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WHAT THE DOING DOES: RELIGIOUS PRACTICE & THE PROBLEM OF MEANING

[A] meaning has taken shape that hangs over us,
leading us forward in our blindness,
but awaiting in the darkness for us to attain awareness
before emerging into the light of day and speaking.
We are doomed historically to history,
to the patient construction of discourses about discourses,
and to the task of hearing what has already been said.

—Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*

False Messiahs, False Meanings

THE OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE. The morality of slaves. The projection of desire.

Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are more than a little incredulous about the meaning of religious practice.¹ Wishing to divest it of its visible significance and expose it

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¹ "Religious practice" is here being used where one might elsewhere find the term "religion." There are two reasons for this substitution. First, "religious practice" calls attention to the embeddedness and particularity of what might seem, under the title of "religion," to be a homogenous and universal *thing*. What is ordinarily called "religion," I would like to imply, does not exist outside of practices – including academic practices.

Secondly, "religious practices" might also connote modes of materiality that are lacking from a conception of "religion." Whereas a Schleiermachiian understanding of faith or feeling is often associated with the term religion, I should not like to exclude other, as Althusser says, "modalities." Although "the materialities of a displacement for going to mass, of kneeling down, of the gesture of the sign of the cross, or of the mea culpa, of a sentence, of a prayer, of an act of contrition, of a penitence, of a gaze, of a hand-shake, of an external verbal discourse of an 'internal' verbal discourse (consciousness), are not one and the same materiality" (Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster [New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1971], 169), they all have some resonance with the category of "religious practice," where "practice" is not to be opposed to but should include the notion of "thought."

“as the most fatal seductive lie that has yet existed, as the great unholy lie,”² all three theorists share the assumption that there is a fundamental asymmetry between manifest and latent content.³ “All three begin with suspicion concerning the illusions of consciousness,” Paul Ricoeur states, “and then proceed to employ the stratagem of deciphering.”⁴ That is, they argue that people’s consciousness of meaning fails to match up with meaning itself, and therefore can be categorically considered *false* consciousness.⁵ An interpretation of religious practice like the ones attributed to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud posits and then proceeds to rank and order meanings, bequeathing some with the designation of *truth* and others with that of *illusion*. The scholar’s job is then to construct “a mediate *science* of meaning,”⁶ through which the “multitude of ruses and falsifications of meaning”⁷ can be demystified.

It is this surface-depth distinction that has exposed the theories of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud to the label of “reductionism” in the study of religious practices. Despite the effective synonymy of the term with the “hermeneutics of suspicion,” however, “reductionism” is not necessarily conceptually dependent upon a notion of false consciousness. Reduction, according to Richard Rorty, “is a relation merely between linguistic items, not among ontological categories. To reduce the language of X’s to the language of Y’s one must show either (a) that if you can talk about Y’s you do not need to talk about X’s, or (b) that any given description in terms of X’s applies to all and only the things to which a given description in terms of Y’s applies.”⁸ Reduction, on Rorty’s view, is a matter of words — all kinds of words. Because the reductionist gesture that replaces one language game with another has no inherent connection to the *content* of those language games, every theory is as susceptible to the charge as any other.

Although there is no necessary analytic relation between reduction and illusion, they are habitually conflated in the study of religious practice.⁹ In myriad

² Nietzsche in this passage is referring to (what else?) Christianity. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (New York, NY: Random House, 1967), 117: §200.

³ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 33.

⁴ Ricoeur, 34.

⁵ See Ricoeur, 33.

⁶ Ricoeur 34, emphasis in original.

⁷ Ricoeur, 17.

⁸ Richard Rorty, “Non-Reductive Physicalism,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 115.

⁹ In the paragraphs to come, I set aside the question of what the so-called “antireductionists” (Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Friedrich Schleiermacher) “really” think and take up instead what I think scholars who study of religious practice often think they think. I employ them not as themselves, per se, but rather as constellations of issues that exist in the study of religious practices – if not in the “primary” literature, then in the “secondary” literature (if such

critiques, Mircea Eliade claims that reductionist accounts fail to attend to the “irreducibly religious” element, where that element can only be found in so-called “religious experience.”¹⁰ “It is unfortunate,” Eliade laments, “that we do not have at our disposal a more precise word than “religion” to denote the experience of the sacred.”¹¹ Religious experiences, Eliade claims, have “a mode of being that is peculiar to themselves; they *exist on their own plane of reference*, in their particular universe.”¹² Similarly, Rudolf Otto identifies the “real innermost core” of the religious as a “mental state,” which “is perfectly *sui generis* and irreducible to any other.”¹³ Therefore, “a religious datum reveals its deeper meaning when it is considered on its plane of reference, and not when it is reduced to one of its secondary aspects or its contexts.”¹⁴ Although Eliade admits that “there is no such thing as a “pure” religious fact,” the responsible scholar must “concentrate on the religious signification of his documents.”¹⁵ “The confusion,” Eliade continues, “starts when *only one* aspect of religious life is accepted as primary and meaningful, and the other aspects or functions are accepted as secondary or even illusory.”¹⁶

In setting about the task to “seek to understand the *essence of religion*,”¹⁷ Eliade establishes a tight connection between “the center of religious life”¹⁸ and “where the [practitioners] have untiringly declared it to be”¹⁹ — i.e., in the experience of the sacred. To be guilty of reductionism, by these standards, is thus to reduce the language game of religious practices to anything *other* than the language game of religious experiences. “We do not have the right,” Eliade professes, “to reduce them to something other than what they are, namely spiritual creations.”²⁰

a distinction can be made for heuristic purposes). My use of Eliade, Otto, Smith, and Schleiermacher has been irreversibly influenced by the literature surrounding and constructing them (including works by Daniel L. Pals, Russell T. McCutcheon, Robert A. Segal, etc.), substantiating Jorge Luis Borges’ claim that “each writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. In this correlation, the identity or plurality of men doesn’t matter” (Jorge Luis Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors,” in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1999), 365).

