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## Editorial

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We proudly present to you the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of the ESJP!

Once again, the papers featured in this edition represent the very best philosophical works written by students of the Erasmus School of Philosophy. Three papers made it through this year, and we are impressed by all of them. Sebastian Cincelli wrote about capitalism and blockchain technologies, offering a fresh perspective on a captivating current societal phenomenon. William James seems to be back in fashion, appearing in the paper by Nathalie Maria Kirch as well as featured prominently in that of Arwen Vonck. It was interesting to see both our new editor Arwen and our former Editor-in-Chief maneuver through blind selection rounds and peer review process, which required utmost care and discretion from all parties involved. We are impressed to see the quality of their papers spoke for themselves and are proud to see them featured in this edition.

This editorial is of course the moment to thank all the wonderful people involved in this edition, so let's get right to it! This edition would never have been possible without the help of our amazing editorial team, who saw some new faces once again. We welcome Merel Scheltema, Sonia Shvets and Luc Lichtsteiner, who despite their busy schedules and 'pandemic-hecticism' managed to be a lead editor on our favorite papers alongside the well-known Gideon Frey. Also new to the journal are of course the wonderful Jeroen de Vries as Secretary, and myself as Editor-in-Chief. Without Jeroen, who was always ready to tackle editorial problems and lend a much-appreciated ear, I don't know whether this edition would have seen the light of day. Thank you, Jeroen.

Joining us as editors, we had the pleasure of welcoming Ermanno Petrocchi, Giovanni Prins, Noor de Smit, Arwen Vonck, and Dimitri van Cappeleveen, who are all currently pursuing their master's, and Alexandrine Tieke. Being the only new editor still pursuing her bachelor's degree, Alexandrine proved to be an indispensable addition to our journal.

Ivar Frisch and Margot van Baarsen, though not new to the journal, deserve all the credits they can get for being excellent editors once again alongside Lara Rose Eikamp, who deserves a heartfelt acknowledgment for working on our first editing manual we all relied on for guidance. As always, we want to thank the members of the advisory and supervisory board of the ESJP for their continued support and enthusiasm, as well as David van Putten for providing us with a wonderful editing training and his philosophical insights. Because of the pandemic, this was the first and only time the whole editorial team was able to meet in real life, and we want to thank David for making the meeting so enjoyable. Of course, we also had to say goodbye to some familiar faces. Max Gasser and Nathalie Maria Kirch left their posts as secretary and editor-in-chief. I want to thank them for the enthusiasm, wisdom and patience they showed us to ensure Jeroen and I learned all the tricks of the trade, and for placing their faith in us.

Lastly, I want to thank our readers. Not just any reader, although I am grateful for every single one of them; you are what keeps this journal going. But I want to take a moment to thank a very specific type of reader: the scared reader. It is the philosophy student that wholeheartedly loves the field and whose time is best spent passionately pouring over the fascinating papers, the students who concoct all sorts of philosophical ideas they would love to tell the world about, and yet; they don't. We are the scared philosophers, the selfish thinkers, and we don't like to share our thoughts. We keep them locked away inside our mind and we can't help but tug the curtains tighter one more time, just to be certain no light will pierce through. We will do anything to remain hidden from the external eye whose gaze leaves us helpless and exposed. Our philosophies stay ours, because that is where they're safe. Yet in the silence of our safekeeping, we are

reminded of the inescapable. There's a deadline at the door, ideas are awaiting. Who dares to step into the light? It takes courage to step out, and Arwen, Nathalie, and Sebastian; they had exactly that. And here they are, presented in this edition, for us scared philosophers to pour over once more. It is their courage that inspires us to be philosophers, to continue being amazed by the realm of thoughts. Perhaps none of us really ever stops being a scared philosopher. Perhaps, through the years, we learn that none of us is writing for an unknown external eye. We are writing because it's fun, we are writing for ourselves, and those passionate philosophers around us; scared and brave alike. Today, we celebrate a new edition, with three authors who were brave and talented enough to write down their thoughts for others to enjoy. At the ESJP, we admire them greatly. We are happy to present their papers in this journal, and we hope you will love to read them as much as we did. We know you will.

All the best,

Georgina Aránzazu Dijkstra  
*Editor-in-chief*

## About

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The Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy (ESJP) is a double-blind peer-reviewed student journal that publishes the best philosophical papers written by students from the Erasmus School of Philosophy, Erasmus University Rotterdam and from the Humanities Programme of the Erasmus University College. Its aims are to further enrich the philosophical environment in which Rotterdam's philosophy students develop their thinking and bring their best work to the attention of a wider intellectual audience. Aside from serving as an important academic platform for students to present their work, the journal has two other goals. First, to provide members of the editorial board with the opportunity to develop their own editing and writing skills. Second, to enable students to realize their first official academic publication during their time as a student at ESPhil or the Humanities Department of the EUC. A new issue of the ESJP appears on our website every January and June.

To ensure the highest possible quality, the ESJP only accepts papers that (a) have been written for a course that is part of the Erasmus University College or Erasmus School of Philosophy curriculum and (b) nominated for publication in the ESJP by the teacher of that course. Each paper that is published in the ESJP is subjected to a double-blind peer review process in which at least one other teacher and two student editors act as referees.

The ESJP encourages students to keep in mind the possibility of publishing their course papers in our journal, and to write papers that appeal to a wider intellectual audience.

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## In this Issue

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Capitalism has become able to appropriate economically and quantitatively our “qualitative field of life” by creating and destroying social relations based on debt mechanisms. In parallel, technologies such as blockchain are expected to disrupt business practices and social interactions as they are currently conceived. For Brian Massumi, blockchain is what we need to resist capitalism and escape its pervasiveness, as it can help us “reinvent” the concept of value within broader collective arrangements. In his paper **Thousand Blockchains: *Capitalism and Tokenmania***, author Sebastian Cincelli, argues against this assumption; stating that blockchain is inadequate for effectively resisting the pernicious effects of capitalism, and decentralized technologies cannot replace the hard work of politics.

In **Psychology and Phenomenology of Religious Experiences: *Investigations Into Religious Experiences and Arguments Against Epistemological Reductionism***, Nathalie Maria Kirch explores religious experiences from the perspectives of both psychological as well as phenomenological scholars. First, she criticizes the epistemological reductionism which is implied by popular anti-religious movements like New Atheism as well as religious bodies themselves. She then moves on to presenting subjective accounts of truth used in pragmatism and phenomenology, as an alternative to rationalist, third-person accounts of truth. Several writings of William James are discussed, including parts of his infamous book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Kirch presents an argument for framing phenomenology as a method of psychological research. What follows is the presentation of three phenomenological analyses of religious experiences, which are supposed to highlight their polymorphic nature: Chrétien’s *The Wounded Word*, Marion’s *The Saturated Phenomenon*, as well as Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy*. The ultimate aim of her investigation is to find a way to combine science and religion into a worldview in which they can coexist.

William James’ Theory of Emotions has received much criticism for its alleged prioritizing of bodily feelings over cognition for the creation of emotions. Consequently, this would make affective intentionality impossible. In her paper **Hoe Emoties Ons Bewegen: *Lichamelijke Intentionaliteit en het Effect van Defect Affect in William James’ Emotietheorie***, Arwen Vonck argues that these criticisms miss the mark, as James does, in fact, accommodate affective intentionality and cognition in his Theory of Emotions. According to James, detaching body from cognition inevitably leads to a state of pathology. To guard us from this, he implements intentionality in his theory by conceiving of our experience of the world as an active process of world making, in which physical facts intertwine with our own feelings, thoughts, and interests. Consequently, everybody experiences the world in a unique way, and there is a plurality of possible world representations, all of which can exist alongside each other in the pluralistic society James envisions.



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# A Thousand Blockchains

## *Capitalism and Tokenmania*

Sebastian Cincelli

“Dai diamanti non nasce niente, dal letame nascono i fior.”  
Nothing comes from diamonds; flowers are born out of shit.  
- De Andrè, *Via Del Campo*

Over the last decades, financial intermediaries have gained exceptional influence over our daily lives; capitalism has become able to exercise "control over the future" (Lazzarato 2012, 46) by creating and destroying social relations based on debt mechanisms. In parallel, technology has invaded the social sphere with innovations such as blockchain. This digital public ledger that records online transactions is expected to disrupt business practices and social interactions as they are currently conceived. Because of its revolutionary potential that could affect global power structures, some people see blockchain as the most promising opportunity to effectively resist the pernicious effects of capitalism.

This paper aims to: a) critically analyze financialization and its connections with capitalism and debt mechanisms; b) investigate the revolutionary potential of blockchain technologies in contrast to their drawbacks and risks; c) evaluate the viability of ongoing experimental implementations of blockchain technologies in their attempt to resist capitalism; specifically, among these, the idea proposed by Brian Massumi, which requires us to “reinvent” the concept of value within broader collective arrangements. My conclusion is unequivocal: Massumi’s project, although interesting and promising, is undermined by several contradictions. Blockchain is insufficient to resist capitalism and cannot replace the hard work of politics.

