

# CURING DUALISTIC, DISEMBODIED PATTERNS OF THINKING IN THE ACADEMY



David H. Nikkel

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay develops aspects and implications of Poteat's critique of the Enlightenment's critical paradigm and development of post-critical thinking in dialogue with Pascal in his dissertation and four post-critical thinkers who figured prominently in his project: Kierkegaard, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Polanyi. Then it critiques from a Poteatian perspective the critical, dualistic, discarnate picture that still dominates the academy, especially attending to the cognitive science of religion. CSR involves both a reductive physicalism involving unconscious mental mechanisms and a re-inscribing of subjectivistic or mentalist (alleged) beliefs in disembodied supernatural and human spirits.*

This article will analyze the project of William H. Poteat's career, especially as focused on the themes of embodiment and of the dualistic, discarnate Enlightenment "picture" of human nature and of reality that he found troubling and ultimately insane. This insanity results in the loss of conviction that life is worth living, as modernity's controlling picture yields a subjectivism or mentalism—either absolutistic or relativistic—that sunders us from our bodies and our embodiment in the world or a physicalism leaving no place for the meaning or the sacredness of human and animal life. Focusing on several key themes/ideas/metaphors, it will make reference to his 1950 dissertation and to the ideas of four post-critical thinkers who figured prominently in Poteat's teaching and scholarship. Graduate students in Religious Studies during my time there from

1977 through 1981 referred to the following as Poteat's "canonical" thinkers, as Poteat rotated four courses on these four: theologian Soren Kierkegaard, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, philosopher of language Ludwig Wittgenstein, and philosopher of science and epistemology Michael Polanyi. I do want to emphasize that Poteat taught courses to other cohorts of his students on, and seriously engaged with, other post-critical thinkers. This piece will conclude with an application of Poteat's concerns to the so-called "cognitive science of religion," which has gained much currency in recent years.

Before delving into the four post-critical thinkers, I will attempt to unpack some of the various but inter-related meanings of being "critical" in the Cartesian Enlightenment sense and by way of contrast of being "post-critical." Descartes famously split the world into two radically, fundamentally different realities, thinking substances and extended substances. This dualism worked to discarnate human beings whichever pole one focused upon: 1) an internal pure mind unable to find any meaning in the world even as it pictured a god-like external and impersonal vision of things, or 2) a merely physical, spatial, externalized, objectified, de-personalized, machine-like body devoid of any meaning. Thus one absconds or absents oneself from one's actual minded embodiment in the world. Either pole discarnates one from one's living body that enacts and discovers meaning in the world. The specifically critical component of Descartes' picture centers on the demand for certainty. For any belief to count as knowledge it needs to find explicit justification according to formal, reversible logic expressed in clear and distinct ideas. Indeed, one had an obligation to exert one's utmost effort to doubt before believing anything. Relying acritically on any presumed knowledge was anathema. Given the split between mind on the one hand and body-world on the other and the demand for indubitable knowledge, finding truth and value—finding any meaning—becomes impossible. Plying the mind side of the divide, absolutistic beliefs about oneself or one's group cannot legitimately withstand such scrutiny; plying the physical side, the critical gaze turns one into a robot. Nihilism results when one unflinchingly approaches the world through this Cartesian picture. To the extent one allows this picture to influence one's day-to-day living, insanity will be the result.

In his essay, "Being Post-Critical," Dale Cannon notes several aspects of the term "post-critical," including its opposition to the Enlightenment program.<sup>1</sup> In being post-critical one rejects the Cartesian demand for explicit certainty. This rejection involves a paradigm shift that I will proceed to explicate. The post-critical paradigm refuses the Cartesian program of systematic doubt, where any and all truth and meaning must find explicit justification, must stand up to critical reflection. Instead, one recognizes that one always relies tacitly on knowledge not critically established, including one's body, language(s), and traditions. I would note here that one's language and traditions are not separate from one's embodiment in the world, but function as aspects of that embodiment. Indeed, the post-critical paradigm asserts that there are some things upon which

we must primordially rely acritically (and thus tacitly or prereflectively) in order to know anything at all. The fiduciary dimension of acknowledgement and embracing of our acritical reliance on our embodiment in the world for most of our knowledge then is crucial for being post-critical. This entails a personal commitment that one is grounded through one's embodiment in a real world, a common world. Thus, one's attempts to know bear a universal intent. Cannon also recognizes, however, as do I, the need to be "critical" when appropriate. Often, being critical happens prereflectively as we attempt to make sense of something that appears incoherent.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes being critical involves reflective reasoning in the attempt to achieve coherence. Clearly and most specifically for this piece, it is critical reflection within a post-critical stance that recognizes the critical paradigm, its genesis, and its dire consequences. In the following I will develop aspects and implications of Poteat's critique of the Enlightenment's critical paradigm and development of post-critical thinking in dialogue with Pascal and the four post-critical thinkers and then in relation to the cognitive science of religion.

In "Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility," Poteat expounds upon some Cartesian Enlightenment conceits that would drive his future scholarly endeavors. In homing in on Descartes as the "fulfillment"<sup>3</sup> of Renaissance and Enlightenment conceptions of reality and human nature, Poteat emphasizes the "exteriorization of sensibility," whereby all is reduced to mathematical abstractions of space and time.<sup>4</sup> Here humanity has achieved autonomy with respect to God, yet the upshot of this high accomplishment is merely that humanity can exercise technical reason to purportedly control a machine-like universe.<sup>5</sup> Humanity has become an external object to itself, with mind losing any inherent meaning as it attempts to control a mechanistic nature whose only possible meaning might have resulted from the projection of meaning upon it by mind.<sup>6</sup> Poteat's assessment of the effect of Enlightenment assumptions on its understanding of human nature accords with his reliance upon Pascal as his principal interlocutor. Poteat begins Chapter 1 with a telling quotation from Pascal: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."<sup>7</sup> Pascal presciently anticipated the ultimate issue of the Cartesian paradigm of mathematical and physical space in relativism and nihilism.