¹⁰ See Robert A. Segal, “In Defense of Reductionism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51.1 (March 1983), 100.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Quest; History and Meaning in Religion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1969), unpaginated preface.

¹² Eliade, *The Quest*, 6, emphasis in original.

¹³ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy; An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1958), 7, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Eliade, *The Quest*, 6.

¹⁵ Eliade, *The Quest*, 19.

¹⁶ Eliade, *The Quest*, 19, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 1987), 232, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Eliade, *The Quest*, 10.

¹⁹ Eliade, *The Quest*, 10.

²⁰ Eliade, *The Quest*, 132-133.

Because the accounts given by theorists like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are generally perceived as “fundamentally opposed to the normal stance of faith,”²¹ they lend themselves to scathing criticism on the grounds that they do not elucidate the touted “standpoint of the believer.”²² Because of the hegemony of this particular, and strikingly Protestant, conception of the “religious,” any scheme that deviates from it qualifies as reductionism. Inasmuch as phenomenological approaches have successfully staked out territory in the so-called “non-” or “antireductionist” camp, all other accounts are *ipso facto* considered to be reductionist.²³

Reductionism and the surface-depth distinction have thus become virtually indistinguishable in the study of religious practice. For Marx, the story goes,²⁴ religious practice is *nothing but* the fixation of the masses, an ideology that ensures the continued dominion of the ruling class. For Nietzsche, religious practice is *nothing but* the *ressentiment* of the weak turned inward, pathetically masking their impotence. For Freud, religious practice is *nothing but* the ambivalence of ego, wishes repressed and projected outside of oneself. Because these hidden truths are necessarily obscured by operations of power or repression, the accounts offered by the relevant theorists are to be favored over the “superficial” interpretations offered by participants in religious practices. Hence such explanations are understood, in Daniel L. Pals’s description, as “aggressively reductionistic.” In *Seven Theories of Religion* (for which Nietzsche does not make the cut), Pals claims that Marx’s tendency

is to describe religion as always an effect, an expression, a symptom of something more real and substantial that lies underneath it... His strategy is identical to that of Freud...in that beneath the surface of religious beliefs and rituals, he is always seeking out the hidden cause of these things, which is to be found in something else. For Freud, that something is a neurotic psychological need; ...for Marx, it is...the material facts of the class struggle and alienation. Since these burdens form the reality behind the illusions of belief, we explain religion best only when we reduce it to the forces of economic life that have

²¹ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 279.

²² Pals, 186.

²³ On the view of reductionism espoused by Rorty, however, Eliade’s concentration on the language of religious experience might *itself* qualify as reductionist. The impulse to reverse the charge of reductionism on Eliade (albeit for different reasons) has been felt by Robert A. Segal, among others. See Segal, 99.

²⁴ As with Eliade, Otto, and Smith, I set aside the question of what Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud “really” think and take up instead what I think scholars who study of religious practice often think they think. See, for example, Pals, who writes apropos of Marx and Freud: “each theorist believes that this functionalist approach can bring him to a reductionist conclusion. None is content with the more modest claim that his strategy explains just one part of religion, while other theories may well explain other parts. Each insists that he has found what is basic and fundamental; hence other theories are not really needed. Each feels not just that he can explain religion but that he can explain it away – that is, *reduce it* to something other than what it appears” (Pals, 158).

created it.²⁵

The focus on the disconnection between the hidden and the shown, the real and the illusory, the true and the false has thus bolstered “antireductionist” accounts of religious practice, wherein meaning and consciousness of meaning are again united. Eliade writes, “A religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of...any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it — the element of the sacred.”²⁶ Eliade, whom Russell McCutcheon groups with Otto and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, privileges “the interior, interpersonally unavailable *feeling, faith, or consciousness* (all three betraying the continuing influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher) as primary and underivable. Therefore, to study its manifestations — religious institutions, myths, symbols, and so on — is not to study the thing *an sich*.”²⁷

The allusion to Kant is apt. Like all objects of study, any supposed access to *noumena* can be charged with reducing the *Ding an sich* to mere *phenomena*. Taken to the extreme in radical epistemological skepticism, which begins with the suspicion that one’s perceptions do not accurately represent the external world, the distinction between noumena and phenomena becomes absolute. Similarly, as Ricoeur notes, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud begin with the suspicion that one’s perceptions of religious practice do not match up with what really goes on. As much as Descartes and Kant, then, the inquiries of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud serve to consummate a distinction. They extend the division between meaning and consciousness of meaning to its logical conclusion.²⁸

The field is thus bifurcated into camps of meaning. “According to one pole,” as Ricoeur writes, there is “the manifestation and restoration of a meaning addressed to me in the manner of a message, a proclamation, or as is sometimes said, a *kerygma*; according to the other pole, it is understood as a demystification,

²⁵ Pals, 145.

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (Cleveland, OH: Meridian Books, 1963), xiii.

²⁷ Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15, emphasis in original.