In section 1 (Financialization and Blockchain), I investigate the logic behind the attribution of value, the circumstances which led to the emergence of money, and its role within the capitalist system. For Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, capitalism sustains itself thanks to its ability to produce desires; these, in turn, create new needs that capitalism readily satisfies. This process implies a subtle form of subjugation, whereby money is used to generate debt and make sure that the mechanism is continuously perpetuated. Ultimately, alternative monetary frameworks are desirable, but they would be insufficient to solve the problem at its roots; more fundamental and revolutionary forms of resistance could be based on blockchain technologies. Blockchain-based money is not merely a digital currency, but rather, a set of protocols affecting social relations. Can blockchain serve as a platform for collective individuation, despite its weaknesses? Although currency has become a constitutive element of social relations, a rupture with causality should take place on a pre-monetary level, and blockchain technologies may serve the purpose by virtue of their power to bring people together in ways unmediated by money.

For Massumi (2015, 69), we need to resist quantification and take back the “qualitative field of life,” which he defines as a contagious “boost of vitality.” In section 2 (Reinventing Value), I describe affect as the distinctive feature of such field and frame it in terms of a differential relation of power. Furthermore, I address the main weaknesses and contradictions of Massumi’s call for a reinvention of value by means of blockchain. First, his attempt to resist quantification is undermined by his very appeal to the notion of degrees. Differential relations of power can be seen as variations of intensity that are necessarily perceived on a quantitative scale. Second, as we are forced into a condition of complicity with capitalism, it is rather naïve to think that we can technologically shelter from its influence. Third, Massumi’s project depends on

goods and services that necessarily need to be sourced from the dominant economy. This could introduce an unwanted-yet-present teleology, dictated by the technological platform's need for self-preservation. Thus, I conclude that blockchain technologies are not yet adequate for fully and effectively resisting the pernicious effects of capitalism.

Nevertheless, even if we manage, somehow, to reinvent value and register qualitative intensities, this would not mean that blockchain has been successful in enabling us to resist the pernicious effects of capitalism. In section 3 (Post-value challenges), I describe other issues that remain to be solved. First, although blockchain allegedly eliminates the need to trust other people, we cannot speak of trustless technologies, and these are ultimately not even desirable. Second, the uncritical adoption of tokens combined with the tendency to tokenize everything can exacerbate the same capitalistic logic that blockchain is supposed to resist. Third, since blockchain has the potential to control economics, power relations risk being merely concealed instead of being avoided. Lastly, the firm belief that decentralization coincides with democracy can be the symptom of network fetishism: it could make us look at networks with genuine interest even if these were the causes of our own oppression.

In section 4 (Conclusion) I summarize the arguments developed in this paper and their implications.

## 1. Financialization and blockchain

### *1.1 Money, debt and desire*

In 1903, William Henry Furness III, an American anthropologist, spent some months on the island of Yap in Micronesia. He studied habits and customs of the local population, including the use of “large, solid, thick, stone wheels, ranging in diameter” (Furness 1910, 93) as means of exchange. Furness observed that the value bestowed upon the stones could involve extrinsic factors, such as the number of people who died to bring the stone home (Tharngan 2000), thus showing that the attribution of value is socially constructed. Anything can potentially be turned into a currency: all that is necessary is the mutual recognition among its users. As Ferguson (2009, 29-30) puts it, money “is a matter of belief, even faith [...] trust inscribed.” Ultimately, the acceptance of a specific currency is discretionary and based on the expectation that others would do the same (Goldberg 2005, 957).

The role of the rai stones as means of exchange in the Yapese society could make us think that the emergence of money is a response to the need to deal with issues of distribution of goods and allocation of work among economic agents. However, there is at least one other possible perspective to consider. For Graeber (2014, 157), we should not look at money as a medium of exchange, but rather, as a standard of deferred payment that embodies social relations. As such, money gives consistency to debt, an evanescent concept that appeared even before economic exchanges. To understand this theory, we need an investigation beyond a merely transactionalist sphere, moving from the exchange of goods to the pre-monetary organization of relations among people, something that has little to do with the accumulation of wealth.

Debt, for Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 139), is the key concept underlying capitalism, “the only social machine that is constructed on the basis of decoded flows, substituting for intrinsic codes an axiomatic of abstract quantities in the form of money.” Because of the massive financialization that we experience every day, “the qualitative field of life” (Massumi 2018a, 39) is appropriated economically and quantitatively, leading to “an internalization of the creditor-debtor relation” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 218). The capitalistic market economy structurally entails subjugation, implemented through a system of lack exploitation that produces desires by taking advantage of people's libidinal (and not exclusively sexual) impulses. The causal relation between needs and desires is reversed: fears, anxieties and loves are coded by

debt relations; social dynamics of exchange are converted into cash (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 27, 185). Hence, the role of money within such a human economy is to make debt infinite; “the tax on aristocrats and the distribution of money to the poor are a means of bringing the money back to the rich” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 197). In other words, money makes the regime of debts stronger; it is not a transparent tool of exchange, but rather a constitutive element of social relations (Massumi 2018a, 17). As Lazzarato (2012, 46) emphasizes, people are “trained” to promise to honor their debts.

The advent of neoliberalism as a major economic trend introduced a disruptive change: the deregulation of markets enhanced the emergence of new structures in the coordination of economy and state power (Vogl 2014, 150). Since the sovereign State is replaced by the economic State (Lazzarato 2015, 71), all realms of social life become submissible and eventually submitted to the economic approach (Vogl 2014, 148). As Martin (2002, 3) puts it, “money is both the means and ends of life.” Financial relationships are no longer passive reflections of people’s expectations, but actively affect economic activity. As Massumi (2015, 4) puts it, everything becomes “a calculus of risk,” as value is now contestable and can be traded as a commodity. People are now divided between those able to take risks and those who are “at risk” (Martin 2007, 11). Although money is not the root cause of the injustices we observe in our daily lives, it often contributes to their exacerbation and perpetuation. Hence, it makes sense to look for alternative monetary frameworks, as they may mitigate these vicious cycles, but it hardly appears sufficient to fully escape capitalism.

### ***1.2 Resistance***

We have seen that financialization turns social relations into new forms of subjugation. But who benefits from them? One might say that the better off are those who have large capitals to leverage. As Piketty (2014) eloquently emphasizes, different rates of development and uneven wealth concentrations result in pervasive and increasing worldwide inequality. Yet, according to Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 346), the ultimate beneficiary is capitalism itself, as everybody works for its immortality. As Massumi (2018a, 36-37) puts it, “humans do not run capitalism; capitalism runs through the human.” Progressive wealth taxation is often proposed as a potential way to counteract inequality (Cooper 2014), but arguably other issues would remain, such as those concerning human subjectivity. Redistributive policies would still be insufficient to free people from desire-induced enslavement; while supporting people’s endurance to financialization, they would be ultimately functional to capitalism’s perdurance.

Instead, Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 377) call for active resistance: subjugated groups should become subject-groups, having “as their sole cause a rupture with causality, a revolutionary line of escape.” Seem (2009) paraphrases this concept in terms of a task: groups have to connect in new ways, construct new social arrangements. Guattari (2014, 34), in his *The Three Ecologies*, is even more radical: we need “existential mutations.” Some people think that a big part of such existential mutations can be achieved with blockchains.

### ***1.3 Blockchain’s potential***

To appreciate the potential of blockchain technologies, we should think of how the Yapese recorded changes in ownership of the rai stones: through an oral ledger shared within communities, stories were passed down over generations (Fitzpatrick and McKeon 2019, 9), with the risk of some information being lost or altered. A blockchain can be seen as a digital version of such ledger, with significant advantages. For instance, all records in a blockchain are linked together by means of cryptography, which prevents their alteration without need for a central authority. The ledger is globally broadcasted among individual users through the

internet (Campbell-Verduyn 2018, 1), thus making sure that all transactions are known and indisputable. Bitcoin, a peer-to-peer version of electronic cash, is the most famous example of blockchain application, but the underlying technology is much more versatile. In a blockchain-based list of records, new information can be appended by mutually distrustful parties; these can reach consensus thanks to a policy that automatically resolves any potential dispute. Furthermore, blockchains preserve privacy, enforce individual rights (such as ownership), and favor inclusion, by lowering barriers to participation (Tapscott and Tapscott 2018).

We should note that, as emphasized by Beller (2020, 218), a cryptocurrency such as Bitcoin is a communications medium, that is “a set of protocols for denominating social relations.” Hence, blockchain technologies can have implications far beyond transactions of goods and services: some people even expect “a monumental shift in the power structure of the world” (Greenberg 2013). Ultimately, blockchain is the basis for the creation of new substructures for a distributed economy, or a “distributed capitalism” (Tapscott and Tapscott 2018, 99). But is a new form of capitalism what we really need? If not, can blockchain still help us design alternative, non-capitalist forms of social organization?