The motif of the loss of the human self continues in one of the four post-critical thinkers, Kierkegaard. I confess that Poteat on Kierkegaard was the only "canonical" course of my years at Duke that I did not have opportunity to take. To my knowledge, Kierkegaard did not explicitly deal with the issue of (dis)embodiment. However, an important connection between the Pascal of the dissertation and Kierkegaard has ramifications for the embodied nature of life: the centrality of time and decision for the existential self. As Poteat notes in the dissertation, Descartes reduces "time to a mode for measuring motion in space...obscuring" that time in "creaturely existence" is "irreversible and decisive."<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard, reacting against abstract conceptions where time is under our control, writes of the aesthete who can contemplate infinite possibilities

without ever having to decide. Although Poteat in *Polanyian Meditations* specifically refers to Kierkegaard less than to any of the other “canonicals,” temporality figures heavily in his expounding upon our embodied existence. His analysis of a musical melody in particular and of the temporal nature of existence more generally, with his frequent deployment of “pretension” with respect to stretching to the future and “retrotenion” with respect to stretching from the past, constitute a quintessential component of this effort.

Temporality also figures prominently in another crucial Poteatian theme, the contrast between the Greek proclivity to engage the world through vision versus the Hebrew tendency to do so through orality/aurality. Vision tempts us to imagine that we can cognize reality in a timeless instant, while the written text obscures the reality of time, because we can view a whole page or more at once, because of its physical fixity and permanence, and because of its transportability across time and place. Orality/aurality, on the other hand, entails personal engagement and responsibility in a particular context, a particular space and a particular passage of time. Thus a focus on vision allows for a discarnate and insane picture of human nature and reality in a way that orality does not, an idea that I will expand upon next.

From the first time Poteat in a class session shared with me and others Renaissance paintings where everything is crystal clear in foreground and background,<sup>9</sup> I was struck with the pregnancy of his observation. The picture of human nature these paintings convey clearly involves God-like (transcendent) cognitive powers, where all is fully known immediately—at least this becomes obvious as Poteat interprets its significance. This picture disembodies and abstracts us from our bodies and our convivial natural and social worlds. The desire to know all with certainty and without mediation becomes philosophically explicit in Descartes. Moreover, Poteat notes in his books how this standard for truth and reality, where the fullness of Being must be immediately present without any alleged slippage of time, continues to haunt deconstructionists and poststructuralists like Derrida and de Man. Thus, for them the sign never really signifies and meaning remains ever undecidable—except for the arbitrary decisions we cannot help but make. Poteat pinpoints the standard of truth and reality that haunts them:

When, however, under the blows of philosophic criticism, ahistorical Truth is exposed as a chimera and we are left, so we suppose, with “only” the realities that are disclosed amid the pretensions and retrotenions of time—when, in short, we are left “only” with history, by definition devoid of an ahistorical truth—the perfectly ordinary relativism that can be overcome in practice, now viewed through the afterimage of the doctrine of an ahistorical Truth and therein showing itself destitute of any mark of truth of this kind, becomes the

relativism, so heavy with pathos, that for us henceforth attests to the absence of *all* truth.<sup>10</sup>

I recently discovered Poteat's intriguing lecture, "The Banality of Evil: The Darkness at the Center."<sup>11</sup> Here Poteat references Hannah Arendt's notion of banality, by which she does not intend to deny the seriousness of the evil behind the Holocaust but rather to indicate the commonplace nature of the evil of many perpetrators through a lack of empathy and/or conformity. In this lecture and in *Recovering the Ground*, which has many references to Kierkegaard, Poteat ruminates further about the modern loss of self and its possible recovery.<sup>12</sup> In the lecture, he begins with Enlightenment pretensions (in the everyday sense) to transcendent God-like perfection, where humans can see everything with an absolute clarity that enables us to subject everything to mechanistic and bureaucratic scientific rationality. However, following this line of thought we inevitably end up becoming part of the machine and the bureaucracy—the type of problem Poteat identified in his dissertation. Thus we succumb to the banality of evil, which results in losing ourselves in the finite, in refusing spirit, in refusing transcendence, which results paradigmatically in the Holocaust. While the objectivist, materialistic, relativistic, and nihilistic sides of modern disembodiment may have the upper hand in how we humans picture ourselves and explain why many Germans cooperated with the Final Solution, we can also find in Poteat's thought the continuing influence of an other side, as he takes notice of the Gnosticism of fascism and communism: that is, the absolutistic, idealistic, transcendent aspects of the modern picture.<sup>13</sup> Paul Tillich, who lived for a while under Nazi rule before escaping to America, explains the attraction of fascism to European youth: alienated by "the emptiness of adjustment to the demands of the industrial society" and "the emptiness" of "playing with cultural goods," they longed for "something *absolutely serious*" (even if demonic).<sup>14</sup> In separating themselves from Jews and other undesirables, it's probably no coincidence that the Nazis harped upon the alleged disgusting physical bodies of these others. Additionally, participating in the projected glories of the Third Reich—as the ultimate consummation of history—served as a means to transcend death, even as the barbarity and insanity of mass death reigned.

Poteat's and Kierkegaard's recipes for recovering the human self are similar: claiming my givenness, my embodiment, as a self in community, as received from a divine source, in such a way that I take responsibility for who I am, what I say, what I do. That constitutes accepting oneself as spirit before the Spirit, as achieving the transcendence possible and appropriate for a finite human being, rather than the insanity of a supposed absolutistic transcendence of mind or of the non-transcendence of the human as a meaningless material object.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is the post-critical thinker who most explicitly identifies and problematizes the dualism inherent in the Enlightenment discarnate picture,

as the dichotomous pair of idealism or subjectivism and empiricism or objectivism form two sides of the same Cartesian coin. In splitting us from our lived world and from ourselves, that picture assumes an either-or between a disembodied mind that finds meaning in abstract conceptions and mental images on the one side or material objects, including our own bodies, whose only possible meaning is merely physical or physiological, on the other. In either case, internally or externally, reality is already determinate, rather than becoming determinate in the mostly prereflective bodily engagement with the thing. The sense of Poteat's distinctive coinage of "mindbody" accords with the meaning of Merleau-Ponty's "phenomenal" (1962:105-106), experiential, habit, or lived body. The root for our living, being, knowing is the on-going correlation of our attentive, embodied effort to make sense of the things, the world, which call us into a mutually constitutive relationship. In Poteat's words:

My mindbody as imagination—as, that is, the pretension toward order, meaning, coherence, closure, logos—devises, that is, defines and arrests, an articulation within the hitherto indeterminate...