²⁸ Noting the affinity between the rehabilitated Descartes and the “masters of suspicion,” Ricoeur posits a difference of degree: “Descartes knows that things are doubtful, that they are not such as they appear; but he has no doubt that consciousness is such as it appears to itself; in consciousness, meaning and consciousness of meaning coincide. Since Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, this too has become doubtful” (Ricoeur 33). I would tend not to emphasize this difference, as I prefer pre-*cogito*, demon-deceived doubter, circa Mediation I. See René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 76-79.

as a reduction of illusion."²⁹ It is in the quest for "true meaning," however, that Eliade, Otto, and Smith are on a par with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. We can see, with Ricoeur, how the two poles are united along another axis: in their shattering of received wisdom, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud reinscribe the structure of meaning that they have inherited. True meaning, for Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, becomes that which is simultaneously obscured from the participant and revealed to the theorist in religious practice. Their searches imply a quest for a messianic *meaning an sich*, just as much as Eliade, Otto, and Smith's, only they locate it entirely outside of ordinary consciousness. "From the beginning," Ricoeur writes, "we must consider this double possibility:"

The situation in which language today finds itself comprises this double possibility, this double solicitation and urgency: on the one hand, purify discourse of its excrescences, liquidate the idols, go from drunkenness to sobriety, realize our state of poverty once and for all; on the other hand, use the most "nihilistic," destructive, iconoclastic movement so as to *let speak* what once, what each time, was *said*, when meaning appeared anew, when meaning was at its fullest. Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning.³⁰

In this way, one might consider Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud to be theologians *par excellence*. Through the destruction of ordinary understandings of religious practice, the hermeneutics of suspicion place new meanings in the same old skins. As many have observed,³¹ one must then resist the impulse to oppose "interpretation conceived as the unmasking, demystification, or reduction of illusions, to interpretation conceived as the recollection or restoration of meaning."³² So long as interpreting a religious practice is understood as "the showing-hiding of double meaning,"³³ the question will still be "undecided whether double meaning is dissimulation or revelation, necessary lying or access to the sacred."³⁴ As Ricoeur states, the three masters of the "school of suspicion" thus offer understandings of religious practice that "clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth."³⁵ To the extent that Marx, Nietzsche,

²⁹ Ricoeur, 27.

³⁰ Ricoeur, 27, emphasis in original.

³¹ See, for example, Roland Barthes, who considers the reception of any single meaning, regardless of its content, to be "theological." See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.

³² Ricoeur, 9.

³³ Ricoeur, 7.

³⁴ Ricoeur, 26.

³⁵ Ricoeur, 33.

and Freud attempt to demystify meaning, they reify that which they seek to uncover. "The ultimate idolatry," in the words of Slavoj Žižek, is not "the idolizing of the mask, of the image, itself, but the belief that there is some hidden positive content beyond the mask."³⁶

We might understand the theories heretofore mentioned as versions of what Michel Foucault calls "commentary" on religious practices. "Commentary questions discourse as to what it says and intended to say; it tries to uncover that deeper meaning of speech that enables it to achieve identity with itself, supposedly nearer to its essential truth."³⁷ In structuralist terms, then, to analyze a practice is to explicate the signified, a feat that is accomplished through the construction of a nonidentical signifier, i.e., commentary. To do so, as Foucault argues, is to create "a whole tangled web." Commentary works by "showing while concealing," exercising the "dangerous privilege" of "stating what has been said" by means of "what has never been said."³⁸ In the conceptual space between the signifier and the signified, *meaning* erupts as a compensatory gesture to fill the void of the primordial rift. In the same way that a text's essence will never fully be "gotten to" and will forever be out of reach, a religious practice cannot but be left "with an inexhaustible reserve."³⁹ The elusive signified is thus "revealed only in the visible, heavy world of a signifier that is itself burdened with a meaning that it cannot control."⁴⁰

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 138.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (London, UK: Routledge, 1989), xvi, emphasis in original.

³⁸ Foucault, xvi.

³⁹ Foucault, xvi.

⁴⁰ Foucault, xvi-xvii. The preceding argument can be nicely summarized in parentally-advised vernacular through the story of the endlessly deferred messianic figure popularized by rapper Eminem. The critically acclaimed track "The Real Slim Shady" (which has won numerous awards, including the Grammy for Best Rap Solo Performance, the Billboard Music Award for Best Rap/Hip Hop Clip of the Year, and MTV Video Music Award for Best Video of the Year [2000]), serves as a worthwhile allegory for the problem of meaning. An abridged version of the lyrics runs as follows:

Will the real Slim Shady please stand up?
I repeat, will the real Slim Shady please stand up?

And there's a million of us just like me
Who cuss like me; who just don't give a fuck like me
Who dress like me; walk, talk and act like me
And just might be the next best thing, but not quite me

And every single person is a Slim Shady lurking
He could be working at Burger King, spitting on your onion rings
Or in the parking lot, circling, screaming, "I don't give a fuck!"
With his windows down and his system up

Foucault advocates a departure from this kind of inquiry, not in favor of a quest for real or truer meaning, but as a rejection of the presuppositions that such a search implies. To comment on religious practice in the manner of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (and no less Eliade, Otto, and Smith) is to condemn oneself to the infinite task of signifying, which is

to admit by definition an excess of the signified over the signifier; a necessary, unformulated remainder of thought that language has left in the shade — a remainder that is the very essence of thought, driven outside its secret — but to comment also presupposes that this unspoken element slumbers within speech, and that, by a superabundance proper to the signifier, one may, in questioning it, give voice to a content that was not explicitly signified. By opening up the possibility of commentary, this double plethora dooms us to an endless task that nothing can limit: there is always a certain amount of signified remaining that must be allowed to speak, while the signifier is always offered to us in an abundance that questions us, in spite of ourselves, as to what it “means.”⁴¹

So long as it is considered a thing *an sich*, the meaning of a religious practice will therefore elude the scholar. Because the signified can never be fully symbolized in the signifier, Foucault claims that any attempt to identify meaning effectively becomes mystical. If, as Ricoeur argues, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud “triumph over the doubt as to consciousness by an exegesis of meaning,”⁴² then it “is an exegesis which listens, through the prohibitions, the symbols, the concrete images, through the whole apparatus of Revelation, to the Word of God, ever secret, ever beyond itself.”⁴³ Like the Cartesian move to relegate our perceptions to the realm of mere appearances, thus mystifying the external world to the *n*th degree, the production of “deeper” interpretations by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud serves to further reify the meaning of religious practices. No less than Eliade, Otto, and Smith’s, then, these analyses are predicated upon an encounter

So will the real Shady please stand up?