#### ***1.4 Technological mediation***

One of the main criticisms of contemporary capitalism concerns the unprecedented influence that financial intermediaries have gained over our lives (Thomson and Dutta 2018, 3), accentuated by digitization. Whilst mainstream financial narratives push people to conform to certain standards and embrace predetermined opinions (Guattari 2014, 35), blockchain is passed off as a formidable tool for human emancipation (DeFi Capital n.d.).

However, one could legitimately disagree: after all, in some sectors cryptofinance is becoming so pervasive that human involvement could be eradicated altogether (Kruppa and Murphy 2019). A “machine-controlled economy” (Brouwer 2018) might entail an apparent impotence, as hinted by Hui (2016, 157): in a preprogrammed context, such as the blockchain, people’s roles are always already anticipated. Should we see this as a form of alienation? This reduction in human involvement is something that Latour (1992, 231-232) would call “delegation,” whereby humans give agency to non-human actors and technology might take over not only people’s actions and attitudes, but also values and ethics. According to Akrich (1992, 211), certain behaviors can be prescriptively imposed back: technical objects define the actors with which they interact. This also applies to cryptocurrencies, as we are forced to obey some procedures that detach us from financial processes, turning us into passive operators (Brouwer 2018, 5).

A different approach could arise from a contemporary interpretation of the theories of Simondon (2017, 16), who argued that alienation is ultimately attributable to people’s lack of knowledge about the nature and essence of machines. Technical mediums can still foster transindividual relations and lead to the realization of people’s unrevealed potential both at the collective and individual level. Rather than technical objects, blockchain technologies should then be seen as technical platforms, able to bring people together and “organize them as a decentralized collective” (Rantala 2019, 261), possibly in ways unmediated by money. Since the individual subject is the result of the so-called process of individuation, never-ending and always incomplete (Scott 2014, 53-54), blockchain technologies could create the conditions for further individuations, by stimulating self-awareness and reflexivity (Rantala 2019, 259). This can ultimately prompt the resolution of tensions and the achievement of an equilibrium in which human relations and habits are restructured and technologies are stabilized by the same network to which they belong (Hui 2016, 56-57). One question remains unanswered: how can blockchain favor individuation? As we will see, an interesting response has been provided by Massumi in his *99 Theses On The Revaluation Of Value*.

## 2. Reinventing Value

### 2.1 Affect

Capitalism's ability to produce desire and, thus, create needs, makes it reasonable to combine the flows of capital with the economy of the libido, as Deleuze and Guattari did (Seem 2009). The capitalist machine channels life activity "toward modes of existence and manners of relation propitious for the generation of profit" (Massumi 2018a, 17). Massumi (2018a, 39) embraces the view on capitalism proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, as made evident by his description of how "the qualitative field of life is economically appropriated and subsumed under the principle of perpetual quantitative growth." This qualitative field implies a dimension of collectivity, whereby interactions among individuals give rise to vital forces that belong to different levels of life. These constitute all the subjective factors pertaining to the immanent outside of capitalism (Massumi 2018a, 9) that we can identify with the word "affect."

As the economy is an open system, its subsistence is based on processes of appropriation of potentials that are to be found in the processual field of its immanent outside (Massumi 2018a, 39). This is why, for capitalism, affect is an externality, namely a force that modulates economic logics without being part of them (Massumi 2018a, 9). Massumi (2005), in an introductory chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, specifies that affect is not a personal feeling, but rather, the "ability to affect and be affected." He also makes a reference to Spinoza, who defined someone's essence in terms of what one can actually do based on the body's "power of acting" (Spinoza 1994, 154). Affection, then, can either increase or decrease such power.

Deleuze (1981), interpreting Spinoza, proposes an analogy between affection and infinitesimal calculus; infinitely small quantities can be part of a differential relation, which "will present itself as the subsistence of the relation when the terms vanish." The same applies to bodies affecting each other: based on the very affection, their relation originates something new, a differential in power subsisting beyond the bodies. The encounter of two bodies mutually affecting each other results in a variation of power, but ultimately such an occasion is only completed by "the promissory note of incompleteness it envelops, in excess over its determinate character" (Massumi 2017, 352). An occasion of experience, that is the moment in which affection occurs, can ground its course on "germinal forms left by the antecedent occasion among the detritus of its passing" (Massumi 2017, 356). In other words, the encounter always results in a surplus of potential, which Massumi (2017, 362) calls "surplus value of life," part of a perpetual turnover of excess whereby every absorption is followed by a release. Capitalism systematically captures the surplus value of life and turns it into capitalist surplus value (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 35).

For Massumi (2018a, 4), then, the goal is to "take back" the qualitative field of life by recognizing affect's irreducibly qualitative nature. To collectively counter the capitalistic capture, we need new social architectures of interaction (Beller 2017) that could be based on blockchain technologies. Yet, existing cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin, do not revalue value, but rather, they "repeat, each in its own way, essential characteristics of the capitalist equation" (Massumi 2018a, 24). Hence, to undermine capitalism, a new digital environment for alter-economic experimentation (Massumi 2018a, 103) should be invented to break up institutional structures and initiate a "revolutionary investment of desire" (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 378). In this digital environment, creative collaboration would foster "different experiences of collectivity in action" (Massumi 2018b), whose qualities are to be "registered". But how can we register affect? For Massumi (2018a, 55), it is a matter of "affective resonance," through which differentials of power are given emphasis based on specific criteria. It should be observed that this appears incompatible with his claims that "affective resonance ultimately resists measure" and "relation is always more lively than its systematic registering" (Massumi 2018a, 45). Regardless, for Massumi (2018b) what we need is an "affect-o-meter," a mechanism to computationally turn qualities into binary machine codes, or as he puts it, translate "qualitative flows into a numerical expression."

## 2.2 Quantity vs. quality

Qualitative differentials are characterized by the variability of their intensities, something that, Massumi (2018a, 27) argues, we can try to register. Following Simondon (2017, 253), we could consider affective qualities as weights containing potentials, virtualities that constitute pre-individual realities. Across different energetic fields, there are disparities of potentials that coincide with disparities of information. When an event occurs, a new level of existence is attained qualitatively, although the corresponding discharge of energy is quantitatively measurable (Massumi 2009). Yet, for Massumi (2018a, 91), this measurement should be based on a qualitative emphasis non-reducible to quantities, something he calls “insistency.” Clearly, a different emphasis is given to different insistencies, but how can we qualitatively distinguish one differential power from another? It is a matter of degrees, as insistency is precisely the degree of a quality; a quality in higher degree claims more emphasis. For Massumi (2018a, 93), a degree is not an intensive magnitude, which would imply a quantitative aspect, but rather an affective intensity, which expresses itself as “a purely qualitative difference of degree.” However, I argue that his very appeal to the notion of degrees brings quantification back into the picture.

Already in the Middle Ages, John Duns Scotus had argued that forms can have different “latitudes,” distinctions of degree that express variations of the quality of a form (Duffy 2016, 126). A quality contains infinite homogeneous parts “such that changes in the degree or variations in the intensities of quality can be explained by the addition or subtraction of these parts” (Duffy 2016, 127). Massumi admittedly embraces a Deleuze-Guattarian perspective towards capitalism and affect; yet, Deleuze himself argued that degrees of affective intensity are characterized by an intrinsic distinction, independent from and prior to the extrinsic distinction between figures that constitute their extensive representation (Duffy 2016, 131). Since the position on a scale of intensity that makes degrees distinguishable from one another is expressed numerically (Duffy 2016, 139), the intrinsic distinction between degrees is inevitably quantitative. For Deleuze (1992, 203) numbers cannot “adequately express the nature of modes” as they derive from an abstract way of thinking; hence, flows of power should not be treated numerically. However, variations of intensity in a linearly ordered series are inevitably perceived on a quantitative scale, constitutive of the notion of degree.

In this section, I have shown that qualitative events determine discharges of energy that are quantitatively measurable, and the notion of degree inevitably entails a quantitative aspect. Hence, Massumi’s attempt to design an affect-o-meter cannot succeed in taking back the qualitative field of life. While the variability of intensities pertains to a purely aesthetic dimension, Massumi’s approach cannot escape quantification.

## 2.3 Ecology and teleology

Massumi (2018a, 67) acknowledges that we cannot just walk out of capitalism; there is a “processual embrace” binding together surplus value of life, capitalist attempts of appropriation and postcapitalist creative processes of resistance. Hence, we are all living an ontological condition of complicity with capitalism that cannot be avoided, but should be practiced strategically, in order to make escape prevail over capture (Massumi 2018a, 67-68). Such a strategic play is called by Massumi (2018a, 69) “creative duplicity,” which also involves “recognizing what works in the systems we work against” (Massumi 2018b). Furthermore, Massumi (2018a, 88) describes his new blockchain-based digital environment as a temporary autonomous zone capable of interaction with the existing economy. Here, creative duplicity is made possible by a digital membrane creating a separation between collective production of surplus values of life and the dominant economy (Massumi 2018b). Such a membrane would be characterized by a certain porosity, allowing some transactions between the two environments to take place, in order to accommodate matters

of practical self-sustenance that cannot prescind from the usual market logic and necessarily need to be sourced from the dominant economy, such as food, travel, accommodation for participants, and so on (Massumi 2018a, 127).

