In Defense of Abstraction: A Reply to William Schweiker

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I AM GRATEFUL to Professor Schweiker's for his careful reading of my essay and for his thought-provoking response. His remarks are lucid and insightful, and they raise some important questions. Because our replies are to be brief, let me launch right in. Schweiker's main concern is with my method, and specifically, with my use of "macro-abstract conceptual dyads: Self/Other; insider/outsider; identity/difference," something that he sees as possibly "blocking the future that it [my manifesto] envisions," and, more generally, as impeding the understanding of "the actual complexity of human cultures and 'religions'" with all their messiness and sloppiness. I am not unsympathetic to Professor Schweiker's concern. The history that I attempt to trace out in a very impressionistic fashion in this article is in actuality extremely sloppy. But then history is always more messy and sloppy than the historian (or even than the micro-historian) makes it out to be.

To bring order to that messiness—to wind one's way through the idiographic complexity to construct a nomothetic vision (the regularity/order) that can serve as the basis for an agenda, as is my goal here—what choice have we but to rely on abstract conceptual structures? It is true, of course, that abstractions slough over that messiness, for example, eliding the fact that Enlightenment thinkers were not univocal in their depiction of other cultures and religions. (I have attempted to at least signal some of that messiness in my notes 6, 9 and 10.) That being said, I agree with Schweiker that the dialectic that I am setting forth in this piece begs for more history. On the one hand, that kind of detail is, of course, impossible in an essay-length work. On the other hand, it is not clear to me that *any* amount of historical detail will ever obviate the need for abstraction, at least if our goal is anything more than mere "transcription" (see Levene's essay in this issue). (Is there ever such a thing as *mere* transcription?) Put another way, explaining something always requires that we work with categories that are "less complex" than those things that we are trying to explain. But let me make it clear that Schweiker's other point—that the full case for my argument would require a greater balance between historical detail and abstraction—is one with which I am in complete agreement.

Perhaps it is not the abstraction, however, that is the worry so much as the dyadic quality of the particular abstractions I use. My choice of these dyads, of course, is driven by my agenda. I find them heuristically

useful, even if, with Professor Schweiker, I am of the opinion that under greater critical scrutiny they (like all structural dichotomies) tend to self-destruct. It is certainly not my intention to hypostasize these dyads, to suggest that, for example, the Self/Other (or even the self/other) distinction can withstand what Buddhists call "an ultimate analysis." (What good Mahayana Buddhist, after all, could claim that the self/other dichotomy corresponds to something inherently real?) That being said, these dichotomies do seem to me to be conventionally, pragmatically useful categories—ones useful to my goals in this particular project. Might there be other variables of analysis that might be more adequate to the specific argument I am trying to make—triads or polyads, perhaps? Maybe so. If we had the luxury of yet another round of exchanges, I would ask Professor Schweiker what he might suggest as alternatives. Regardless, it is unclear to me why the logic of dyads in and of itself, would impede goals like theory pluralism.

On Professor Schweiker's last point, that "one does not want to repeat the problems of the past by assuming that the 'dialectic of alterity' is answered by merely replacing Christian with non-Christian sources," I am in complete agreement. Theory pluralism should not devolve into knee-jerk inclusivism. We should not resort to religious theories—Christian or non-Christian—simply to correct past *ex*clusionary errors (even if one wonders whether, as a corrective, creating institutional structures that give a greater voice to discourses that have been previously marginalized might not be called for.) We should resort to non-Christian theories not because they are non-Christian, and not because they are religious, but because, quite simply, they illuminate the phenomenon that is being subjected to scrutiny—to put it more bluntly, because they work. Nothing about a theory's "religious affiliation" (or lack thereof) *prima facie* guarantees that it will be interesting, intellectually useful, or that it will serve as the basis for human flourishing. If the study of religion has taught us nothing else, it has taught us that in religion (as in all things human), the bad and the ugly exist alongside the good. If, in my essay, I have stressed non-Christian religions as potential sources of theory, it is only because I believe that these religions have operated under something of a handicap as regards their transition from "object of" to "source of" theory.

As Professor Schweiker makes clear, we agree much more than we disagree. But his few qualms—and the lucid way he has gone about explaining them—have given me the opportunity to rethink and to clarify my own thoughts on these issues and for this I am extremely grateful.

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