I’m Slim Shady, yes I’m the real Shady
 All you other Slim Shadys are just imitating
 So won’t the real Slim Shady
 Please stand up, please stand up, please stand up?

Guess there’s a Slim Shady in all of us
 Fuck it, let’s all stand up

(See Eminem, “The Real Slim Shady,” in *The Marshall Mathers LP* [Santa Monica, CA: Interscope Records, 2000], track 8).

⁴¹ Foucault, xvi-xvii.

⁴² Ricoeur, 33.

⁴³ Foucault, xvii.

with the divine.⁴⁴ “For years,” Foucault discloses, “we have been commenting on the language of our culture from the very point where for centuries we had awaited in vain for the decision of the Word.”⁴⁵ Halting the search for a messiah then entails “refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning” to that which is studied. As Roland Barthes affirms, this gesture “liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases — reason, science, law.”⁴⁶

What *What the Doing Does* Is

One such anti-theological activity is Heidegger’s dissolution of the subject-object distinction in *Being and Time*. Allowing philosophers to abandon questions concerning the *Ding an sich*, being-in-the-world opens up a whole new field of inquiry that Heidegger calls the existential analytic.⁴⁷ Similarly, an approach to the study of religious practice that eschews the notion of “the tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred”⁴⁸ might render the debate over reduction moot. Inasmuch as the problem of meaning is, on Foucault’s view, a symptom of the division between the signifier and the signified, an alternative might be to stop asking the positivist question about the essence of a religious practice and instead be content with “carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning.”⁴⁹ Instead of deciphering the secret behind what people do, the scholar can hope to describe religious practices in somewhat different terms.

Consider this statement of Foucault’s: “People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does.”⁵⁰ The observation indicates a way in which a scholar can analyze a religious practice without claiming that its meaning is either illusory or concomitant with its appearance. “The resulting interpretation,” as Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow argue, “is a pragmatically guided reading of the coherence of the practices of the society. It does not claim to correspond either to

⁴⁴ Ricoeur discerns the similarities between the phenomenology of religion and the hermeneutics of suspicion, asking, “to destroy the idols, to listen to symbols – are not these, we asked, one and the same enterprise?” (Ricoeur, 54)

⁴⁵ Foucault, xvii.

⁴⁶ Barthes, 147.

⁴⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 49-58: §1.II.12-13.

⁴⁸ Barthes, 147.

⁴⁹ Barthes, 147.

⁵⁰ Qtd. in Hubert L. Dreyfus & Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 187.

the everyday meanings shared by the actors or, in any simple sense, to reveal the intrinsic meaning of the practices."⁵¹ By focusing on *what the doing does* in a very broad sense — where, in Schleiermacher's terms, knowings, doings, and feelings *all* count as things religious practices *do* — the scholar can seek to put forward a perspective on which certain normative questions bear without entering into debates over what a religious practice *means*. Doing so extricates one from the business of determining which interpretations of religious practice are "really real," so the scholar need not necessarily occupy a higher, more knowledgeable, more liberated standpoint than the believer; nor must the scholar necessarily relinquish the language of religious participation. The resulting account is one in which it may be entirely irrelevant to ask questions what a religious practice means or who has access to it. Moreover, because the doings that we call religious do an infinite number of things, this kind of analysis requires that the scholar make explicit the kind of doing with which he or she is concerned as well as the viewpoint from which those concerns matter.

Reductionism might then begin to evaporate as a problem. So long as each account is understood as an attempt to construct a pragmatically guided reading, then there is no meaning of religious practice that can be said to be reduced. Arguing that a religious doing does something in particular is not to argue that that is all that a religious practice does, nor is it to argue that that is what the practice essentially means. There is all surface, no depth: "the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath." As in Barthes' proposal for literary analysis, religious practice is "to be ranged over, not pierced."⁵²

To illustrate a way in which accounts of religious practice can advantageously engage the question of what the doing does while avoiding issues of meaning and its reduction, the remainder of this inquiry will proceed by way of example. The following sections of this essay will attempt to demonstrate a way of reading theory "nonreductionistically" by drawing attention to relevant methodological moments in the work of Louis Althusser and Georges Bataille. For this reason it will not be preoccupied with the question of what Althusser and Bataille "really think,"⁵³ but instead it shall employ what is useful from their accounts in gesturing toward an analysis of what the doing does.

⁵¹ Dreyfus & Rabinow, 124.

⁵² Barthes, 147.

⁵³ I do not take myself to be asking or answering the question of what Althusser or Bataille "really mean," nor do I find such a question interesting for the same reasons that I do not find the question of what religious practice really means to be helpful.