While I recognize that “there is no position of purity from which to oppose capitalism” (Massumi 2018a, 127), I argue that this creative duplicity has some weaknesses. Firstly, as Beller (2021, 229) puts it, Massumi’s digital membrane should be “aware of capital’s savage granularity but still capable of insulating a cooperative endeavor from capital’s toxicity.” This is a somehow naïve (and technologically rather utopian) ambition. But even if we could successfully design such a membrane, it would necessarily embody a form of delegation, whereby technologies would define the actors with which they interact (Akrich 1992, 211). There would be a high risk of blockchain-induced alienation (see section 2.4 Technological mediation) and creative encounters could be significantly hindered. Secondly, there is a contradiction in terms of teleology. Massumi (2018a, 115) declares that “no product separate from the process would guide the process teleologically” and “emergent collectivity would be valued as the product.” In other words, the project’s goal should be the creative process, and not the creative product. However, he also says that the project aims to “find ways of processually coupling with the existing economy in order to sustain itself” (Massumi 2018a, 123). Therefore, the participants’ legitimate aspiration to find ways to keep their project ongoing risks turning the creative product into a new goal. Ultimately, I agree with Tola (2020, 403) when she argues that Massumi’s new cryptocurrency appears as a way to “monetize affective intensities.”

Massumi’s return to quality should not be based on escaping quantification, as this would prevent him from “registering” in the first place and his affect-o-meter would be useless; rather, he should aim to express quantities in a non-numerical way. In this case, however, the registering process cannot be delegated to blockchain technologies, which are in desperate need for new components to complement their computational dimension.

We have seen that Massumi’s proposal has some contradictions, partly due to the difficult coexistence between old and new socio-economic models. First, the inevitably quantitative account of variations in the intensities of a quality. Second, the naïve belief that alter-economic experimentations can be technologically sheltered from the influence of capitalism. Third, the unwanted-yet-present teleology dictated by the technological platform’s need for self-preservation. Nevertheless, even after successfully registering qualitative intensities through a blockchain-based platform, other issues, that do not concern the conception of value, are still relevant and should be carefully considered.

### 3. Post-value challenges

#### 3.1 Trust

The international financial crisis in 2008 was likely enhanced by an increasing loss of trust in governmental and financial institutions (De Filippi, Mannan, and Reijers 2020, 1). However well-founded, this narrative might make us foolishly think that we should “move towards a world in which we trust no one” (Zuckerman 2018) and eliminate the need for trust in the first place. Blockchain seems to go in this direction, as it presents itself as a potential solution to trust issues; Bitcoin, for instance, is described as “a system for electronic transactions without relying on trust” (Nakamoto 2008). The consensus mechanism makes it unnecessary to trust the parties with which we interact, as we can enjoy a “built-in trust” derived from the network itself (Tapscott and Tapscott 2018, 85). In this respect, however, media representations are quite fairytale like: authoritative magazines such as *The Economist* (2015) defined blockchain as “The Great Chain of Being Sure about Things,” as if it provides direct access to the absolute truth. Clearly, this is not the case.

The acceptance of currencies is based on the expectation that others would do the same (see section 2.1 Money, debt and desire), and this is in fact no different for cryptocurrencies. Blockchain also creates “shared expectations with regard to the manner in which it operates, and the procedural correctness of its operations” (De Filippi, Mannan, and Reijers 2020, 2). Hence, trust is not at all unnecessary, and framing blockchain as a trustless technology is at least misleading. For instance, Bitcoin users must trust the integrity of its underlying system (Popper 2016, 55) and all involved actors, such as miners and programmers. As argued by Baldwin (2018, 3), we also need to trust algorithms and encryption software. A blockchain-based network does not operate in a self-contained manner, but rather, it is a hybrid system “made up of both technical and social components” (De Filippi, Mannan, and Reijers 2020, 7). As Winner (1980, 134) puts it, technology's impact on society “must be understood with reference to the social actors able to influence which designs and arrangements are chosen.”

Algorithms embody trust in a proceduralized way, and for Iaconesi (2017) this comes at the expense of a culture of co-responsibility between human beings. If we look at Massumi’s attempt to take back the qualitative field of life, we should see that proceduralized trust is not fully compatible with mutual affection and surplus value of life, since it entails a high risk of alienation. With blockchain the need for trust is reduced in the first place; people are compelled to trust an algorithm, and consequently, lose their freedom to decide if and when to trust each other. Ultimately, blockchain enhances transparency and accountability (Tapscott and Tapscott 2018, 84), but the solution to mistrust is not to eliminate trust; rather, we should look for ways to creatively embrace mistrust. This does not mean that there is no room for blockchain, quite the contrary; what needs to change is the reason why we use it. For Zuckerman (2018, 108), our goal should be to “build systems that help us trust better and more wisely.”

### **3.2 *Tokenmania***

Blockchain’s underlying mechanism is based on tokens, namely units of value issued by a community or an organization. Whilst tokenization ultimately amounts to a socio-financial practice, it could also be a way for artists to harvest the value of their work. Blockchain technologies are often depicted as “new avenues for experimentation toward the autonomy of art [...] from the extractive logic of financial markets” (Lotti 2018, 93). This is reflected in Massumi’s conception of the aesthetic dimension: affective interactions are improvisational, free from existing norms of society, and more akin to beauty, wonder, and adventure (Massumi 2018a, 113). However, we should not forget tokenization’s reductive nature. As Massumi (2018a, 49) puts it, in the registering of the qualitative by the quantitative “there is much that escapes conversion” and that remains unaccounted for. In his hypothetical affect-o-meter, he even envisioned thresholds to ensure that the capturing of the creative advance gives special weight to certain passages of forces (Massumi 2018a, 125). Yet, I argue that the choice of these thresholds is detrimentally arbitrary: if certain forces are not given enough weight, they could dissolve. This could affect not only the registering process, but also the creative interaction itself, thereby turning a risk of reduction into a risk of manipulation.

The transposition of affect into a cryptocurrency takes for granted that everything is tokenizable. Nowadays, with tokenization, all kinds of assets (not only traditional assets such as bonds but also to artworks, sports teams and even celebrities) can be divided into small ownership stakes, so that they can be “fractionally owned by multiple parties” (Singhal 2019). Through blockchain, central issuance of money becomes decentralized issuance of “moneyness,” whereby these assets acquire some attributes of money (Beller et al. 2020, 2). I call this fascination with tokens “tokenmania,” a phenomenon entailing dangerous resemblances with capitalism. As O'Dwyer (2015) puts it, blockchain “proceeds from a perspective that already presumes a neoliberal subject and an economic mode of governance.” An evocative claim is made

by Iaconesi (2017), who speaks of transactionalization of life: “all the elements of our lives are progressively turning into transactions.” Our emotions and relationships are framed as parts of a procedure, and as such, tokenizable. A “tokenized mode of economic life” (Jervis 2019, 1) could degenerate into hyper-tokenization, whereby the uncritical adoption of tokens makes it impossible to distinguish between algorithms and the fabrics of society (Lotti 2018, 93). Ultimately, this would exacerbate the same capitalistic logic that blockchain is supposed to resist.

### ***3.3 Transgression and power***

For Iaconesi (2017), the transactionalization of life has a crucial implication: it is incompatible with informality and transgression. Why is this so relevant? Foucault argued that transgression enables individuals to subversively transform themselves and resist subjugation by challenging imposed limits; not aggressively, but rather creatively (Allan 2008, 92). Seventeen years after *Anti-Oedipus*, which called for “a revolutionary line of escape,” Guattari (2014, 50) specifically indicated the need to cultivate dissensus. Yet, paradoxically, blockchain is a consensus mechanism. Although it is indeed a new revolutionary way of organizing the world that could create the conditions for individuation as intended by Simondon (see section 2.4 Technological mediation), we should not forget that such a process is never-ending and always incomplete (Scott 2014, 43). Hence, blockchain should not prevent, once adopted, the emergence of further ways, alternative approaches, different interpretations. Deleuze and Guattari (2005, 458) once claimed that we risk turning into “intrinsic component pieces” of a larger machine – the machine being the television. Can we make sure, now, that the same danger does not involve blockchain as well?

