THE INS AND OUTS OF RELIGIOUS COGNITION

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1. Introduction

If an academic enterprise is defined in part by the issues it tackles, a rough but reliable technique for judging a field’s intellectual progress is to take stock of the questions it has put to rest. Does the track record suggest an encouraging trend of theoretically and empirically progressive “problems shifts” (Lakatos 1980)? Or is the pattern one of unresolved fundamental problems being passed down from one generation of scholars to the next like a family curse? Measured against this impromptu standard, it requires a healthy dose of interpretive charity to discern genuine progress in the study of religion. Take, for example, the classic “insider/outsider problem” (McCutcheon 1999). The methodological bedrock for many religion scholars is that the verdicts of religious insiders must be granted infallible first-person authority when it comes to the whys and hows. From this vantage point, the single most relevant constraint on any theory about religious behavior and thought is what religious people say about themselves. In fact, this model of inquiry suggests that if an outsider’s findings conflict with an insider’s judgments we should treat the dispute itself as refuting evidence for the third party’s claims. Wilfred Cantwell Smith speaks for legions of religion scholars when he advises that “no statement about religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers” (Smith 1959: 42). After all, who else is in a better position to know what is really going on when sacrifices are made or prayers raised than the sacrificing or praying agents themselves?

The snag in this methodological policy is that when we yield the epistemic floor to religious insiders, academic third parties are relegated to merely translating the insider’s perspective into another vocabulary and adding a few touches of ethnographic delight. The decision to grant the observations of religious insiders incorrigible status virtually guarantees that any attempt to articulate empirically vulnerable, explanatory theories about this domain of human activity will fail to get off the ground. The reason for this is simple—there cannot be a robust human science of religion if it is impossible a priori for an outsider to
demonstrate that an insider is simply mistaken about the relevant whys and hows of what they are doing. While a case can be made for granting religious insiders uncontested authority when it comes to telling us what they think is going on when they sacrifice or pray, no one has managed to produce a compelling argument for treating these reports as necessary truths that establish the required conceptual space for all discussions. Yet, after more than half a century of debate, the field of religious studies remains saddled with the question of first- vs. third-person epistemic authority. To see how a progressive academic venture should handle the insider/outsider question, however, we need look no further than the modern cognitive sciences.

It was once a given in the philosophy of mind that each of us has privileged, unmediated first-person access to the contents and workings of our own minds. The thought was that in the mental economy of self-knowledge we all trade on reliable if not irrefutable inside information. After all, who else is in a better position to know what is really going on when I am thinking or perceiving than I? Unfortunately, the swelling catalogue of research on such curious phenomena as blindsight, hemineglect, and anosognosia proves just how wrong we can be when issuing judgments about the mind’s operations from the inside. Consider the humble blind spot. The region of the eye where the optic nerve axons exit the retina—usually referred to as the optic disk or optic nerve head—lacks photoreceptors. This innocent anatomical fact results in a light insensitive area or “blind spot” in our field of vision that most of us only recognize when placed in an artificial situation specifically designed to exploit this evolutionary curiosity (see Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998 for an entertaining series of at-home experiments). Our insider’s first-person phenomenology of sight assures us that we have a seamless and richly detailed visual field “as far as the eye can see”—and we are wrong.

Based on the extensive clinical and experimental evidence regarding the idiosyncrasies of human cognition and perception, there is now widespread consensus that any rigorous science of the mind must be conducted from the outsider’s third-person perspective. More to the point, although first-person phenomenological reports may be treated as incorrigible when it comes to how things appear from the inside they are no more (and no less) than another set of empirical data for the third-person heterophenomenological project of scientific explanation. While you may feel “thinner” after a week or two of dieting, for instance, the only way to determine if you have really lost the weight is to use the standard tools of empirical discovery (e.g., scales for mea-