Advisory Interlude

We interrupt this essay to bring you the following public service announcement. Two points to preface the ensuing discussion:

- ❶ An analysis of what religious practice does should not be understood as a form of functionalism
- ❷ An analysis of what religious practice does should not be understood as a quest for the *meaning* of what religious practice does

First, while an analysis of what the doing does asks questions about functions — what it is that religious practices actually do? — it should not be conflated with *functionalism*. One way of understanding the difference between an analysis of what the doing does and functionalism is to distinguish between two uses of the word “function.” There is a weak sense in which a question like “How does religious practice function?” can be understood, in which it is essentially equivalent to asking what religious practice *does*. It asks, in this case, about the effects of religious doings. A stronger sense of the question, however, is one in which it is assumed that there is a particular job or a role that religious practice plays and is intended (usually on an unconscious level) to play, which is then understood to be its function. Functionalist accounts, in which social bodies are often paralleled to organic bodies, posit a totality to which all processes are related. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown explains this methodology in the following way: “If we consider any recurrent part of the life-process, such as respiration, digestion, etc., its *function* is the part it plays in, the contribution it makes to, the life of the organism of the whole.”⁵⁴ A functionalist account of a social practice, therefore, explains the activity on the basis of its utility for the enduring social body. “The function of any recurrent activity, such as the punishment of a crime, or a funeral ceremony, is the part it plays in the social life as a whole and therefore the contribution it makes to the maintenance of the structural continuity.”⁵⁵ Functional explanation therefore entails showing that a practice has beneficial consequences, i.e., that it satisfies certain needs or serves to maintain a state of equilibrium.⁵⁶ The *raison d’être* of a practice is therefore given in terms of its function.

In functionalist accounts, therefore, *what something does* (the weak sense of function) is conflated with *what it is designed to do* (the strong sense of function). The mode of analysis that is outlined here, however, employs the notion of

⁵⁴ A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “On the Concept of Function in Social Science,” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society: Essays and Addresses* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1965), 179, emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ Radcliffe-Brown, 179.

⁵⁶ See Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 27.

function only the weak sense. A pair of rubber sandals, to take an example from Stephen Jay Gould, provides an illustration of the analytic distinction proffered. Old treadbare tires can be fashioned into excellent sandals, "but one would never argue that Goodrich (or whoever) built the tires to provide footwear in Third World nations."⁵⁷ One cannot, that is, reason from an analysis of what something *does* to an explanation of what it is *for*. Jon Elster makes a similar point in relation to Marxist functionalism. "The mere fact that an activity has beneficial consequences," Elster writes, "is not sufficient to explain it."⁵⁸

An analysis of what the doing does is therefore not equivalent to functionalism. It does not assume any inherent directionality, teleology, or purpose. It does not attempt to provide an explanation or justification, but it does have other uses. An analysis of the effects of a meteor striking the earth 65 million years ago (a bad day for the dinosaurs, the opportunity of an era for mammals), for example, goes nowhere in explaining *why* the catastrophe occurred (unless one wishes to posit a cosmic assassin). Merely to say that, though, is not to show that such an analysis is not worthwhile but only to recognize that its aims are limited. Much can be learned from the analysis of such an event, but not in the way of functional explanation.

One further danger: Talk about explanations has a way of seeping back into meaning talk. If we can explain something, it may seem, then we will be able to decipher its meaning. As much as an analysis of what the doing does is not intended to serve as a functional explanation, though, neither should it serve as another round in the wild goose chase after meaning. An analysis of what religious practice does should not therefore be taken as a quest for the *meaning* of what religious doing does; understanding it in this way merely shifts the problem of meaning from "religious practice" to "what religious practice does." Inasmuch as it is assumed that there remains a meaning (even a second-order meaning) that can be reduced, the various factions will surely make allegations that it has been. Like claims to "the meaning of religious practice," the search for "the meaning of what religious practice does" will only result in myriad charges of false messiahs and a recursion of the problem of reduction.

Exit interlude.

⁵⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, "Creating the Creators," *Discover* 17.10 (October 1996), 44.

⁵⁸ Jon Elster, *An Introduction to Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 33.

Religion Speaks Me

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Louis Althusser outlines an analysis through which one can begin to understand what happens when one participates in the practices that we call religious. Althusser’s description of ideology is a way to “make religion speak,” i.e., make explicit what religious doing *does*.

Let us therefore consider the Christian religious ideology. I shall use a rhetorical figure and “make it speak,” i.e. collect into a fictional discourse what it “says” not only in its two Testaments, its Theologians, Sermons, but also in its practices, its rituals, its ceremonies and its sacraments. The Christian religious ideology says something like this:

It says: I address myself to you, a human individual called Peter (every individual is called by his name, in the passive sense, it is never he who provides his own name), in order to tell you that God exists and that you are answerable to Him.⁵⁹

What is interesting for Althusser is the way in which this “speech” *acts* — what the “banal discourse” of religious doings *does* to individuals and what it makes of them:

if we consider that religious ideology is indeed addressed to individuals, in order to “transform them into subjects,” by interpellating the individual, Peter, in order to make him a subject, free to obey or disobey the appeal, i.e. God’s commandments; if it calls these individuals by their names, thus recognizing that they are always already interpellated as subjects with a personal identity (to the extent that Pascal’s Christ says: “It is for you that I have shed this drop of my blood!”); if it interpellates them in such a way that the subject responds: “Yes; *it really is me!*” if it obtains from them the recognition that they really do occupy the place it designates for them as theirs in the world, a fixed residence: “It really is me, I am here, a worker, a boss or a soldier!” in this vale of tears; if it obtains from them the recognition of a destination (eternal life or damnation) according to the respect or contempt they show to “God’s Commandments,” Law become Love; — if everything does happen in this way (in the practices of the well-known rituals of baptism, confirmation, communion, confession and extreme unction, etc. . . .), we should note that all this “procedure” to set up Christian religious subjects is dominated by a strange phenomenon: the fact that there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God.⁶⁰

One thing that religious doing does, therefore, is transform individuals into subjects. Althusser argues that I am only a subject insofar as I mis/recognize

⁵⁹ Althusser, 177.