I have criticized capitalism for the subjugation it entails, but blockchain is not necessarily different. It could be a mere modernization of the means, while the underlying mechanisms remain unchanged. This is the theory proposed by Bollmer (2018, 6), who points at digital culture’s normalizing power: the media we use carry the “specifications for the proper conduct one should internalize in a world defined by network technologies.” Following this approach, we could say that blockchain users are “trained”<sup>1</sup> to perpetuate connections and flows within the network. Ultimately, this would amount to an imposition of nodal membership and consumption. Within such an environment, can subjugated groups become subject-groups as intended by Deleuze and Guattari? While describing the desire-producing social machine, they argued that “portions of the tasks to be performed are distributed” with the ultimate goal to generate “a residual share for each member” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 141-142). There is, then, little difference from how Bitcoin is organized: the consensus mechanism makes use of hundreds of thousands of participants who verify and authenticate all the transactions occurring globally and they are awarded incentives in the form of cryptocurrency.

In principle, blockchain appears democratic, but Massumi (2018a, 21) acknowledges that cryptocurrencies favor those who own the means of production, namely, energy and technological equipment. Hence, blockchain-based money per se could be a democratic idea, but its implementation makes it inherently selective. For Iaconesi (2017), the fact that our affective interaction depends on the resources needed to sustain our participation reveals that mere issues of access are, in reality, major problems of liberties and fundamental rights. For Baldwin (2018, 6), “what looks equal, democratic, and decentered in the diagram of the network [...] conceals a massive distortion of power and power relations.” Hence, the idea to circumvent economic power through blockchain may be a mere illusion.

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<sup>1</sup> I use here the same verb used by Lazzarato (2012, 46) to describe people trained to promise to honor their debts.

### 3.4 Network fetishism

Where does blockchain draw its charm from? If we look at cryptocurrencies, their “overarching value proposition” (Hsieh, Vergne, and Wang 2018, 53) is decentralization, affecting the creation, validation and secure storage of economic transactions. The fact that everything occurs within a network is often considered a sufficient reason to assume actual democracy. The lack of a central command is “supposed to facilitate non-hegemonic, noncoercive, individualistic freedom of movement, while encouraging some kind of distributed representation and engagement” (Baldwin 2018, 5). Decentralization is often seen as inherently detrimental to the established power structures, and therefore, as revolutionary and socially transformative; even anti-globalization movements tend to ground their discourse on the spirit of networks (Fisher 2010, 225). However, this assumption reveals a myopic understanding of the nature of decentralized networks, which also have problems.

Decentralization is claimed to be superior regardless of its specific historical function, underlying politics and ideologies (Fisher 2010, 225). Yet, even post-industrial capitalism has a tendency to decentralize its sites of power (Guattari 2014, 47). In other words, decentralization is not necessarily the right response to capitalism, which is somehow already decentralized and, as Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 34) would say, feeds itself by decentralizing (deterritorializing) previously centralized (territorialized) social arrangements. Networks should not be considered *a priori* the solution to everything; describing them as autonomous and endowed with a life of their own risks concealing economic and social exploitation (Baldwin 2018, 6). To unconditionally prefer decentralization over any potential alternative could be a form of fetishism, whereby network technologies are naturalized, theologized, and teleologized (Fisher 2010, 185). In Deleuze-Guattarian terms, network fetishism might occur when “there is an unconscious libidinal investment of desire that does not necessarily coincide with the preconscious investments of interest” (Deleuze and Guattari 2009, 345). This could make us look at networks with genuine interest even if these were the causes of our oppression.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari contrast tree-like centered structures with rhizomes, namely acentered networks. One could argue that these were a visionary anticipation of blockchain. However, rhizomes pertain to “a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 2005, 21), whereas blockchain is characterized by preestablished paths and organizing memories. Networks are not only, and not always, indicators of freedom and lack of coercion; they also produce “stoppages, closures, dark spots” (Aranda, Wood, and Vidokle 2015, 7). Ideological discourses tend to hide the infrastructure behind cryptocurrencies, which is also characterized by bottlenecks and tensions among the network’s nodes; these enjoy “emancipation without end, but also without exit” (Musiani, Mallard, and Méadel 2018, 151).

Networks are often used to map complex phenomena into abstract models, but we should not try to “remake the world in terms of our network theories” (Berry 2008, 365); this would produce a flattening of reality, since our models can only be simplifications. Networks challenge us to “think in an elemental fashion” (Galloway and Thacker 2007, 157), as their dynamics also involve unhuman aspects, sometimes not subject to human control. This entails the risk to assume that human and social interventions are ultimately futile, and power relations could therefore become depoliticized (Fisher 2010, 209). But, as Zhang (2018, 8) puts it, “the prospect of decentralizing control does not absolve us of the hard work of politics, and blockchain has so far failed to transfer power to ‘We, the people’, whatever the white papers might claim. Political economy cannot be replaced by technology alone.”

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have critically analyzed financialization and its connections with capitalism and debt mechanisms. I have investigated the emergence of money, showing that the acceptance of a specific currency is discretionary and based on the expectation that others would do the same (Goldberg 2005, 957). For Deleuze and Guattari (2009, 218), the capitalist system is ultimately grounded on mechanisms of perpetuation of debt, which triggers “an internalization of the creditor-debtor relation.” I have argued that, as money often contributes to the exacerbation of social injustices, it makes sense to look for alternative monetary frameworks. However, since now all realms of social life become submissible and eventually submitted to the economic approach (Vog 2014, 148), this would be insufficient to solve the problem at its roots. Capitalism should be actively resisted in more fundamental and revolutionary ways, and one way could involve blockchain, often passed off as a formidable tool for human emancipation (DeFi Capital n.d.). Although blockchain is a preprogrammed context, where people’s roles are always already anticipated (Hui 2016, 157), this apparent impotence can be reframed based on a contemporary interpretation of Simondon’s theories. Blockchain technologies should be seen as technical platforms that can foster transindividual relations and lead to the realization of people’s unrevealed potential both at the collective and individual level.

The core part of this paper is my evaluation of the viability of ongoing experimental implementations of blockchain technologies in their attempt to resist capitalism. Specifically, among these, the idea proposed by Massumi, which requires us to “reinvent” the concept of value within broader collective arrangements. Massumi calls for a qualitative account of affect, intended as a variation in power, and he aims to create a blockchain-based social architecture of interaction (Beller 2017) to counter the capitalistic capture collectively and creatively. I have criticized this project by emphasizing its main weaknesses and contradictions. First, since variations in power entail different degrees of intensity, their orderability makes it impossible to avoid quantification. As argued by Deleuze, different degrees of power belong to a scale of intensity, and therefore, they should be considered quantitatively distinguishable from one another (Duffy 2016, 139). Second, Massumi argues that, within his new digital environment, people should exploit “the two-sidedness of intensive magnitude” by means of a digital membrane, that would create a separation from the dominant economy (Massumi 2018a, 124; Massumi 2018b). I have argued that such a digital membrane would embody a form of delegation, entailing a risk of blockchain-induced alienation that could significantly hinder any creative encounter. Third, Massumi declares that “no product separate from the process would guide the process teleologically,” but he also says that the project aims to “find ways of processually coupling with the existing economy in order to sustain itself” (Massumi 2018a, 124; Massumi 2015, 123). This contradiction I called an unwanted-yet-present teleology, dictated by the technological platform’s need for self-preservation.

Finally, I have argued that even if we manage, somehow, to reinvent value and register qualitative intensities, other issues will remain to be solved. First, although blockchain technologies present themselves as a potential solution to issues of trust, we cannot speak of trustless technology, as blockchain users still need to trust the integrity of the underlying system (Popper 2016, 55) and all involved actors. Proceduralized trust would come at the expense of a culture of co-responsibility between human beings (Iaconesi 2017). Rather, we should look for ways to creatively embrace mistrust. Second, nowadays everything is tokenizable, to the extent that we may speak of a “tokenmania,” whereby the uncritical adoption of tokens makes it hard to distinguish between algorithms and the fabrics of society (Lotti 2018, 93). Ultimately, this exacerbates the same capitalistic logic that blockchain is supposed to resist. Third, when “all the elements of our lives are progressively turning into transactions” (Iaconesi 2017), informality and transgression could become a problem. Guattari (2014, 50) specifically indicated the need to cultivate dissensus, but paradoxically,

blockchain is a consensus mechanism that exerts an imposition of nodal membership and consumption. Therefore, the idea to circumvent economic power through blockchain may be a mere illusion. Fourth, decentralization is often claimed to be superior regardless of its specific historical function, underlying politics and ideologies (Fisher 2010, 225). However, it is not necessarily the right response to capitalism, which is somehow already decentralized. To unconditionally prefer decentralization over any potential alternative could be a form of fetishism, whereby network technologies are naturalized, theologized, and teleologized (Fisher 2010, 185). As Zhang (2018, 8) puts it, “the prospect of decentralizing control does not absolve us of the hard work of politics.”