In time and through habituation, what Merleau-Ponty calls *sedimentation*, these and untold others become *usages*: what and the way in which we do and say; what and the way in which we are given to doing and saying; the repertoire of instruments and gestures that are their means—words and concepts, by what they exclude and what they include, establish one existential environment rather than some other...

Our mindbodies as imagination in its pretension towards meaning and coherence shapes and articulates the world and ourselves in it.<sup>15</sup>

To the extent we can (re)claim our mindbody or phenomenal body engaged in our natural and social world we can avoid the insanity of a mind sundered from its meaningful world or of a meaningless world of reductively physical objects, including our own embodied selves.

Ludwig Wittgenstein obviously focuses on language. He does not explicitly dwell upon embodiment or disembodiment. However, he does sometimes refer to the biological underpinnings of language and always roots language in common practices. Poteat recognizes that, for Wittgenstein, language use or any "language game" is always and necessarily embedded, ensconced, embodied in forms of life. So Wittgenstein's philosophy supports that language arises from our bodies, stems from our embodiment, not merely instrumentally but substantively. But Poteat makes that truth explicit. Here follows my favorite quotation from Poteat on language:

For I claim that language—our first formal system—has the sinews of our bodies, which had them first; that the grammar, the syntax, the ingenuous choreography of our rhetorical engagement with the world, the meaning, the semantic and metaphorical intentionality of our language are preformed in that of our prelingual mindbodily being in the world, which is their condition of possibility.<sup>16</sup>

At one point, Poteat notes that prior to the Enlightenment reading typically involved moving one's lips, if not actually pronouncing words out loud. Enlightenment sensibility, regarding language as strictly mental, looks down upon such benightedness. Poteat, though, realizes that the bodily medium of language cannot be neatly and absolutely separated from its message: "We cannot take possession of words by our 'pure' intellect, since, quite simply, there is no such thing. We apprehend them through our integral mindbodies; and 'moving our lips as we read' is a mark of this fact. Why would this ever happen, if it were not a condition of the comprehension of a text?"<sup>17</sup> Here lines between medium and message, instrument and substance, blur. Neuroscientist, Antonio Damasio, author of the popular trade book *Descartes' Error*, supports the bodily roots of all linguistic—and other—meaning, insisting that all human signs and symbols must involve some connection with bodily sensorimotor or feeling imagery to be comprehensible, to come into existence in the first place: "both words and arbitrary symbols are based on topographically organized representations and can become images." That is, such representations involve the correlation of our body with our environment as appropriately mapped in our brains. Moreover, Damasio continues, if our words "did not become images, however fleetingly, they would not be anything we could know."<sup>18</sup> Poteat recognized that, even when we read silently keeping our lips still, words on a page would mean nothing if we did not tacitly cognize their oral/aural bodily provenance.

Wittgenstein critiques the misuse of language by philosophers captured by the Enlightenment picture of atemporal language realism, where a uniform system of supposedly arbitrary internal signs possesses a simple one-to-one correspondence to independent external realities. Such philosophers fail to use common sense, fail to observe how people actually speak and listen. Instead, he notes the embeddedness of language use in particular contexts of meaning, within a plentitude of language games and within multiple forms of life. Rather than conforming to absolute, static categories, similar words and things bear "family resemblances." Wittgenstein's "dissolving" of miscast philosophical problems definitely bears relevance to Poteat's hope to cure the insanity of modernity, particularly in terms of doubting the meaningfulness of our lives.

In turning to Michael Polanyi, we invoke the only post-critical thinker with whom Poteat engaged face to face, body to body, as well as the one who arguably influenced

him the most. Of Poteat's books of which he is the sole author, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic*, constitutes Poteat's first and longest book. While Polanyi does not often write of embodiment, he leaves no doubt that the inalienable root of our tacit knowing, of what we attend from as we attend to, is precisely our bodies. We tacitly rely upon our bodies for all practical and intellectual knowledge. He writes that "when we make a thing function as the proximal term of tacit knowing, we incorporate it into our body—or extend our body to include it—so that we come to dwell in it."<sup>19</sup> Here, like Merleau-Ponty, Polanyi recognizes that what constitutes inside and outside one's body always depends upon the context of our knowing, of that upon which we acritically rely. For Polanyi this tacit grounding of all articulate knowledge in our inarticulate powers of engaging the world in company with our fellow human beings precludes any dualism between the subjective and objective. Our knowing always engages both our personal commitment and, despite its fallibility, a universal intent. The centrality of the tacit for Poteat led some of us graduate students to coin the phrase, "tacit attack," where in focusing on normally tacit subsidiary elements we lose the ability to do something we normally do quite easily and quite well, momentarily failing to appropriately rely upon our bodies. And we might occasionally act out a tacit attack as we devolved into stumblebums in our walking.

