Review Essay

This volume brings together ten papers that discuss aspects of the convergence between theory of religion and recent analytic philosophy, primarily the work of Donald Davidson, Robert Brandom, and Richard Rorty. The volume is less consistently focused on Davidson's theory of radical interpretation than the title suggests, and the question of how these philosophical themes might be useful for the study of religion receives less explicit attention than readers might wish. However, the questions that this book raises and the avenues that it opens up make it a very significant contribution to recent theory of religion. This review primarily addresses two central themes that recur throughout the book: (i) the defensibility of a distinction between religious and non-religious beliefs; and (ii) arguments for taking religious language literally and not metaphorically (i.e., not as referring in some exceptional, symbolic manner).

The four papers in the first of the book's three sections, "Pragmatics," consider implications of recent and largely pragmatically oriented semantic theories in the work of Donald Davidson, Robert Brandom, and Richard Rorty. Only the first paper, by Terry F. Godlove Jr., explicitly addresses how recent philosophical reflection on meaning and meaningfulness might have a methodological bearing on the study of religion. Godlove's goal is "saving belief" from recent critiques that emphasize ritual and materiality, and that exclude the category of belief as a useful concept for the study of religion (e.g., Donald Lopez, Catherine Bell, and cognitivist theories). Ironically, Godlove attempts this first by suggesting that Davidson's approach of "radical interpretation" similarly decouples action from belief: i.e., actions are not explained by appeal to the agent's reasons. Unfortunately, on this point he misreads Davidson, who does not deny that belief plays a central role in interpreting the practices of others *per se*—especially linguistic practices, which form the foundation of all others. Davidson holds that the meaning of an utterance cannot be determined independently of the beliefs of the utterer. What he denies is that the *content* of a belief can be determined simply by the form of the words used in uttering it. At the same time, Godlove holds that Davidson's approach elides the distinction between material and discursive factors in interpretation: i.e., belief is not granted priority, but (parting ways with Lopez *et al.*) neither is it excluded. He proceeds to make what seems a very non-Davidsonian move in his attempt to argue that "students of religion . . . need to believe in belief" (24). He argues that only participants' second-order beliefs— i.e., beliefs that their ordinary (religious) practices are specifically *religious* in nature—can provide criteria for distinguishing religious from non-religious actions. He sees this conclusion as consistent with Davidson's approach and as countering those who regard the category of belief as interpretationally inert. However, it is difficult to accept Godlove's point without somehow regarding the content of

these second-order beliefs as *sui generis*, to be interpreted somehow independently from the constraints on radical interpretation. As such, without further argument, it is not clear that his view would be sanctioned under a Davidsonian model. Still, the suggestion is interesting and worthy of further exploration. In sum, Godlove's appeal to Davidson is more successful at noting sticky points in the theories of religion that he attacks than it is in evoking Davidson's ideas accurately.

The second and third contributions, by Jeffrey Stout and Richard Rorty respectively, concentrate on examining a relatively recent challenger to the truth-conditional semantics that Davidson takes to underlie his process of radical interpretation. Brandom's "inferentialism" differs from Davidson's semantics by taking inference (interpreted broadly) rather than truth as the central concept in the theory of meaning (and, relatedly, in the theory of interpretation). Stout provides a particularly good exegesis of Brandom's position, especially for those unable or unwilling to plow through the 741 pages of Brandom's major work, *Making It Explicit*. Rorty, typically, argues that Brandom's semantic theory provides a solid foundation for his own form of pragmatism, one that takes the relativistic workings of "cultural politics" as the only method of inquiry for any subject matter. The final paper in this section, by Wayne L. Proudfoot, takes Rorty to task on his interpretation of William James' *The Will to Believe*.