Since, in general, cryptocurrencies are more akin to financial speculation than cultural relations (Beller 2017), we need to achieve a more effective insulation from capitalism, social rather than technological. Massumi (2018a, 118) seems to be aware of the risks of his approach, as he acknowledges that the digital platform cannot be considered the process, but rather, the mere “technical engine” of the creative event. However, I argue that we risk shifting from the opportunity to use blockchain to reinvent value towards a fervor to reinvent value to use blockchain. Furthermore, reinventing value is not only reinventing currency; it is something much more complex and difficult, that transcends the technological domain. If we accept the theory that the emergence of money precedes trade, market transactions and barter (Graeber 2014, 58), the rupture with causality that could free us from capitalism should take place on a pre-monetary level. Hence, before looking for adequate technological infrastructures, we should improve our sociality. For Gabel (2017), for instance, we need an egalitarian reorientation of our creative forces and “the movement of desire toward each other, toward genuine empathy, compassion, and love through mutual recognition.” This would be quite an impressive existential mutation.

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# Psychology and Phenomenology of Religious Experiences

## *Investigations into Religious Experiences and Arguments Against Epistemological Reductionism*

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Why do people hold religious beliefs? 500 years ago, this question would not have been distinct from the question of why people have any other kind of belief or experience. For most people, God was a part of the real world. Yet today, in our post-enlightenment, post-Nietzschean society, there does not seem to be an obvious reason to believe in some sort of deity which determines what is good and bad, which promises salvation, which has a bigger plan for us. Holding religious beliefs has fallen out of fashion, which is apparent from the increasing popularity of anti-religious movements like *New Atheism*, most famously promoted by public intellectuals such as Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett. It is not only organized religion which is criticized by these “Four Horsemen” and their followers; it is also the private aspect of religion, the “naïve” wish of religious devotees for a saviour, a shepherd, an omnipotent father.

When I started studying philosophy, I distanced myself from my Catholic beliefs which I adopted uncritically during childhood. Encouraged by New Atheist type criticisms, I came to feel enraged and cynical about religion. Eventually however, I was confronted with a dilemma: either all religious people, including my own family, were defending stupid, complacent, and medieval beliefs, or I had to leave my rebellious phase behind and consider that the possibility that meaning of religious beliefs and experiences surpasses their epistemological implications. The dilemma I faced was not just a personal one. Is it possible for a person like me, a student visiting a western university, someone who believes in science and thinks critically, to hold religious beliefs without being a complete hypocrite? Are we forever going to feel like we are secretly frowning upon the naivety of religion when visiting church, and secretly detest the coldness of science when sitting in the lecture hall?

I would like to find a way to think about religion and religious experiences which is not in conflict with scientific education and rationalistic convictions. In my inquiry, I am not going to focus on religion in general, but on religious experiences. I do not want to make a distinction between different kinds of religious beliefs and with my discussions of pragmatism and phenomenology, I will concentrate exclusively on the first-person account of religion, which does not allow me to make any claims about institutionalized religion. What I believe lies at the root of the aforementioned conflict is epistemological reductionism, which is introduced in the first chapter. Then, I offer William James’ pragmatism as an alternative way to think about religious experiences and religious truth. Finally, I explore the possibility researching on religious experiences through phenomenology.

## 1. Epistemological Reductionism

The term New Atheism refers to a specific type of atheism in the 21st century (Wolf 2006). Four public figures, named ‘The Four Horsemen’ by their supporters, are famously at the centre of the movement: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Points which all these public intellectuals hold in common are (1) that claims made by science and religion should be treated equally and that religious claims can be tested by means of the scientific method (Dawkins et al. 2019, 16). Moreover, (2) that claims of science and religion belong to the same realm, and that there is no context in which religion is more apt to answer questions than science (Harris 2010, 27-55).

Of course, some religious people and bodies *do* make epistemological and ontological claims, and thereby ‘step into the turf of science’ (Dawkins 1998, 2). The Catholic church, for instance, recognizes the existence of miracles, which are occurrences scientists cannot explain. Most miracles which are recognized by the Catholic church today are cures from disease or injury (Biema 1995). Naturally, it is possible to observe (and in science, we very often do!) phenomena which cannot be explained, without conceding to supernaturalism. If a theory cannot explain a phenomenon, the theory is simply not good enough and needs to be adjusted and tested. As Christopher Hitchens once said, it is necessary to “separate the numinous [the mysterious, and awe-inspiring] from the supernatural [the unexplainable]” (Dawkins et al. 2019, 70-80).

While this is a warranted critique, the question the New Atheists, as well as religious bodies and people come back to again and again, is whether religion is *true*. The New Atheists literally say that religion is *false*, their opponents that it is *true*. Daniel Dennett, *The Four Horsemen*, states “My concern is not so much with the evils of religion as with whether it is true” (Dawkins et al. 2019, 171). This goes for all religions, because all make false epistemological and ontological claims to an equal extent.

Approaching religious discussions in such a way creates a conflict between religion, and widely acknowledged scientific insights (such as evolution). Religion appears to threaten enlightenment values deeply ingrained in our western consciousness. What a dilemma for people like me. Once confronted with such an ultimatum, we are forced to pick a side. The only way to think about religion becomes in terms of truth and lie, ‘good’ and ‘bad’, rational and irrational. Because religion is not scientifically true, because its claims cannot be tested by means of the scientific method, it is deemed invaluable (Dawkins et al. 2019, 170-174). Luckily, it does not have to be this way.

I would like to offer a pragmatist and phenomenological perspective as an alternative to the rationalist stance of the New Atheists and their opponents. What matters in pragmatism is not the rational-scientific truth, but rather the first-person perspective, the real experience. Therefore, from a pragmatist perspective, it is possible to reasonably believe in God without dismissing scientific or rationalist truth and conceding to supernaturalism.

## 2. William James - Pragmatism and the Psychology of Religious Experiences

William James, often regarded to be the founding father of modern psychology, thinks that the essence of religion cannot be defined. His analyses of religion purposefully exclude its institutional aspects and solely focus on the personal experiences associated with religion. Those are: “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 1902, 11-12). The divine then is defined as “the most primal, enveloping, and real; the primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest.” Whether religious experiences should rather be called “spiritual experiences” is left up to the reader. Some authors classify spirituality as distinct from religion for not assuming the existence of an

anthropomorphic, supernatural god. Since “religious” is the word used by James himself, it is also employed here. However, it cannot be stressed enough that religion here is discussed from the first-person account, as something independent from institutionalized religion.

According to James, pragmatism is a *mediating philosophy*, which finds room for faith while still being empirical and adhering to facts. He identifies multiple layers in the definition of *truth*, which brings to light important differences between rationalism and pragmatism: for a rationalist, truth is a static relation, while for a pragmatist, truth is an active process; something which previously was false *become* true (this is not a random process as we shall see). For a rationalist, truth and usefulness are independent, whereas for a pragmatist they are inseparable. As James stated it, “something is useful because it is true, and something is true because it is useful” (James 1907, 76-91).

At the surface level, both pragmatism and rationalism define truth as *agreement with reality* (James 1907, 76-91). On a deeper level, however, ‘agreement’ and ‘reality’ mean something entirely different to each position.

In rationalism, an idea being in agreement with reality means something like it being a copy of reality. Because ideas are imperfect copies of reality, agreement for a rationalist is proportional to how close an idea gets to reality, where perfect agreement can almost never be reached. For a pragmatist, on the other hand, agreement means something like *not standing in contradiction to any other (true) beliefs about reality*. In pragmatism, knowledge about the world is inseparable from action within it (Legg and Hookway 2021). An idea which is in agreement with our other beliefs gets us sufficiently close to reality to be able to act in a useful way. Besides thinking differently about what the term ‘agreement’ means, pragmatists and rationalists also have different conceptions of the word *reality*. While for a rationalist, reality might mean something like *everything there is*, a pragmatist would use the word to refer to *things of common sense* or *everything which is somehow sensibly present*.

The process of becoming true does not happen at random. Not anything can be true, but verification is necessary. Something is indirectly verified if it does not lead to contradiction and is in harmony with all our other (true) beliefs about reality. If a belief guides experience and helps us make *sense* of our surroundings, it is (indirectly) verified. For rationalist (in his position as a rationalist) only direct verification -testing if a prediction fulfils- is allowed, for a pragmatist both direct and indirect verification are permissible. Arguably, a rationalist, in their position as a *subject*, also validates indirectly, by generalizing. For instance, someone who is conducting an experiment according to the scientific method, and has observed that a stone and a feather fall at the same speed if they are in a vacuum, will generalize (and indirectly validate) their observation to all feathers and all stones (James 1907, 76-91).

The difference between the rationalist and the pragmatist conception of truth is the difference between the first and the third-person perspective. From the third-person perspective, if something is true, it is *always* true, no matter if anyone ever discovers that it is true. A pragmatist on the other hand, takes the first-person perspective. If something is *externally* the case - that is outside a person’s lifeworld- they would not accept it as part of their reality, which would mean that from their perspective, it would not be true.

