

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Thursday, 06 October 2005

Reading

- Rudolf Otto, “On Numinous Experience as *Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinans*,” in *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion*, pp. 77-85.
 - Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” pp. 123-162.
 - William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, ch. 3, “The Reality of the Unseen,” pp. 59-77.
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The rise of rationalist science coincided with colonial expansion.

Do members of primitive societies have the capacity to reason? Is there a biological difference?

Tyler says cultures is a complex whole [of knowledge, beliefs, customs, etc.] acquired by man in society. But he doesn't discuss power. *Culture is not static, not a fixed reified thing.* His theories do posit that humans have equal intellectual capacity that develops at different rates over a **linear track**.

The cultures of primitives and of the lower European classes were considered a lower evolutionary state. These lower classes were **evidence of origins**. The subordinate status of women and children was often likened to that primitives/savages.

Stanley Tambiah analyzed Tyler, explaining how Tyler did not emphasize the sense but instead mental capacity. *How do individuals adapt to the environment? What technologies develop?*

Ontology recapitulates phylogeny. As humans develop, they go through stages of evolution of the species. Savages only get so far. The pinnacle is the European white male.

Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* was a comparative study of global religion. Human religious consciousness went from **magic religion science**.

Freud wrote *Totem and Taboo*. We can recognize the relationship between the soul/spirit and the concept of *pneuma*.

Tyler had the doctrine of the **soul of the primitive** (animistic theory). Every man had **life** (feel, think, act) and **phantom** (image, the second self). Theorists like Tyler were trying to find a grand **theory of mind**. The result was that everyone went through linear stages.

William James studied religion with a phenomenological approach. He encourages the observer to bracket questions of the reality outside us. Through observation and interaction there is conscious intention. **The act of perceiving creates objects.**

Realist	A → B	B is a discrete real entity national science perspective
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Realist	A → B	B is a discrete real entity national science perspective
Phenomenology	A → B	recognize cultural factors but acknowledges that B still exists there is an interaction in the act of perception act of engaging/contact creates B, affects A at same time
Social Constructivist	A → B	sees through cultural lens of history, gender, power impossible to understand B because always through a filter

Phenomenological approach:

- bracket your assumptions
- engage the object on its own terms
- describe the object
- data analysis

Anthropology adopts much of the phenomenological approach. Geertz described this as **thick description**. There is awareness of **knowledge gathering**. The idea of **engagement between observer and subject**, whether material or immaterial, is unique to phenomenology.

Otto traveled and engaged in many religious practices. His theories reside between Freud’s rationalist approach and James’ phenomenological approach.

OTTO

tremendum – awe/awfulness, demonic dread

- ∞ e.g. fear of ghosts in our understanding/language
- ∞ linear progression: demon worship → polytheistic gods worship → monotheistic god
- ∞ mystical awe
- ∞ what inspires us is the divine – ontological, inspired in the individual by own senses

majestas – overpowering might, energy, tangible quality

- *How is it that individual objects of consciousness are not object of other senses?*

mysterium – wholly the other, beyond comprehension, radical disjunction between experience and the divine

fascination/curiosity with the divine

FREUD

Why should we study the uncanny? Freud says that we should equally explore the aesthetic of horror and repulsion as much as that of beauty.

He debunked the intellectual uncertainty argument.

Freud locates all emotional distress/disorder in the person. An individual has unconscious drives that influence his/her behavior.

- *How may past experiences influence everyday sensory perception?*

Animism was used to describe how an individual goes through stages from child to adulthood. Freud argued that if an individual did *not* transcend a certain stage, he/she would develop a neurosis. Animism was linked to what he called the **omnipotence of thought**.

A disordered adult was likened to irrationality and a primitive.

Freud also addressed repetition, compulsions, and coincidences as manifestations of the uncanny. Repetition could result from the unconscious mind attempting to get the conscious mind to deal with a certain issue that had been **repressed**.

Freud argued that when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, that is when we experience it as the uncanny.

- *Is it best to use literary texts to analyze the uncanny?*

WILLIAM JAMES

The individual can experience an object that would normally go unsensed and still respond/react to it as if it were real. James wanted to explore these experiences – *what are they and how does one study them?*

He offered a critique of the rationalist perspective saying that the rational movement was inadequate to explain these particular experiences.

James examined the process of **conversion**.

- *Is it possible to learn faith? Or is it cultural, or inherent?*