⁶⁰ Althusser, 178, emphasis in original.

myself as the addressee of an ideological interpellation. This mis-/recognition, however, is not false consciousness. Ideological systems, for Althusser, are not merely illusions, which “need only be ‘interpreted’ to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world”⁶¹ (the position Althusser attributes to Marx and Feuerbach). Rather, ideology is a “necessarily imaginary distortion” of the “relationship of individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derive from them.”⁶² Ideology, when understood via Jacques Lacan’s notion of the imaginary,⁶³ is part of the mirror stage of subject formation. The child in Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory identifies with its reflection in the mirror insofar as it mis-/recognizes itself in the *imago* — the idealized whole.⁶⁴ Through the (necessarily illusory) act of this identification, however, the subject emerges: the gesture of saying “It’s me” when faced with the image in the mirror (which, strictly speaking, is *not* me) is itself the very deed that generates me. The *I*, Lacan argues, is in this way “precipitated in a primordial form.”⁶⁵

The act of mis-/recognition, encapsulated by the utterance “It’s me,” is thus (in the philosophical sense) a *performative*. As J. L. Austin writes, it “is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.”⁶⁶ The “transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image”⁶⁷ hence cannot be true or false; it simply is. For Althusser, then, ideological interpellation is not a distortion of the “real world” but is itself constitutive of that world. My knowing that I am the one being hailed by the call “Hey, you there!” thus *makes it the case* that there is an “I” to be hailed at all. By issuing and answering the summons,⁶⁸ Althusser argues, both *the hailer and the hailed are enacted into existence*. The “absolute condition” of interpellation is thus the center, the reflected *imago*, from which the call to subjectivity derives. Through this “specular” structure, one knows (i.e., accomplishes) how things “must be” in the real world. Through a process of necessary mis-/recognition,

⁶¹ Althusser, 162.

⁶² Althusser, 165.

⁶³ Here I am reading “imaginary” in the precise Lacanian sense in which it is not falsity as such but “the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning” (Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* [London, UK: Routledge, 1996], 149) through which truth is produced (See Slavoj Žižek, “The Truth Arises from Misrecognition,” in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher [New York, NY: Routledge, 1991], 188-212.).

⁶⁴ See Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,” *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Norton, 1977), 1-7.

⁶⁵ Lacan, 2.

⁶⁶ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 6, emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Lacan, 2.

⁶⁸ One need not answer the summons in the sense of turning around. Merely by knowing that it is me who is called is enough to interpellate me a subject, as subjects “always-already are” (Althusser 176).

what religious practice, like all ideological systems, *does* is therefore the following:

- ❶ the interpellation of 'individuals' as subjects;
- ❷ their subjection to the Subject;
- ❸ the mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects' recognition of each other, and finally the subject's recognition of himself;
- ❹ the absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be all right: *Amen – 'So be it'*.⁶⁹

Because religious practice does these things, it can be understood as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). ISAs, Althusser states, "contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation."⁷⁰ One thing that religious practice does, which constitutes Althusser's primarily concern, is that it secures the conditions for reproducing the society's status quo. Through "recalling in sermons and the other great ceremonies of Birth, Marriage and Death, that man is only ashes, unless he loves his neighbour to the extent of turning the other cheek to whoever strikes first,"⁷¹ religious practice "teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'."⁷² Through their ideological performances, then, subjects learn to cohere "to the rules of the established order," achieving "a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'."⁷³

A result of religious practice is therefore the construction of certain kinds of subjects, namely subjects who "work by themselves" to reproduce the conditions of production. These individuals, who Althusser calls "good subjects," operate to the specifications of the state without recourse to violence, which "bad subjects" require. Good subjects "'recognize' the existing state of affairs (*das Bestehende*), that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise', and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt 'love thy neighbour as thyself', etc."⁷⁴ To the extent that

⁶⁹ Althusser, 181, emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ Althusser, 154.

⁷¹ Althusser, 154.

⁷² Althusser, 133, emphasis in original.

⁷³ Althusser, 132-133.

⁷⁴ Althusser, 181.

material behaviors produce both subjects and their subjectors, *ideology induces reality*. A religious practice, therefore, is “the inscription in life” of a performative utterance: one thing that it does is create and maintain a world like “the admirable words of the prayer: ‘Amen — So be it’.”⁷⁵

To Disrupt Discontinuity

Meet another prospective reductionist: Georges Bataille. Obsessed with work, death, and everything in between, Bataille’s theory is heavily indebted to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Despite the infamy of these three predecessors in the study of religious practice, one can rescue Bataille from the abyss of meaning by keeping to the “surface” of the analytical model.

For Bataille, human sacrifice among the Aztecs serves as a perfect example of religious practice. By destroying a thing — by taking it finally out of the capitalistic realm of utility — sacrifice does something that Bataille finds very interesting: through the practice of consumptive expenditure, the effects of production, rationalization and reification are counteracted. The first volume of *The Accursed Share* reads:

Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane. Servile use has made a *thing* (an *object*) of that which, in a deep sense, is of the same nature as the *subject*, is in a relation of intimate participation with the subject. It is not necessary that the sacrifice actually destroy the animal or plant of which man had to make a *thing* for its use. They must at least be destroyed as things, that is, *insofar as they have become things*. Destruction is the best means of negating a utilitarian relation between man and the animal and plant. But it rarely goes to the point of holocaust. It is enough that the consumption of the offerings, or the *communion*, has a meaning that is not reducible to the shared ingestion of food. The victim of the sacrifice cannot be consumed in the same way as a motor uses fuel. What the ritual has the virtue of rediscovering is the intimate participation of the sacrificer and the victim, to which a servile use had put an end.⁷⁶

There is an absolute distinction between the world of “immanent immensity”⁷⁷ and what Bataille calls the *real* world, in which nature “becomes man’s property but it ceases to be immanent to him.”⁷⁸ This difference is embodied in the

⁷⁵ Althusser, 181, emphasis in original.