The scientific method of acquiring knowledge through observation, questioning, hypothesising, testing, and analysing, can be classified as rationalist. It would allow us to test a hypothesis such as ‘God created earth’. The grounds on which we derived our implications and formed our answer would be common, and accessible to anyone; ‘yes, it seems that earth was indeed created by God,’ or ‘no, there is no convincing evidence that earth was created by God.’ In rationalism, truth is something to be discovered, to be *uncovered*. If we apply the pragmatic definition of truth to religious experiences and beliefs, their truth can be *created*. Something can be true because it feels meaningful, inspiring, true. We can ask whether God created earth

and find a thousand different answers, and they would all be true- true to the one answering: ‘yes, I believe that God is the beginning and the end of everything, I believe He somehow created this world, and every dead and living thing in it,’ or ‘no, I do not believe in anything I cannot touch, so I do not believe in God in the first place!’

### **2.1. “You will always be my brother.”- An Example**

An example of something which is true from the first-person perspective, but not from the third-person perspective is this: imagine you had an older brother F. You were raised together, he taught you how to ride a bicycle, you fought each other like siblings, you loved each other like siblings. As you grew older, you relied on each other like siblings. Now you find out that after having their first son, your parents were unable to have more children and adopted a second one. You are that child, which means that you and F are not related by blood. When he finds out, F tells you that he does not care whether you are blood related. No matter what, you will always be part of his family, and he will always be your brother.

From a third-person perspective, this is not really true. Perhaps you could say that your belief was updated from ‘F is my biological brother’ to ‘F is my brother by choice,’ but since the objective scientific definition of brother includes having the same biological mother and the same biological father, you and F are not siblings. From a pragmatic perspective, however, the discovery that F is not your real brother has a completely different effect. You did not care about being genetically related to him before, and you do not care about it now. What makes F your brother is not that you are blood-related, but that he taught you how to ride a bike, that you fought like siblings, and that you loved each other like siblings. Now that you are older, you rely on each other like siblings. So, while from the third-person, rationalist perspective, the news that you are not blood-related to F has updated your belief system, it did not change anything from the first-person perspective, because blood-relatedness is not relevant to you. This, for James, is an argument against rationalism: the rationalist account of truth does not have anything to do with usefulness and is therefore meaningless.

### **2.2. Pragmatism in ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’**

How does this pragmatist conception of truth relate to religious experience? This becomes clear in William James’ two lectures published in *‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’: The Reality of the Unseen and Mysticism*. In his lectures, James discusses a broad range of topics, including mysticism (James 1902, 143-160), pragmatic perspectives on the truth-value of religious experiences (James 1902, 10-19), and whether religious experiences can justify the belief in God (James 1902, 10-19). As stated previously, James’ interest lies in the first-person account of religion, and he defines religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James 1902, 11-12).

#### **2.3.1. Pragmatism in ‘The Reality of the Unseen’**

The objects of religious beliefs only exist in idea (idea, is here meant as the unsensible). From the first-person perspective, however, no difference between inner and external reality is made. The religious devotee believes in their ideas as strongly as in sensible objects (James 1902, 20). In that sense, the objects of belief are quasi-sensible (they are treated by the person experiencing them nearly the same as sensible objects). For some people, a *religious belief* might be as vague as a belief that ‘there is a force of good in the world.’ Some

might secretly feel like they have a guardian angel which protects them against bad luck, and others might feel like God tells them that He has a plan for them when they connect with Him in prayer.

For James, rationalism is the philosophy which is opposed to mysticism (James 1902, 156). In rationalism, all our beliefs ought to find themselves on articulate grounds. These grounds can be (1) definitely statable abstract principles, (2) definite facts of sensation, (3) definite hypotheses based on these facts, (4) definite logically drawn inferences. James' argument against rationalism here is that, in the religious realm, the subconscious and non-rational holds primacy. When discussing non-scientific topics such as religion or metaphysics, articulate reasons for why a certain claim is true only make sense to us when they are aligned with our inarticulate beliefs about them: those things we believe to be true, but cannot prove. This does not mean that these "irrational" beliefs *should* hold primacy, or that the non-rational is *better* than the rational. It simply means that this is a more accurate description of the religious mind (James 1902, 28). Let us remind ourselves that the pragmatist definition of truth was that is in agreement with reality, as experienced from the first-person perspective.

### 2.2.2. Pragmatism in 'Mysticism'

What is a mystical experience? James lists two necessary and sufficient requirements, as well as several characteristics which sometimes occur. The necessary and sufficient attributes are *ineffability* and a *noetic quality*. If an experience is ineffable, it means that no adequate report of its content can be given in words. The noetic quality of an experience refers to someone feeling a profound state of knowledge. Attributes that not necessarily occur are *transiency* and *passivity*. Transiency means that the experience cannot be sustained for long (in James' lecture, a maximum of 2 hours is given). Passivity means that, one does not actively participate in the religious experience. Rather, it feels as if this state 'overcomes' you. Sometimes people experience being extremely passive during a religious experience and fall into trance. This often goes hand in hand with a poor ability to remember the experience. However, James states that some memory always remains even if not every detail can be remembered (James 1902, 144).

### 2.3. Is Mystical Truth Authoritative? A Compromise

So now we know that the truth of mystical states can be judged by their perceived usefulness for a particular person, and not by means of the scientific method. Let us remind ourselves that for a pragmatist, knowledge of the world is inseparable from agency within it. If a scientific truth is not helpful, if it cannot be *used to act*, it is not a pragmatic truth. Mystical beliefs are not necessarily useful, but from a pragmatist perspective, they can be regarded as true if they are useful (for example if they help a person deal with grief, or other forms of suffering). An objection which comes to mind here is that of beliefs which are not useful in a utilitarian way. If the usefulness to the beholder if a belief legitimizes it, does that mean that even beliefs which are harmful to others are legitimized? Saying that a young girl who believes that people who have pre-marital sex go to hell possesses a form of truth seems absurd and offensive. However, from a pragmatist perspective, the experience of the girl does not create a need for others to believe in the same thing, nor does it indicate any (political) action.

At the end of the lecture, William James answers the question 'is mystical truth authoritative?' Two different answers are given. The first answer is yes, mystical truth is authoritative for the person who experiences it. The second answer is no, mystical truth is not authoritative for anyone else. The dilemma one seems to face when trying to find truth in religion thus turns to be no dilemma at all. Pragmatic truth is a valid alternative type of truth, which breaks the authority of the rationalist truth, without invalidating it.

Returning to our previous example, the question ‘did God create earth?’ seems to put a religious person in the dilemma of having to prove their answer. This proof would have to be accessible to anyone, it would have to be made on common grounds (one way to do that would be to use the scientific method), which is impossible for this question. What we now see is that there is an alternative way of answering this question: you can answer it for yourself, and your answer can be unquestionably true *to you*, and you do not have to convince anyone of this truth in order to believe in it. However, you also could not reasonably convince anyone else of this truth. The fact that you feel that earth was created by God, does not compensate for the lack of proof, and the fact that there is no proof does not need to change how unshakably certain you are.

We now have an alternative way to think about religious experiences, one which is not in conflict with rationalism or the scientific method. Both science and religion are compromised in some way. The scientific answer to our question is not authoritative, nor is the religious one. Neither is the scientific perspective cold, nor is the religious one naïve. Neither will I need to continue terrorizing my family by proclaiming that I am an atheist, nor will I let go of my pursuit of a scientific career, nor will I remain part of the church, nor will I stop praying.

## 2.6. Recap

Let us recap. Simplified, the rationalist standpoint which was outlined here might be captured as

Religious experience is not true (no means of direct verification is possible). Therefore, it is not valuable.

while the pragmatist conception (also simplified) may be something like

Religious experience is true (by means of the principle of non-contradiction). Therefore, it is valuable.

We can see that from the pragmatic perspective accounts of religious experience are considered a lot more valuable. However, the New Atheist perspective is not captured fully, since at times a more moderate version of the argument is given. The more moderate version could be summarized such as:

Religious doctrines are not true, and therefore not valuable.

In this moderate version, it is the religious doctrine which is condemned because of it misses rationalist truth value, not religious experiences. As for religious experience, it is acknowledged that it is valuable, just not that it is true. This means that the religious experience can be valuable for a person, but they would not have the right to ‘impose’ whatever they take from it on others. Nobody is under any obligation to believe in it. On this point, a pragmatist would agree. Moreover, a rationalist thinks that in no case the experience could be described as supernatural (unexplainable). Here, the pragmatist would only agree hesitantly. It is true that from the scientific perspective, there cannot be anything supernatural because everything is part of

nature. A religious person, however, might not have the same definition of nature as a scientist, and within their lifeworld, supernatural phenomena may very well be possible.

In the next chapter, we will introduce a field which investigates religious experience based on the same subjective conception of truth as James' pragmatism: phenomenology (Baghramian and Marchetti 2017, 3-22).