Stout, Rorty and Proudfoot have little explicitly to say about why a scholar of religion should care about these developments in philosophical semantics, or about what difference they might make to his or her methodological practice. Nonetheless, these first four articles have, often implicitly, a crucial common theme: the extent to which a coherent distinction can be drawn between *religious* and *non-religious* discourse and/or practice. Specifically, the four articles can be read as exploring whether a *semantic* distinction—that is, a distinction capable of being recognized by an all-embracing theory of meaning—can be drawn.

Brandom's inferentialism appears, at least on the surface, to preclude a semantic distinction between religious and non-religious discourse/practice. According to inferentialism, the content of a given utterance (or the significance of a given practice) is determined by its inferential links to other linguistic or behavioural commitments. From Brandom's perspective, the correctness of an inferential link is not given in classical terms of truth-preservation, but rather in pragmatic terms of satisfying certain culturally embedded normative "proprieties." Crucially, inferential links do not respect categorical divisions (i.e. a "scientific" claim may be inferentially linked to "non-scientific" claims, and so its content or meaning cannot be regarded as exclusively scientific). As with Davidson, Brandom is committed to a form of semantic holism in which the unit of meaning appears to be the entire language, and which does not divide up into nice and neat discrete units of content. That is, the autonomy of "religious" language—or any other sphere of language for that matter—is called into question.

Stout hints that, as the content of all discourse involves various normative constraints, religious discourse cannot be distinguished from, say, scientific discourse by holding that only the former has normative commitments. Stout tries to save the category of religion by arguing that religious (and presumably moral) discourse, in addition to having content constrained by normative commitments, has a content that is explicitly *about* normative issues. This position is a bit opaque, however, as it rests on a distinction between semantic commitment and semantic content, whereas both Davidson and Brandom attempt to explicate the concept of semantic content via pragmatic commitment. In other words,

Stout tries to save the distinction between religious and non-religious spheres by a move to a higher or meta-level, but this move is unclear. On top of that, it does not seem to fit with Davidson's view (nor Brandom's) despite its explicit appeal to Davidson.

Rorty, according to Proudfoot's contribution, recognizes this problem, and suggests that the content of religious discourse must ultimately swing free of normal inferential connections to other statements; though this seems in tension with Rorty's apparent acceptance of the basic Brandomian point. In his own paper, Rorty argues that there can be no justification of the "proprieties" which underlie correct inference for Brandom's approach other than those thoroughly relativistic and pragmatic ones that underlie all "cultural politics." However, "cultural politics" is such an all-embracing framework for Rorty that it is difficult to see how it would allow for a coherent semantic division between any areas of discourse, including the religious.

In all, the four articles in the book's first section provide a nice jumping off point for those not immersed in the philosophical literature, as well as an interesting and divergent exploration of some central issues. However, readers who are looking for clear and explicit links between what is going on in philosophical semantics and how the scholar of religion should pursue his or her subject matter will be somewhat disappointed.

This book seems to suggest at times that recent work in philosophy can be applied to the study of religion, as if Davidson's ideas offer a new form to be applied to the content of "religious" phenomena. However, a closer reading of this philosophical work runs counter to this view by calling into question two distinctions: form/content; and religious/non-religious.

Most significantly for theory of religion, both Davidson and Brandom are attempting to provide constraints on interpretation at its most basic and elementary level—i.e., right at the theory of meaning *itself*. Elsewhere, Godlove has drawn on Davidson to argue that 'religion' cannot be understood as a framework applied to certain phenomena. Analogously, the work of Davidson (or Brandom) cannot simply be seen as a theory to be applied to religious data. Indeed, Davidson's rejection of the "third dogma of empiricism"—the scheme/content distinction—would seem to preclude this. Rather, their semantic theories threaten to undermine the idea that 'religion' refers to a distinguishable set of beliefs or practices. That is, if these approaches were successful, then it would be entirely erroneous to suggest, as the cover of this book does, that they "present new methodological options for the study of religion in the twenty-first century." More pointedly, Davidson argues that the objects of belief *just are* their natural causes. So, it is difficult to see what it could mean to say that religious beliefs are "about" the non-natural. A link to cognitive views of religion could be developed here, one that theorists such as Jeppe Sinding Jensen are exploring.

