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Response to Robert Segal's 'Jung as psychologist of religion and Jung as philosopher of religion'

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Robert Segal has written a characteristically thought provoking paper questioning the degree to which Jung's system of psychology, particularly his psychology of religion, gives shape to philosophical conclusions regarding religion. Such conclusions would implicate Jung, despite his protestations to the contrary, as a philosopher of religion. More broadly, Segal is attempting to define the relationship between a social scientific explanation for religious experience and belief and what philosophers would refer to as the truth-value of certain propositions about states of affairs in the world, such as 'God exists'. Segal succinctly frames his position on the concluding page of his paper by stating that 'The *truth* of religious experience depends on the origin of religious experience' (Segal 2010, p. 381; emphasis in original). He then goes on to stipulate that if there are sufficient social scientific—or natural scientific—explanations for the existence of a certain experience, in this case a religious experience, then the putative cause of the experience, in this case God, is superfluous to the explanation. Philosophers would call this an eliminationist argument in which a reductive analysis of a phenomenon eliminates one of the categories associated with the phenomenon in folk psychology. Thus neuro-philosophers such as Paul and Patricia Churchland will argue that folk psychological states, such as religious beliefs, do not exist in the sense that identifiable brain states are sufficient to account for the phenomenon. I will return to the eliminationist argument below, but first it is necessary to highlight several other elements of Segal's argument.

To set the stage for his argument regarding psychology and religion, Segal outlines, for purposes of analogy, several examples from the sociology of science. The objective of this discussion is to 'see how far the social sciences claim to go' (p. 365) in questioning or relativizing the claims of the natural sciences. To the extent that a social scientific investigation can at least relativize scientific truths that 'seem immune to social scientific factors' (ibid.) he will have *prima facie* grounds for subjecting the implicitly more tenuous religious claims

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to social scientific critique. Segal addresses three examples of the sociology of science beginning with the work of Thomas Kuhn, for whom sociology provided insight into the processes that give rise to what he called normal science, through the Edinburgh school which suggest that all belief statements should be subjected to sociological examination, but still acknowledges the distinction between scientific beliefs and non-scientific beliefs and concludes with the radical sociology of knowledge of Bruno Latour et al. for whom even scientific facts may be viewed as social constructions. Which among these approaches to the sociology of science comes closest to Jung is a question Segal wrestles with, although I would have to say that in the end I personally think Jung comes closest to Latour, for reasons I will try to make clear.

At this point I need to do a little conceptual housekeeping. In an argument as fine grained as Segal's it is essential that we pay attention to the terms being debated. First, I suggest that we distinguish among belief statements, dogmatic religious statements, and experiential claims. In the United States, for example, polls will often show over 90 per cent of the population stating that they believe in God. However, the growing Muslim population in the country would necessarily reject the Christian dogmatic statement 'God is three persons in one'. Statements about the experience of God are more complex, however, and require further consideration in so far as I take them to be at the heart of the problem for the philosophy of religion.

The second area that needs clearing up has to do with the nature of projection. Segal is quite clear about his own position when he states:

> A social scientific explanation, if accepted, renders the truth of religious belief not impossible but improbable. To maintain, as Freud, Berger, and Jung do, that religious belief originates in projection is to say that it originates in error. For to *project* God on to the world is by definition to ascribe to the world that which is in humans rather than in the world. To project something on to the world is to confuse what is in oneself—whether a wish, as for Freud and Berger, or an image, as for Jung—with what is in the world. To project is to project falsely.
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> (pp. 378–79 emphasis in original)

There are a number of problems in this paragraph. Projection had its origins in 19th Century neurology, where, for example, it offered an explanation of the mechanism by which we smell things 'in our nose' or see them 'with our eyes'. The original thinking about projection was that a stimulus in the sense organ was then mapped to and interpreted within the brain and returned to the sense organ as an experience of the world (Laplanche & Pontalis 1973). Freud, of course was trained as a neurologist, and imported the neurological notion of projection into his system of psychology (Hogenson 1983). For Freud, however, psychodynamic projections of unconscious material acted as defence mechanisms, but that does not mean that their content is false. To the contrary, projection originates in a conscious experience that is repressed because it is unacceptable to consciousness. And, as Segal acknowledges, there usually is,

following Jung, a 'hook' in the object of the projection that allows the projection to form some degree of correspondence to the object. Projection, in other words, presents a rather more complex situation than a simple true/false dichotomy would allow.[1]