For Poteat the post-critical paradigm calls for our grounding in something prior to and beyond critical, skeptical reflection. He metaphorically employs ground and place to point to that which is primordial. For example, from *A Philosophical Daybook*: "My mindbody is the absolutely radical and prior—at the root of and antecedent to absolutely everything (!)—*here and now: the primordial place*, whence all times and places are pretended; that every time and space retrotends. There being this place is not the *condition* of my mindbodily integrity; it *is* this integrity."<sup>20</sup> And in *Recovering the Ground* Poteat identifies "the unimpeachable ground of Being in which we are grounded" with "our lively convivial mindbodies in the world."<sup>21</sup> This prereflective ground of all meaning, this thick temporal engagement of our sentient, feeling, motile bodies with our social and natural world, forms the basis for all reflection and rationality, for all judgment of what is real, what is valuable. Thus inheres the insanity of allowing a discarnate, visual, atemporal, abstract, alienated picture of human nature to set the explicit or implicit standards for the real, the true, the good.<sup>22</sup>

Note that a crucial part of Poteat's post-critical paradigm is that meaning—and here I am including both making sense and affording value—is primordial with our convivial mindbodily engagement with the world. We begin and live our lives embedded, ensconced, embodied in meaning. Meaning in the first place is part and parcel of our embodiment in our natural and social world; critical reflection helps us make sense and determine value when certain problems arise. But critical reflection in the mode of Descartes or Derrida is helpless in establishing from scratch, from nowhere, out of

nothing, that something or anything has value. Traditions constitute a key element of the social world in which we are embodied. As Poteat argues, tradition and critical thought do not stand on the same logical plane; we cannot criticize our traditions whole cloth. He continues: “If tradition as that which is handed over, *given*—whether as one’s native language, a practice, inherited analogies, metaphors, imaginative pictures—exerts its force on us in such a way as hardly to be felt by us, though not less potent on this account, it is that within which we dwell at ease.”<sup>23</sup> Our prereflective mindbodily being in the world, including our social traditions, always then grounds us in meaning.

This recovery of meaning, of the ground, of common sense, and of a genuine human self, suggests another Poteatian theme: that we are at home in the world; or at least we can be if we overcome a discarnate picture of human nature and the nature of the world. This at-home-ness contrasts with a Cartesian world where thinking and extended realities never cohere, a Heideggerian/Sartrean world into which we are indifferently thrown, or a Derridian/Foucaultian world where we can never be present nor mean what we say. As Poteat pens,

We are *at home* in the world insofar as we dwell in our lively mindbodies in the matrices of our form of life. To suffer from bad conscience because of this—as is the Enlightenment’s way—to, alternatively, talk in Heideggerian terms of our being “thrown” into the world does not alter the *fact* of our having been “handed over” to ourselves precisely by that which has formed and continues to sustain us. It serves only to fashion an *Enlightenment* myth in the light of which we are declared to be homeless. And so we have taken ourselves since Descartes handed us our deracinate *cogito*.<sup>24</sup>

Thus for Poteat we are radically grounded in meaning as responsible persons through our mindbodily engagement with our social and natural world in its temporal thickness and in its tacit and fiduciary prereflectivity, which includes language, traditions, and forms of life, as the very basis for reflection and critical thinking.

Dale Cannon has raised the question: “When speaking of an ‘existential recovery of oneself,’ ‘a return to the ground,’ ‘a post-critical paradigm shift,’ and ‘a recovery of commonsense,’ was [Poteat] talking about the same thing or different things?”<sup>25</sup> I submit that all these phrases represent inter-related angles of a very coherent project; all these began as or became ways of speaking about overcoming an insane dualistic, disembodied picture of humanity in relation to the world.

However, by and large the academy and our culture have uncritically accepted the critical picture—a picture that attempts to subject everything to its discarnate, critical gaze. Therefore, it will take serious efforts by many in the way of critical reflection

in the post-critical mode—in touch with our radical embodiment—and widespread dissemination of that reflection to dissolve that picture and cure our insanity.

What then are the prospects of overcoming this insane picture in the academy and beyond? I confess that I am more pessimistic than in my younger days. As Cannon notes, becoming post-critical involves a personal transformation and a heuristic leap, shifts that are impossible existentially and logically as long as one views the world through the Enlightenment picture.<sup>26</sup> The absurdity of that picture when it becomes focal rather than tacit and the ubiquity of the “postmodern” contributed to my earlier optimism. Of course, deconstructive and poststructuralist forms of postmodernism won the branding wars for the term, rather than a more moderate or common sense postmodernism. While deconstructionism/poststructuralism has passed its heyday, various forms of constructivism that deny meaning inherent in our embodiment still hold sway in much of the humanities and social sciences. I have found that the American Academy of Religion’s Body and Religion Group seems to be just about how the body is constructed, rather than how one’s body in the first instance constructs. Such constructivism takes the subjective or mentalist or “idealistic” side of dualism, to use Merleau-Ponty’s terminology. The subjective side also takes other forms. In the earlier-mentioned lecture, “The Banality of Evil,” Poteat notes Descartes’ rhapsodizing about human transcendence, “even to the point of perhaps one day overcoming death.” Poteat goes on to clarify, “I’m not making this up. These were his very words.” Yet today, some scientists look forward to preventing the aging and the regeneration of cells such that we might indefinitely postpone death. Furthermore, some futurists, Ray Kurzweil having garnered the most fame, foresee a time when human consciousness as information will be uploaded to a great computer, thereby totally eliminating the human body in our ultimate consummation. What insanity to imagine we will continue to exist as immortal bodiless information!

Many natural scientists and other academics adhere to the objectivist or “empirical” side in the form of a reductive physicalism, which in its own way alienates and disembodies us from our lived body and its inherent meaningfulness. The influence of this reductive physicalist picture extends beyond the academy, as non-academics sometimes wonder, “Am I just the synapses of my brain?” or “Am I just my (selfish) genes?”

And then there is the so-called cognitive science of religion.<sup>27</sup> On the one hand, cognitive scientists of religion generally assume a reductive physicalism as their own metaphysical or ontological stance. As indicated earlier, from a Poteatian perspective, this simply opts for one side of Cartesian dualism. Meaning and value pertain to the subjective side of the divide, making them unreal, illusory for the physicalist. So we are left with meaningless physical processes, thus alienating ourselves from our personal meaning-laden embodiment in the world. An example of such a process is postulated in unconscious mental mechanisms that are supposed to cause humans to detect supernatural agency when none exists. Undoubtedly in immediate processing of stimuli

from our environment, we do have a prudent tendency to suppose agency. Better a false alarm when there's a rustle in the bush than to ignore a dangerous predator. But CSR utilizes this truth to oversimplify things. Something I learned from Poteat is that our attempts to orient ourselves in more abstract realms have some continuity with our most primordial attempts to orient ourselves in our environment. This desire involves a concern for truth, accuracy, and coherence. We breathe a sigh of relief when the rustle isn't a tiger. Our concern for truth involves both our prereflective and more reflective efforts. CSR presumes that human reflection regarding possible extraordinary, supernatural, or ultimate causes must always be overridden, overwhelmed by prereflective mechanisms. Lost is a responsible person or self who can be appropriately prereflective and appropriately critical. Most of us accordingly are supposedly powerless to overcome unconscious mechanisms that render futile our universal intent to discover truth and meaning.