The three papers in the book's second section, "Culture and Cognition," form a less coherent unit and fit less clearly with the book's central emphasis. Both Catherine Bell and Maurice Bloch make the claim that Godlove's paper attempts to counter: that the category of 'belief' is problematic. Bell emphasizes historical and cultural context, using the case of Chinese belief in spirits to argue that belief systems should not be expected to be coherent: "coherence is a rhetorical project" (113). Bell finds problems with two of Davidson's key theses: (i) a theory of meaning must be "truth-conditional"; and (ii) in order to get interpretation off the ground at all, the interpreter must assume that the practitioner shares broad epistemological and normative commitments which guarantees more commonality than differences between "world views." For Davidson, the "validity" of a world view held

by a particular person is determined, by and large, by the extent to which it coheres and conforms to that person's overall network of beliefs and intentional behavioral commitments. This network is such that its bulk (i) is guaranteed to be true and (ii) is shared by all beings whose speech and action are capable of being interpreted. For Bell,

> philosophical discussions like Davidson's, which relate belief and meaning to truth, however truth is understood, not only seem to threaten religious studies' post-theological emphasis on the validity of different world-views, they also appear to threaten to push analysis to the level of the sentence, from where it appears hard to come to any conclusions about religion in general. (102)

Both of Bell's critiques have problems. First, how would we go about producing a theory of religion that did not "relate belief and meaning to truth"? Her proposal is to emphasize "the coherence and incoherence of practices" with due emphasis on "their historical freight" (116). Either this points to a different sort of relation between meaning and truth, which would need to be spelled out more explicitly, or Bell's view is open to the sort of argument made by Frankenberry and Penner in this same volume. That is, how is it possible to make any sense of the "validity of different world-views" in the absence of any specifiable connection between meaning and truth? Second, she rejects a straw doll version of Davidsonian semantics as an approach narrowly focused on sentences in order to quickly move her discussion of belief to a broad cultural level. This alleged gap between religion and the sentence misreads the holism of Davidson and Brandom. It presupposes rather than demonstrates that religious language functions differently than other modes of speaking and hence, must be analyzed in a special manner. Ironically, Bell's misreading of Davidson fails to note that the threat she might well wish to counter resembles her own view more than the caricature of analytic philosophy that she tosses aside. The threat that semantic theories pose to "religion in general" is not due to narrow analysis at "the level of the sentence" but the radical nature of the move beyond the individual sentence (as we argue here): it is holism that threatens to erode the boundary around "the religious", i.e., the insistence that meaning must be analyzed in its broad context, including appeals to cultural factors, not in supposed relations between sentences and things. It is one thing to not like the implications of a theory; it is something else to argue a different perspective. In the end, Bell merely asserts that religious meaning is transcendent in a different sense, not reducible to ordinary language analysis.

Thomas Lawson argues the standard cognitivist line: "religious ideas are parasitic on ordinary ideas" (117); and religious language is characterized both by a focus on supernatural agents and by counter-intuitive elements that account for its transmission. He holds that rituals are effective because of repetition and rich sensory appeal, and he reports on supporting empirical studies. Bloch critiques the cognitivist claim that religious language is distinctly characterized by being counter-intuitive. Bloch has three specific critiques. First, he draws on Davidson's view of radical interpretation to argue that cognitivist theories of religion fail to take account of shared contexts of belief. Second, he holds that ritual—as formalized action separable from the intentionality of participants—does not meet Davidson's requisite for interpretation, the intention to speak truth: rituals are "in the category not of semantics but of pragmatics" (142). Third, he suggests that "the counter-intuitive is everywhere," and is therefore not characteristic of religion (144-46).