⁷⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, v. 1: Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1988), 55-56, emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Zone Books, 1992), 42.

⁷⁸ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 41.

sacrificial act, which “draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice.”⁷⁹ Sacrifice, therefore, “is heat, in which the intimacy of those who make up the system of common works is rediscovered.”⁸⁰ The achievement of this intimacy is the dissolution of the subject-object distinction, which results from the inception of labor.

For the *subject* is consumption insofar as it is not tied down to work.... This useless consumption is *what suits me*, once my concern for the morrow is removed. And if I thus consume immodestly, I reveal to my fellow beings that which I am *intimately*: Consumption is the way in which *separate* beings communicate. Everything shows through, everything is open and infinite between those who consume intensely.⁸¹

Religious practice, for Bataille, “is always a matter of detaching from the *real* order, from the poverty of *things*, and of restoring the *divine* order.”⁸² What religious practice does, therefore, is establish a state of intimacy through which humans, like animals, can be “*in the world like water in water*.”⁸³ “A violent death disrupts the creature’s discontinuity,”⁸⁴ so “by dissolving the separate beings that participate in it,” sacrifice then “reveals their fundamental continuity, like the waves of a stormy sea.”⁸⁵

In so doing, however, the “possession of intimacy leads to a deception.”⁸⁶ By removing the sacrificial object from productive circulation, it is again rendered a *thing*, but this time a sacred thing. “The *sacred thing* externalizes intimacy: It makes visible on the outside that which is really within.”⁸⁷ On Bataille’s account, therefore, religious practice does at least two things. It provides respite from the world of things while simultaneously positing yet another thing, inasmuch as the very intimacy gained is attributed to the object of sacrifice.

Religion in general answered the desire that man always had to find himself, to regain an intimacy that was always strangely lost. But the mistake of all religion is to always give man a contradictory answer: *an external form of intimacy*. So the successive solutions only exacerbate the problem: Intimacy is never separated from external elements, without which it could not be *signified*. Where we think we have caught hold of the Grail, we have only grasped a *thing*, and what is left

⁷⁹ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 43.

⁸⁰ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 59.

⁸¹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 59, emphasis in original.

⁸² Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 57-58, emphasis in original.

⁸³ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 19, emphasis in original.

⁸⁴ Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York, NY: Walker, 1962), 22.

⁸⁵ Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, 22.

⁸⁶ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 189.

⁸⁷ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 189, emphasis in original.

in our hands is only a cooking pot.⁸⁸

The disruption of daily discontinuity thus has the double effect of providing a kind of “interior freedom”⁸⁹ that, in the end, leaves the participants alienated. Through a process of externalization and reappropriation, religious practice thus makes a thing, destroys the thing, confers sacredness upon the thing, and then estranges us from the thing. For Bataille, therefore, what the doing does is reify intimacy: it giveth and it taketh away.

On Fearing our Forebears

To claim that religious practice does something in particular is not to claim that a deep or liberatory meaning has been unearthed. Althusser explicitly states that the analysis which tells us that what religious doing does is to reproduce the existing social relations has purchase only insofar as one’s interests are in the particular kind of doing that concerns social inequality. In fact, Althusser writes that the state, just like ISAs, is only analytically useful “from the point of view of the class struggle, as an apparatus of class struggle ensuring class oppression and guaranteeing the conditions of exploitation and its reproduction.”⁹⁰ Rather than taking this claim to mean that religious practice is being *reduced* to relations of production, we might say that it is being viewed *from the vantage point* of class struggle. While Althusser’s analysis depicts something of which the participants are probably not fully conscious (and something rather sinister from the perspective of the proletariat), it does not preclude other inquiries and the language games they engender. The understanding of religious practice proffered here by Althusser, therefore, can be critical without being reductionist.

Bataille’s analysis of religious practice, similarly, is possible only from the perspective of what is referred to as *general economy*. “To sacrifice is not to kill but to relinquish and to give,” Bataille writes, and through this expenditure “the offering is rescued from all utility.”⁹¹ Because it is only “to the *particular* living being, or to limited populations of living beings, that the problem of necessity presents itself,”⁹² Bataille’s perspective is not one that recognizes loss, lack, or anguish.

⁸⁸ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 130, emphasis in original.

⁸⁹ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 57-58.

⁹⁰ Althusser, 184.

⁹¹ Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 49.

⁹² Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 23, emphasis in original.

Anguish arises when the anxious individual is not himself stretched tight by the feeling of superabundance. This is precisely what evinces the isolated, individual character of anguish. There can be anguish only from a personal, *particular* point of view that is radically opposed to the *general* point of view based on the exuberance of living matter as a whole. Anguish is meaningless for someone who overflows with life, and for life as a whole, which is overflowing by its very nature.⁹³

The standpoint of excess is one in which “death has no meaning,”⁹⁴ so to fear death is already to be made into a *thing*, as through work. To adopt the perspective of scarcity, in which “problems are posed *in the first instance* by a deficiency of resources,”⁹⁵ is to be unable to recognize the aspect of what the doing does that is of interest to Bataille. From the perspective of the general economy, what religious doing does is destroy useable materials, whether it does this in the form of sacrifice or conquest or luxury. Bataille’s analysis, as explicitly stated, is therefore predicated upon the existence of a surplus of resources. One thing religious practice does, when considered with the general economy in mind, is establish a state of intimacy that is always already alienated.⁹⁶ When characterized in this way, then, the account can be consistent with any number of other analyses that may not take surplus as their starting point.