Cognitive scientists of religion find an avenue of support for their position in the supposed proclivity of young children to believe in supernatural agents. Deborah Kelemen has concluded that children probably are natural teleologists and even intuitive theists, because they theorize that inanimate natural objects have an intended purpose.<sup>28</sup> Olivera Petrovich goes further in holding that young children possess innate "core religious concepts," since they overwhelmingly answer that plants and animals have been created by God.<sup>29</sup> Of course, the fly in their ointment is that young children have encountered the concept of God from adults. No evidence exists that young children have on their own, *de novo*, invented the idea of a powerful supernatural agent. Indeed, one study purports to show that young children do not invoke animistic or magical thinking to explain natural events.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, at least two studies cast doubt on how much of a tendency children have to teleologize or ascribe intentionality to phenomena: a 1932 study of tribal children by Margaret Mead and one by contemporary psychologist Frank C. Keil.<sup>31</sup> Mead concludes that Manus children, despite growing up in a very animistic culture, "not only show no tendency towards spontaneous animistic thought, but that they also show what may perhaps legitimately be termed a negativism towards explanations couched in animistic rather than practical cause and effect terms."<sup>32</sup> As part of a series of experiments on categorizing life forms with children in grades kindergarten, 2, and 4, Keil described and asked questions about a "thing" that could enter a human body and cause harm. Subgroups were given alternative descriptions of this "thing": 1) functional or teleological where the thing has to get inside people's bodies and use parts of their bodies, or it won't last long;<sup>33</sup> 2) simple mechanical where the thing causes abrasions; 3) intentional "that directly attributes goals and desires" to the thing; 4) artifactual where a human designed the thing; or finally, 5) no description at all.<sup>34</sup> "Children at all ages thought that the 'teleological' thing did not know what it was doing any more than the mechanical one,"

Keil concludes—that is, a large majority of children did not attribute knowledge or intention to the “functional/teleological” thing.<sup>35</sup> If the human propensity to ascribe intentional agency were as pervasively strong as CSR generally holds, one might expect that at least the youngest children would attribute such to the “functional/teleological” thing. After all, blaming evil spirits for disease is rather common among tribal peoples. While Kelemen has parenthetically referenced the Mead and Keil studies, she does not specify, let alone engage, Keil’s results, while only briefly engaging Mead’s study in a footnote.<sup>36</sup>

CSR also attempts to assert the decisiveness of unconscious mechanisms, which involve rather crude anthropomorphizing, by claiming that they override more abstract theologically correct conceptions in normal processing. That is, agency detection favors “minimally counterintuitive” rather than more maximal supernatural concepts. An experiment involved reading stories involving supernatural agents and then asking participants questions about said stories. My take is that the researchers were much too picky in holding their test subjects to the standard of a quite literal remembering or retelling of the story, rather than allowing the participants to go with the gist of the story, even allowing for employment of some metaphor, before judging that the participants really believed the anthropomorphic rather than theological ideas.

Magic, mentioned just above, represents another area where CSR appears narrow in its outlook. Most cognitive scientists of religion ignore magic. This neglect does limit human ability to find or form meaningful patterns in nature and human social life to only those practices in which individual supernatural agents are directly involved. James Frazer famously distinguished between magic and religion, consigning them to different eras of human prehistory. Scholars of religion since then have corrected Frazer in that both appear in indigenous religion and that some beliefs and practices combine both. Yet there seems to be little room for doubt that some ritual practices of indigenous peoples involve the belief that, if the ritual is performed correctly, a certain magical result will eventuate apart from the intentions of any supernatural agent. This absence of agency fails to fit into CSR’s paradigm.

This sole focus on *personal* agency figures into CSR’s inability to allow for any overall directionality or meaning to the universe. Edward Slingerland for his part dismisses the possibility of any larger meaning: Some modern Westerners harbor “a more diffuse, non-theistic sense that what we are doing ‘matters’—a conceit that makes no sense unless we project some sort of abstract, metaphorical agency onto the universe.”<sup>37</sup> Slingerland attributes this projection to the sphere of social interaction, specifically the human need for social approval. I would mention that our basic biological drive for orientation to our world involves both the social and physical—and perhaps in the human case orientation and explanation beyond our physical and social universes. Slingerland’s dismissal appears to apply not only to those with the vague sensibility he

cites, but many Eastern believers as well as some Western religious naturalists who see the universe or aspects of it as divine, as involving some non-theistic directionality. These folks do attribute precisely some metaphorical agency or causality to the universe or to the overarching (traditionally more Western) or underlying (more Eastern) source of the universe. That these Eastern believers and Western religious naturalists have deliberately rejected metaphors of personal agency for their version of ultimate reality constitutes an argument against Slingerland's assumption that our need for social approval must lie behind all belief in an ultimate or overall direction or meaning to the universe. The purported impossibility of any ultimate or overall meaning to the universe tends to leave us with subjectivism and nihilism.