The problem of projection is compounded where Jung is concerned. While Segal notes that Jung's understanding of projection and religion derives from the theory of archetypes, he does little to unpack the implications of archetypal projection. The issue is that Jung is perfectly clear that at any given time the archetypal image will be heavily determined by cultural conventions, but it nevertheless portrays something substantive about the archetype itself. To take a somewhat mundane example, if you asked most school children brought up in the Western scientific tradition how many colours are in the spectrum or rainbow, they would answer seven. But the spectrum is, of course, a continuum. Anthropologist David Lewis-Williams explains that the colours of the spectrum were defined by Newton, who, having a poor sense of colour:

> asked a friend to divide up the spectrum. When the friend obliged and split it into six colours, Newton insisted on seven colours because of the significance of the number seven in Renaissance thought, and, as Newton himself said, seven corresponded to 'the seven intervals of our octave'. Newton therefore asked his friend to add indigo to the spectrum, it being a popular dye at that period.
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> (Lewis-Williams 2002, p. 122)

Does Newton's interpretation of the spectrum—including it would seem a bit of hermetic philosophy as well as a contribution from some 17th Century fasionistas—provide accurate information about the spectrum? Clearly the answer is yes, but a qualified yes in so far as the phenomenon in question is actually a continuum, and that other interpretations are offered in other cultures. Adapting a passage from the philosopher Jean-Luc Marion's discussion of images the archetypal image does not represent, it presents the fundamental nature of the archetype[2] even though, as Jung remarks in 'On the nature of the psyche,' 'every archetype, when represented to the mind, is already conscious and therefore differs to an indeterminable extent from that which caused the representation' (Jung 1954, para. 267).

It seems to me that this line of reasoning in Jung presents Segal with the following paradox: while it is in principle impossible to know the extent to

[1] At the risk of getting too deeply involved in semantics, in classical psychoanalytic theory one usually distinguishes between a projection, a wish, and a transference. For purposes of this response, I will stay with projections, but a more careful reading of Freud would not so readily conflate religion as wish fulfilment with religion as projection. God as a strong but benign father might be a wish fulfilment, but Satan as a violent destructive force might be a projection while excessive idealization of a priest would be a transference.

[2] Marion writes: 'The icon does not represent; it presents—not in the sense of producing a new presence (as in a painting) but in the sense of making present the holiness of the Holy One' (Marion 2004, p. 77).

which an archetypal image diverges from the actual nature of the archetype in itself, even to the degree that it is highly improbable that the image actually represents the archetype accurately, the archetype is nevertheless the underlying cause of the image. Indeed, if one takes full account of apophatic or negative theology, it becomes clear that there is a well-established tradition within a variety of religious communities that explicitly attempts to separate God from representational efforts.

So what is the status of religious experience, given this discussion? Let us take some of the widely acknowledged great experiential mystics, such as Hildegard of Bingen or Jung's favourite, Nicholas of Flue. By and large the actual experiences of these great mystics are, in the event, profoundly compelling sensory experiences. The mystic is frequently at a loss for words following the experience. By some accounts, Nicholas was so overwhelmed that the terror in his face made it difficult for others to look at him.[3] However, they all eventually attempt to bring the experience into a form of collective discourse—Nicholas painted images that corresponded to the folk religious beliefs of his class and region. I take it that this is in some sense a matter of projection, perhaps wish fulfilment, but the original claim made is that the mystic 'experienced God'. But what does it mean to experience God in this sense? There can be no question that there is an event in the mystic's sensorium, including the brain, but is there an object of sensation? This is the point at which eliminationist arguments come into play. A neuroscientist can, for example, stimulate the brain in such a way as to cause an experience similar to the mystic's experience. But the neuroscientist can also stimulate the brain in such a manner as to cause a variety of other experiences ranging from sexual arousal to visual experiences of commonplace objects. But the fact that the commonplace object can be artificially stimulated in this manner does not alter assumptions about its ontological status. It is, however, the exact opposite with the artificially stimulated religious experience. What distinguishes these events in the mind of the neuroscientist is what I take to be an implicit assumption that methodological naturalism can make a priori claims on the validity of religious experiences that it would not make on other phenomena, but this claim, I would further argue, rests on a confusion of religious belief, religious doctrine, and religious experience, as outlined above. This is the point at which it would be instructive to revisit the work of Latour for whom scientific statements could as easily fall under the analysis Segal proposes for religion. Segal is, to be sure, sensitive to this issue, given his introduction of Latour's point of view. But his argument remains that projection only undermines the probable validity of a specific set of belief and experiential statements, rather than all belief and experience statements. This distinction introduces a level of complexity that Segal's paper does not adequately address. The difficulty here, as I believe is the case with a number of other social and

[3] The classic instance of this reaction from observers is Exodus, 34:29.

natural scientific discussions of religious phenomena, is that projection is, in a very real sense, an intrinsic element of any meaningful experience.

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