Reading Althusser and Bataille in these ways does two things. First, it allows the scholar of religious practice to use their theories in a restricted sense and for particular ends. If the scholar does not find their theories useful, it need not be because Althusser and Bataille are guilty of reduction. When class struggle is not the perspective from which the scholar wishes to analyze religious practice, then Althusser’s theory of ideology will not be useful simply because the normative concerns do not coincide with those of the inquirer, not because Althusser fails to capture the meaning or essence of a religious practice. Similarly, Bataille’s interpretation of religious practice is not concerned with the perspectives of loss, lack, or anguish, so it will be relevant only to certain types of inquiries. Reading Bataille as giving an account of what religious doing does from the perspective of general economy allows the scholar to identify the particular concerns of the account and the standpoint from which this analysis affords insight. Bataille’s analysis *qua* “what the doing does” does not seek to uncover the deep meaning

⁹³ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 39, emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 39.

⁹⁵ Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 39, emphasis in original.

⁹⁶ In addition to “what the doing does,” there are effects of a religious practice that could be understood as “what ‘what the doing does’ does” and so forth. In the case of Bataille, for example, if the “doing” is sacrifice, “what the doing does” might be “destroy useable materials,” and “what ‘what the doing does’ does” might be “establish a state of intimacy,” and “what ‘what ‘what the doing does’ does’ does” might be “alienate participants.” For concision, however – and because I would prefer to remain agnostic on the ordering of events and the direction of causality – I have not employed these cumbersome terms and have instead spoken only of “what the doing does.”

of religious practice and so cannot be charged with having failed to achieve that non-goal. Rather, it attends to an aspect of what religious practice does in a certain context without crowning it as a meaning or as an essence. Reduction, meanwhile, waits offstage, uncalled upon to make an appearance.

Acknowledging that the usefulness of particular theories is a function of their relevance to specific concerns also allows one to partake of a certain theoretical promiscuity. The scholar need not adhere to a single interpretation as capturing *the* meaning of a religious practice and so can make use of ostensibly incompatible theories without fearing charges of contradiction. By ascribing meaning to a practice and then setting out on a quest to find it, one unnecessarily delimits a field of inquiry. What the doing does can be analyzed as any number of things: an account of physical causes, psychological effects, social interactions, etc. To this extent, there is no reason to insist on univocity. By understanding Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as proposing doings and not meanings, they might be rendered complementary to each other, as well as to the likes of Eliade, Otto, and Smith. Reading Althusser and Bataille in the mode of what the doing does thus points toward a way of reading back the legacies of the three masters of suspicion without reducing them to mere reduction.

This essay can be viewed as a gesture towards bringing the language game of what the doing does into the language game of reductionism. This move is not made in order to dismiss the concerns of “antireductionists” but rather to ask them to formulate their criticisms more precisely. For example, there are at least two different types of problems that one could identify in an account like Althusser’s, either of which might be lumped into the charge of “reductionism.” First, one might wish to contend that religious practice, from the perspective the class struggle, does not actually have the effects that Althusser claims: it does not reproduce the conditions of production. Alternately, one could concede that Althusser’s analysis is correct but argue that its vantage point is misguided: there is some reason why one should not or cannot adopt the perspective of the class struggle. Either of these kinds of critique could be persuasively made if sufficiently detailed, but labeling the theory reductionist without specifying its offense does not go very far toward cultivating such inquiries.

This essay, therefore, represents my own analysis of what the doing does. From the perspective of someone who seeks to conserve useful theoretical resources wherever they are found, I fear that the language game of reductionism has untoward consequences. There is a way in which talk about reductionism does something that I would prefer not do. What it often does, it seems, is close off possibilities. To the extent that it is feasible, I would like to envision the scholar as a *bricoleur* — one who collects and retains disparate elements “on the principle

that ‘they may always come in handy’;⁹⁷ recognizing that one “has to use this repertoire, however, because [one] has nothing else at [one’s] disposal.”⁹⁸ Helping to preserve theoretical elements for further use and expand avenues of inquiry is what I hope “what the doing does” can do.

Regarding a suggestion like what the doing does, however, it might be complained that there is no place for the *agent*. The agent, though, only exists in a particular type of discourse, and there are good reasons for not wanting to reduce all discourse to agent-central discourse. When we are asking questions from the vantage point of nuclear physics or planetary science, for example, there is no use for talk of agents — or of elephants or tables or a host of other things. Recognizing that, however, is not the same as saying that agents and elephants and tables do not exist; nor is it the same as saying that all talk of agents or elephants or tables should be eschewed in favor of talk of quarks and quasars. Different discourses bring different questions and concerns into view, while inevitably obscuring others. Reduction, on Richard Rorty’s account, implies that a certain language game can be replaced entirely with some other language game.⁹⁹ While Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud might well believe such a substitution to be preferable, their analyses need not commit them to such a radical claim. To read the hermeneutics of suspicion not as reductionist accounts of religious practice but rather as studies of what the doing does allows the scholar to invoke Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, as well as their mutual progeny, without fear. For Marx, one thing that religious practice *does* is transfix the masses, establishing an ideology that ensures the continued dominion of the ruling class. For Nietzsche, one thing that religious practice *does* is turn the *ressentiment* of the weak inward, pathetically masking their impotence. For Freud, one thing that religious practice *does* is exhibit the ambivalence of ego, repressing wishes and projecting outside of oneself. Disagreement is possible, but reduction is not. No longer proclaiming hidden meanings, one can then receive and employ their legacies boldly.

The opium of the people. The morality of slaves. The projection of desire.

No fear.

⁹⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 18.

⁹⁸ Lévi-Strauss, 17.

⁹⁹ See Rorty, 113-125.

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