The three papers in the book's third section, "Semantics," all argue that religious language should be taken literally, denying that it refers in some exceptional way to its objects. Nancy K. Frankenberry critiques the view that religious truth refers in a non-literal, hence metaphorical, way to some transcendent realm. Citing Davidson, she asserts that metaphors do not say anything apart from their literal meaning, which shifts emphasis from the meaning to the use of metaphors. She then draws on Rorty to extend Davidson: metaphors have no cognitive content but play a functional role in generating new beliefs and desires, in bringing about cultural change.

Hans H. Penner asserts that the myth of 'the given,' stemming from the Romantics, has been the basic theoretical assumption in the study of religion over the last 200 years: religion is analyzed as non-rational because the two parts of the given (immediate data of experience and form/conceptual schema) are held to be independent, undermining the possibility of interpretation and translation. For Penner the failure of this view is clear in the fact that scholars cannot agree on a theory of symbolic meaning. He proposes definitions of 'religion,' 'myth,' and 'ritual' based in literal appeals to "superhuman agents" (169).

Jonathan Z. Smith looks at two examples to make a similar point. First, studies of the biblical 'manna' have wasted time looking for a natural phenomenon 'behind' the term. Smith suggests that analyzing the narrative function of the term is more productive. Second, studies of the oceanic 'mana' have wasted time looking for a sacred or social reality 'beneath' the term. Smith suggests that analyzing the argumentative function of terms is more productive than discussions of meaning.

Penner and Frankenberry make three distinct claims here: (i) religious language should be taken as literal; (ii) scholars of religion should not separate issues of meaning from those of use; (iii) the content of religious language is false. The philosophical works drawn on in this volume add another reason to credit the first claim, a position defended by Penner and others for many years on a variety of other grounds. The second claim is valuable. It underlines the key point of Davidson's radical interpretation, Brandom's semantic inferentialism, and Rorty's pragmatism, i.e., that use and meaning, pragmatics and semantics, are intertwined. Their message is not to turn away from meaning to use but, rather, to rethink meaning within a broader context where use plays a central role.

The third claim, however, seems based on a misunderstanding of Davidson and Brandom. Frankenberry and Penner cannot be suggesting that religious language is false by virtue of not corresponding to its objects. After all, with Davidson and Brandom we are far past a correspondence view of truth and referential semantics. According to them, the content of a sentence is *not* given by a referential understanding of its truth conditions. (When, to use Godlove's example, Peter of Verona asserts "There is only one God," the truth-value of this assertion does not depend on whether the singular term "God" refers to a particular entity uniquely possessing certain characteristics.) Reference, for both Davidson and Brandom, is subordinate to truth, not vice versa. As Davidson writes, "Words have no function save as they play a role in sentences: their semantic features are abstracted from the semantic features of sentences, just as the semantic features of sentences are abstracted from *their* part in helping people achieve goals or realize intentions" (1984, 220). As such, even an atheist can consistently give a literal reading to Peter's claim and regard it to be true as uttered. To restate the point a bit superficially, scholars of religion are wasting their time if they think that the truth or falsehood of religious language depends on whether or not

there really is some religious reality out there or in here: following Davidson, the truth of religious language is a function of how it is used and interpreted.

In sum, this is an extremely valuable and often challenging book for those interested in how contemporary analytic philosophy may inform theories of religion. It grapples with central questions and raises new ones. On our reading—a closer reading than that offered in this book—the work of Davidson, Brandom, and Rorty seems likely to undermine the distinction between religious and non-religious language/action. If this is in fact the case, then the philosophical theories introduced by this book offer a theoretical challenge, not a methodological contribution, to the study of religion. These sorts of pragmatically oriented semantic theories are not one more instrument for the scholar of religion's toolbox. They offer a fundamental challenge to the ways that the meaning of religious phenomena is generally discussed in Religious Studies. As such they force us to question the nature and scope of the discipline itself. If the religious/non-religious distinction remains untouched, then, less radically but still significantly, these theories open up important new avenues for exploring the complexity of religious meaning. Either way, they challenge us to return to a careful consideration of how religious language relates to its putative objects.

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References

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