While CSR for the most part adopts a reductive physicalist stance for itself, it tends to view the benighted populace of humanity as inveterately dualistic. The dualism it so attributes is quite Cartesian and disembodied. In so doing, it interprets religion in a discarnate way, thus reinscribing and reinforcing a discarnate dualism. To make sense of an indigenous shaman imagining he or she is flying in the body of an eagle, a shaman being possessed by the spirit of a mountain, or a modern movie goer following the transfer of bodies and consciousnesses in *Freaky Friday*, cognitive scientists like Slingerland, Jesse Bering, and Paul Bloom, assume that the shaman or movie-goer must be a Cartesian philosopher who at some level is abstractly and logically explaining these strange happenings.<sup>38</sup> This is to misunderstand our usual prereflective assumptions to the point of absurdity: we do not imagine ourselves in even a momentary disembodied state before we take on a different body or spirit. The more reasonable alternative would be to recognize that we humans are embodied beings who naturally imagine in various bodily ways.

Despite CSR's claim that our agency detection anthropomorphizes, some cognitive scientists of religion claim that we humans over-detect *disembodied* gods, goddesses, and spirits. Primal and ancient animistic belief entailed embodiment in nature or in some kind of anthropomorphized—or animalized—body. Of course, these embodied spirits do not suffer all the limitations that humans and animals endure with their bodies. And their bodies may be hidden from us or even invisible to our ordinary vision. As some ancient religions developed, as in Greece, for example, some animistic beliefs gave way to a god or goddess who controlled a part of nature, like Poseidon and the seas. However, such ancient gods and goddesses were blatantly anthropomorphic in body. Not only did primal and ancient people typically depict deities as embodied, they believed their representations bore some analogy to actual divine bodies. While ancient Judaism prohibited representation of God (the historical reality of which happened much later than depicted in Hebrew biblical narrative), it did not explicitly deny, and in some scriptural passages specifically refers to, God's body. The underlying rationale was that the greatness of God and the divine body in comparison to human or animal

bodies would countenance no visual representations. The complete disembodiment and immateriality of God in learned Jewish and Christian theology resulted from a long journey strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, particularly of the Platonic and Aristotelian varieties. (Even Stoicism, influential in the ancient world and in some respects on Judaism and Christianity, affirmed some materiality to the divine, in its pure state of Fire.) I would note that the argument of some cognitive scientists that our unconscious supernatural agency detection usually overcomes abstract theological thinking runs counter to the notion that religious or supernatural agency is essentially discarnate. The insistence of some cognitive scientists that belief in spiritual beings like us in various ways exist as essentially disembodied simply reinscribes the presupposed picture.

Also tending to reinscribe our essential disembodiment, cognitive scientists often regard belief in life after death as tantamount to a dualistic belief in disembodied spirits. Jesse Bering and David Bjorklund did an influential study on children's beliefs about what happens to a mouse eaten by an alligator.<sup>39</sup> Bering in a major article begins with this assertion: "By stating that psychological states survive death, one is committing to a radical form of mind-body dualism."<sup>40</sup> While I have written at some length about particulars of the Bering-Bjorklund study,<sup>41</sup> my main criticism is that I suspect that young children typically believed that the mouse continued to exist in another body in another world. Unfortunately, that possibility was not tested for. Ten years ago at a reunion at Yale University, I asked Paul Bloom whether any of the experiments with children supported the hypothesis that humans innately distinguish between disembodied souls and mindless bodies over the hypothesis that humans innately distinguish between animate, sentient, intentional embodied beings and inanimate things. He answered in the negative. In an e-mail from 2008, he indicated that he finds more "compelling" the thesis of mind-body dualism for interpreting the results of the most significant experiment(s), by Bering and Bjorklund, than the animate-inanimate distinction. Specifically he writes that the fact that most young children believe that a dead mouse's mental states continue while its biological states do not "strongly suggests that kids think it has no body but still has a mind."<sup>42</sup> As suggested above, the lack of testing the possibility that the children believe other bodily states continue in another realm makes dualism less than compelling for me. These cognitive scientists have begged the question of whether afterlife belief entails dualistic disembodiment.

Furthermore, this assumption about afterlife belief flies in the face of evidence from the history of religions. Primal religions typically believe in an embodied world in some spatial relation to our present one—though unreachable until we die—and often better than our present one, without all the evils. The clichéd "happy hunting ground" represents one version of this. Moreover, the spirits of ancestors as they interact with this world, though without some of the limitations of our bodies, are hardly

disembodied. Early theorist of religion E. B. Tylor reports that primal cultures, though often conceiving spirits as “vaporous,” most definitely do not regard them as “immaterial.” In one example, he notes how some tribal religions make sure an opening exists in a container where a spirit abides so that it could escape.<sup>43</sup> When the Toraja of Indonesia are about to sacrifice a water buffalo, they warn the spirits to keep away lest they suffer injury.<sup>44</sup>

As ancient agricultural civilizations developed, afterlife beliefs typically changed: In some cases afterlife belief died out, in many others an unhappy picture of the afterlife emerged. I attribute this change to the dominance of agriculture in these cultures and to their controlling pictures about life that arise from agriculture: like dead plants, dead human bodies are buried in the earth. While new plants come from the soil and nourish new human life, particular human individuals do not revive from the grave any more than do particular individual plants. Typically, afterlife belief focuses on an Underworld, where people are mere shades or shadows of their former selves, as in the Hebrew concept of Sheol. Note that the dead do have a body, albeit a shadowy one. While they do not suffer complete disembodiment, I sense that the lack of full-blooded, full-bodied life constitutes precisely the most unsatisfactory aspect of existence in Sheol or Hades. The unhappy nature of such an afterlife takes some of the steam out of the argument for a human compulsion to believe that some (disembodied) part of us survives. Annihilation appears a better prospect than “life” after death in Sheol.

Additionally, I would note that resurrection of the body represents the most original version of life after death in the Western monotheisms of rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The influence of Greek philosophy, especially (neo)Platonism, has complicated the picture in Western theology, introducing a disembodied soul—at least until the Judgment Day—with which to contend. Nevertheless, I suspect that for believers in an afterlife from these religions, the vast majority imagine immediate presence in heaven with a perfect body, reunited with departed family and friends whose transformed bodies they immediately recognize.

