, Davidson fills that in in a remarkably harmonious and consistent manner. Where Davidson failed to give complex examples of the relation between radical interpretation and meaning, Smith’s essays are rich sources of examples.

Conclusion

It should come as no surprise that our comparison of Smith and Davidson is not meant to tell the objective truth of their respective views and the relation between them. We do not aim to capture the essence of comparison or to provide a real, objective framework for comparative method. Our first goal was to use Smith as a model of how interpretationist-friendly comparative methodology would look—one that avoids avoids the various critiques levelled against comparison in general. (At the same time, Smith reveals how the sort of Davidsonian approach to interpretation can apply itself beyond the basic, superficial, and artificial examples all too frequent in the philosophical literature.) Our second goal follows from that: to illustrate that Smith's views on comparison contain deep resources for further work, not least because of their resonance with recent work on semantic holism in the study of religion/s.

The pragmatic impact of our comparison of these thinkers has two parallel dimensions. Smith went beyond ruminating on and critiquing comparison as a method: he used comparison consistently and often. Smith is often read as being anti-comparison. In fact, he is against comparison only when it overreaches itself. He modelled but did not develop this point, and Davidson illustrates what that development looks like. Reading Smith in light of Davidson helps us to appreciate just how Smith avoided many of the problems that he and others have noted with comparison as a method. He radically re-orientes the entire debate. And this can inform our own comparative work.

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