While Slingerland shares the official ontology of reductive physicalism with other cognitive scientists of religion, innate Cartesian dualism ends up playing a peculiar role in his attempt to make sense of life. Slingerland begins sounding rather Potentian, poking fun at poststructuralist types who maintain that our preferences are constructed apart from the constraining influences of our bodies and then declaring that “the mind is the body, and the body is permeated through and through with mind.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, he concludes that the fundamental nature of consciousness is the same as that of everything else in the universe—a configuration of matter and energy, just more complex than most: “human beings, like all of the other entities that we know about, appear to be robots all the way down, whether we like that idea or not.”<sup>46</sup> But we do not like that idea! Here is where dualism re-enters in Slingerland’s account, in an ultimately

futile attempt to recover some sense of human personhood. Part of us wants to know the truth, however unpleasant (a part which I view as continuous with our prereflective bodily desire accurately to orient ourselves)—in this case, the alleged physicalist truth that we are just things.<sup>47</sup> However, to quote Jack Nicholson's character in *A Few Good Men*, another part of us "can't handle the truth." For evolution has designed us not to think of ourselves and others as mere things—even though we are.<sup>48</sup> Or as he puts it in a subtitle, "We are robots designed not to believe that we are robots."<sup>49</sup> So not to worry, since evolution has programmed us to believe our subjectivity and our meanings are real and to act as if we were valuable. This dualistic thinking consigns us to irreconcilable conflict between supposed scientific and metaphysical truth on the one hand and what makes life meaningful on the other. The poignancy of this conflict comes out for me in an interview. Slingerland declares, "I love intensely" my six-year-old daughter. But then he confesses that this deep affection for his daughter is illogical, since he does not really believe in "love."<sup>50</sup> This is indeed insane dualistic thinking, where the embodied love of a parent for one's child is less real, less true than discarnate alleged scientific truth. Of course, I credit Ted Slingerland with really loving his daughter at the deepest level of his being—and at the deepest level of reality, both in terms of truth and value, in spite of intellectual protestations to the contrary. I also credit him with making unusually explicit the implications of the dualistic, discarnate, and deracinate picture that affects us academicians and many others, that alienates us from ourselves as responsible persons, putting us in conflict with our lived, embodied, convivial meanings, in the name of a perspective from nowhere that claims to be the perspective from everywhere. If, as suggested earlier, critical reflection must play a crucial role in undermining the power of this picture, then clear-cut examples of the absurdities that ensue when we follow this picture to its logical conclusions, and calling attention to those examples, should figure prominently in our attempt to fashion a cure.

To summarize, CSR in general adopts the reductive physicalist and scientific side of a discarnate dualism, as it imagines it sees things with perfect objectivity. This position renders dubious any human meaning. In particular it reduces religion in the first instance to unconscious mechanisms that imagine the existence of supernatural agents. Belief in such agents supposedly helps explain the illusory belief in any larger meaning. Recognizing the human desire for meaning, many cognitive scientists of religion also attribute to people the belief in disembodied divine and human spirits, thus further serving to explain supposedly illusory meaning, including belief in an afterlife or in any larger meaning. These latter thinkers therefore conjure up and reinscribe an allegedly innate dualism from the subjectivistic or idealistic side. Thus, cognitive scientists of religion on the whole relegate humans to idealistic or physicalist disembodiment, absconding from their own and disallowing others' personal, responsible, convivial embodiment in our natural and social world and the inherent meaning of

that embodiment, as we tacitly rely on our prereflective bodies. They also abscond from their own and disallow others' search for larger or religious meaning through reflection based on our prereflective embodiment in a meaningful world.

Cognitive science of religion could be more productive if it applied the post-critical insights of Poteat in the following ways to bring out our radical, grounded, responsible, and full-fledged embodiment: 1) design studies of theological language and of religious ritual that a) attempt to discern how literally versus how metaphorically people understand theological and ritual language and b) attempt to understand how people integrate prereflective with more reflective belief and practice; and 2) design studies of afterlife belief and of hypothetical situations where people appear to switch bodies that allow for the acknowledgement of embodiment in such beliefs and imaginary situations. This would involve actually attempting to discern whether people imagine or think about being in a totally discarnate state, rather than assuming that disembodiment is necessarily entailed in afterlife belief or in imagining being in another body.

What is Poteat's legacy in a world where the insane picture he saw and the insane condition he diagnosed still exist and exert great influence? In responding to an earlier draft of this essay, Dale Cannon asked, "Who (or what) has been *cured*"? I would answer that Poteat was cured as have been many of his students—and students of those students (though, more than once in his books Poteat catches himself being influenced by the discarnate picture;<sup>51</sup> and so I also catch myself in my own musings). Currently there appears to be no movement clearly countering this insane picture that has reached a level of general awareness among scholars of religion, let alone the wider academy community. Yet despite this lack and the various discarnating subjectivist and reductive physicalist influences in the academy mentioned above, reasons for tempered hope exist. Mark Johnson's embodied philosophy of mind does seem to have reached a level of general awareness among philosophers, though how influential that perspective, along with related theories of embodied cognition, is amidst the philosophy community is questionable. And American pragmatism continues to offer resources given much of its basis in embodied experience. Related to embodied cognition, non-reductionism among biologists, philosophers of biology, cognitive psychologists, and neuroscientists open to holistic meaning within nature offers encouragement. Such thinkers include Terrence Deacon, Stuart Kaufmann, Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, Antonio Damasio, and Gerald Edelman. Also, the February 2017, issue of *Tradition and Discovery* focuses on biosemiotics, which acknowledges meaning at all levels of life. None of these just-mentioned thinkers or movements has evidenced any awareness of Poteat's relevant work—though hopefully that may change. In any case, because of the insight—and the hope—that Bill Poteat has given us, we need to keep that hope and keep the faith, combatting the insanity and helping people find sacred grounding in their bodies in our convivial natural and social world.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dale W. Cannon, "Being Post-Critical," in *Recovering the Personal: The Philosophical Anthropology of William H. Poteat*, ed. Dale W. Cannon and Ronald L. Hall (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 24-26.

<sup>2</sup>William H. Poteat, *Recovering the Ground: Critical Exercises in Recollection* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 113; Cannon, "Being Post-Critical," 31-32.

<sup>3</sup>William H. Poteat, "Pascal's Conception of Man and Modern Sensibility" (dissertation, Duke University, 1951), i.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Poteat, "Pascal's Conception of Man," i-ii, 31-32.

<sup>5</sup>Poteat, "Pascal's Conception of Man," 83-85.

<sup>6</sup>Poteat, "Pascal's Conception of Man," 83-85.

<sup>7</sup>Poteat, "Pascal's Conception of Man," 1.

<sup>8</sup>Poteat, "Pascal's Conception of Man," 350.

<sup>9</sup>Suggested to Poteat by Merleau-Ponty (William H. Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations: In Search of a Post-Critical Logic* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985], 59).

<sup>10</sup>Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, 64-65.

<sup>11</sup>William H. Poteat, "The Banality of Evil: The Darkness at the Center" (paper presentation, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, November 13, 1988).

<sup>12</sup>Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, 18, 26, 123-24, 134, 142, 156, 172, 197.

<sup>13</sup>In an interesting but somewhat cryptic reference, Poteat calls "militant Marxism" the "most cruel and unforgiving of all forms of gnostic apocalypticism" (Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, xiii). As I interpret this comment and Marx, I think Poteat is right: For Marx claims that we are God, as we have alienated ourselves from our noble qualities and projected them onto an illusory supernatural God. And despite his materialistic focus on economics, Marx saw communism, by satisfying our material needs, as freeing us to realize our divine creativity and artistry.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 152.

<sup>15</sup>Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, 165-66.

<sup>16</sup>Poteat, *Polanyian Meditations*, 9.

<sup>17</sup>William H. Poteat, *A Philosophical Daybook: Post-Critical Investigations* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press), 98.

<sup>18</sup>This phrasing and the previous quotation come from Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: G.P. Putnam and Sons, 1994), 106.

<sup>19</sup>Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 16; see also, x.

<sup>20</sup>Poteat, *Philosophical Daybook*, 68.

<sup>21</sup>Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, 141.

<sup>22</sup>Poteat, *Recovering the Ground*, 141-42, 201-202.

<sup>23</sup>Potear, *Philosophical Daybook*, 47.

<sup>24</sup>Potear, *Philosophical Daybook*, 47.

<sup>25</sup>Cannon, "Being Post-Critical," 32-34, expounds upon the role in Potear's thought of how this picture holds folks captive.

<sup>26</sup>Cannon, "Being Post-Critical," 24-26.

<sup>27</sup>Prior to The Primacy of Persons Conference, I wrote an article delving into CSR, entitled, "The Dualistic, Discarnate Picture That Haunts the Cognitive Science of Religion" in *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 50/3 (September, 2015).

<sup>28</sup>Deborah Kelemen, "Are Children 'Intuitive Theists'? Reasoning about Purpose in Nature," in *Religion and Cognition: A Reader*, ed. Jason Slone (London: Equinox Publications, 2006), 99-114.

<sup>29</sup>Olivera Petrovich, "Origins of Religion in Human Development: The Issue of Innateness" (paper presentation, Oriel College, Oxford, February 10, 2005).

<sup>30</sup>Orem, William. "The Magical Mind: How Do Adults Become Supernatural Thinkers?" *Science and Theology News* 6 (2006): 18-19.

<sup>31</sup>Margaret Mead, "An Investigation of the Thought of Primitive Children, with Special Reference to Animism." *Journal, Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1932, 173-90; Frank C. Keil, "The Origins of an Autonomous Biology." In *Modularity and Restraints in Language and Cognition*, eds. M. R. Gunmar and K. M. Marastsos (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992), 103-37.

<sup>32</sup>Mead, "Primitive Children," 186.

<sup>33</sup>Keil, "Origins," 123-24.

<sup>34</sup>Keil, "Origins," 124-25.

<sup>35</sup>Keil, "Origins," 126.

<sup>36</sup>Kelemen, "Are Children 'Intuitive Theists'?" 101-102, 111 n.1.

<sup>37</sup>Edward Slingerland, "The Study of Religion in the Age of Cognitive Science," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76 (2008): 386.

<sup>38</sup>Slingerland, 395; Jesse M. Bering, "The Folk Psychology of Souls," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 29 (2006): 453-62; Paul Bloom, *Descartes' Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human* (New York: Basic Books), 195, 213.

<sup>39</sup>Jesse M. Bering and David F. Bjorklund, "The Natural Emergence of Reasoning about the Afterlife as a Developmental Regularity," *Developmental Psychology* 40 (2004): 217-33.

<sup>40</sup>Bering, "Folk Psychology," 453.

<sup>41</sup>David H. Nikkel, *Radical Embodiment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010; Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2011), 163-68; "Dualistic, Discarnate Picture."

<sup>42</sup>Paul Bloom, e-mail message to author, July 18, 2008.

<sup>43</sup>Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 410-13.

<sup>44</sup>Ronald Eyre et al. "Religion in Indonesia: The Way of the Ancestors," in *The Long Search* (New York: Ambrose Video Publishing, 2001).

<sup>45</sup>Slingerland, 376-78.

<sup>46</sup>Slingerland, 392.

<sup>47</sup>Slingerland, 400-402. Interestingly Slingerland cites the movie, *The Matrix*, where most humans live as brains in a vat but do not know their true state (400-401). Damasio contends that the absence of a body means that a brain in a vat could not duplicate embodied experience (*Descartes' Error*, 228). Though Slingerland does not specify the disembodied state of such brains, I would opine that what the heroes fighting the Matrix, and viewers identifying with them, find unacceptable is not just the deception, but also the disembodiment.

<sup>48</sup>Slingerland, 392-404.

<sup>49</sup>Slingerland, 395.

<sup>50</sup>Todd, Douglas, "Smart Atheist Heads \$3-million Grant into Religion and Morality" (*Vancouver Sun Staff Blogs*, Postmedia Network Inc., January 11, 2013).

<sup>51</sup>For example, Poteat, *Philosophical Daybook*, 71-72.