### 3. Phenomenology of Religious Experiences

Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019, 90-97). It is a form of qualitative research that focuses studies of an individual's lived experiences within their lifeworld. The central structure of an experience is its *intentionality*, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. It becomes the intuitional object, the *content* of my consciousness (Smith 2013). In scientific phenomenology, consciousness is 'sliced' in order to uncover horizons for systematic research. 'Horizons' refers to the context in which the most basic elements of experience are interpreted. In other words, by reducing an experience to its most basic aspects, a horizon of that experience is uncovered. This method, in which certain 'existence assumptions' are 'bracketed,' and the experienced phenomena are observed solely as they appear to the subject, is what Husserl, the founding father of phenomenology, called epoché (Beyer 2020).

A phenomenology of religious experience would be able to investigate religious experiences within the attitude attained by reductions (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668-647). In phenomenological investigations, no difference is made between those objects that exist outside the subject and those that only appear to do so, simply because they are not experienced differently by the subject. So it does not matter if the subject is the only one having a certain experience, which, from a rationalist view, would make it an illusory or hallucinatory experiences. In Husserl's words:

“Every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, [and] everything originally (so to speak, in its “personal” actuality) offered to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented in being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there” (Husserl 1982, 44).

Therefore, the existence of objects and the distinction between 'actual objects' and 'hallucinations' is one of the 'existence assumptions' which must be bracketed in phenomenological investigation (Beyer 2020). The goal of phenomenological research should be seen as distinct from theology. The goal is not to 'sneak God' into phenomenology (a criticism which was famously brought forth by Dominique Janicaud) (Janicaud 2000, 3-87), or to convince people that God exists. Rather, the aim is to establish subjectivity as a valid area of scientific inquiry and to uncover basic structures of the religious human experience (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668- 657).

#### 3.1. Phenomenology as a Method for Psychological Research

Psychology is a special kind of science because it is the only one in which introspection is still allowed as a method of inquiry. Of course, the nature of most phenomena under investigation is subjective, which is why the ambivalence between rationalist and subjective conceptions of truth is probably more evident in psychology than in any other field of inquiry. In contrast to the natural-scientific approach used in most

sciences, in which the scientific method is applied to test inferences about hypotheses, the human-scientific approach used in psychological research applies qualitative and phenomenological methods in order to draw meaningful conclusions (Psychology of Religion, 2021). For example, in mindset research, new mindsets, or patterns of thought, can be discovered by systematically interviewing a number of individuals, and finding common elements in their reports. The subject thus becomes part of the research team, as the sole investigator of their own mind. Their findings are reported to the other researchers, who must in this case adopt a pragmatic viewpoint, as anything that the subject feels they experienced is seen as a true piece of information.

When this subjective conception of truth is used as a starting point for psychological research, rather than the rationalistic conception, phenomenology of religion can be framed as a method of psychological (human-scientific) research to investigate religious experiences. Concerning the psychology of religion, the focus of natural-scientific psychological research into religion has mostly been the (evolutionary) origin of religion and the social function it serves, rather than the subjective aspect of religious experiences (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668-674). Phenomenology allows us to answer questions about religious experiences, which natural-scientific research is not apt to answer: what is the difference between religious experiences and other types of experiences? How are religious experiences generated? Is it an event of interpretation? What are the modes of religious experiences? Do religious experiences have their own phenomenological core structure? How is the structure situated? Does the structure have a specific quality?

### ***3.2. What are Religious Experiences?***

The polymorphic nature of religious experiences makes it hard to formulate concrete criteria to identify them as such. So, even though James' conditions (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency, passivity) leave us with a rather vague idea of what religious experiences actually are, this vagueness is warranted. Already the title *Varieties of Religious Experience* already communicates the richness of (complementary) possibilities in consciousness, and implies that the essence of religious experience should be considered to be a sum of those possibilities (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 668-674). There is not one common form that one could point to in order to explain what religious experiences are. The essence of religious experiences cannot be captured in a rational definition with a list of all necessary and sufficient criteria, but rather with examples and more indirect means such as the use of a certain kind of language. The one seeking to understand what religious experiences are, must try to step into the shoes of the one who has had such an experience.

### ***3.3. Examples of Religious Experiences***

In his article *The Sound of a Small Whisper: Ordinary Religious Experience* Robert Kugelmann argues that any experience could potentially be religious and describes what he calls an ordinary *religious experience* (Kugelmann 2017, 246-256), in which there was no overwhelming sense of the divine, and which could easily be ignored or dismissed. Kugelmann reports a personal religious experience in which he gave a student feedback on her thesis the day before she unexpectedly passed away. This reassured her she would be able to graduate and allowed her to 'celebrate' her satisfactory work. Kugelmann had the feeling that his decision not to postpone the feedback was guided by God, and at the moment in which he realized this, the sky appeared to him like a dome.

A similarly modest account of a religious experience is given *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

“When I walk the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning, if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes. Have you not felt that your real soul was imperceptible to your mental vision, except in a few hallowed moments?” (James 1902, 145)

In contrast to these modest accounts, a more intense numinous experience was reported in *The Varieties*:

"I remember the night, [...] where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. [...] I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him but felt the perfect union of my spirit with His. [...] The perfect stillness of the night was thrilled by a more solemn silence. The darkness held a presence that was all the more felt because it was not seen. I could not any more have doubted that He was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two. [...] My highest faith in God and truest idea of him were then born in me” (James 1902, 25).

### ***3.4. Towards a Phenomenology of Religion***

Many attempts have been made to describe aspects or examples of religious experiences using different phenomenological methods. As Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch argued in their paper, the versatile approaches which phenomenologists have taken is our only way to eventually make the concept of religious experiences less fuzzy, by slowly uncovering the varieties of religious experience, by unveiling the whole of that which at this point can only reveal itself in parts (Louchakova-Schwartz and Crouch 2017, 671).

In the following, I will discuss three texts about religious experiences written by three different thinkers: Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, and Rudolf Otto. These texts are particularly well-suited to illustrate the achievements of the phenomenology of religion and give an idea of what a phenomenological analysis of religion may look like.

#### *3.4.1 Jean-Louis Chrétien: The Wounded Word*

The *Wounded Word* by Jean-Louis Chrétien is a phenomenological analysis of prayer (Chrétien 2000, 147-175). Chrétien describes prayer as an “act of presence to the invisible in which the person who prays becomes an active self-manifestation of God” (Chrétien 2000, 150). It is a kind of self-dialogue, and at the same time an interplay between the one who prays and God. During prayer, a word leaves the one who prays, addresses God, and then turns back upon the sender. Like a boomerang, the prayed word begins and ends with the praying person (Aspray 2018, 311-322).

Within this circle, from the praying person and back to them, two “woundings” occur. In other kinds of self-dialogue, everything is known to the subject, and they remain contained within the shell of their own being. As soon as someone else enters the dialogue, the subject needs to ‘open up’. Thus, the first wounding occurs to the one praying. The dialogue is broken by the presence of God, who enters the circuit of speech, leaving the subject broken and wounded, but also freed and reconfigured. Yet, because an omniscient being

is addressed, prayer “appears to be always surpassed and preceded by the one to whom it is addressed.” Prayer is not about transmitting information, “it does not begin, it responds” (Chrétien 2000, 158).

With the second wounding, not only the subject, but also the word itself is broken. In prayer, a word is addressed to a being which cannot be addressed. The meaning of the word becomes uncertain. “The radical alterity of Him to whom it speaks” therefore wounds the word of prayer (Chrétien 2000, 175).

Chrétien’s contribution is an important phenomenological achievement because it is one of the few existing detailed phenomenological analyses of the religious experience of prayer (Chrétien 2000, 162). Despite critics (some say that Chrétien’s analysis is not neutral because he does not bracket transcendence), Chrétien remains phenomenological because he analyses prayer as a speech act experienced from the perspective of the person who prays (Aspray 2018, 313).

How could you investigate prayer from a rationalist viewpoint? Perhaps by scanning the brains of the one praying? The insights derived from a rationalist investigation would be meek in comparison to Chrétien’s shattering account. From a rationalist stance, it would be worthless simply because it is an ‘anecdotal’ piece of evidence. It would ignore the depth of the lifeworld within a person, and everything valuable to be discovered within it.

#### *3.4.2 Jean-Luc Marion: The Saturated Phenomenon*

In *The Saturated Phenomenon*, Jean-Luc Marion presents a way in which divine revelation could be possible. Marion’s analysis does not assume that divine revelation actually exists but shows a way in which it might exist.

Accordingly, divine revelation might be a particular type of phenomenon, namely a saturated one, which overwhelms the subject in such a way that they are not shaped by existence assumptions. The saturated phenomenon is the possibility of the impossible, it is the possibility of divine revelation (Marion 2000, 214-216; Mason 2014, 25-37). Even if the observer held the assumption that a certain experience is impossible, their cognition would be saturated by such a phenomenon, override all their previous assumptions, and reveal itself with extraordinary clarity, in a perfect kind of givenness (Marion 2000, 214-216). If the four categories (quantity, quality, relation, and modality) are understood as rules structuring intuition, this saturation, or ‘overwhelming’ could go so far that it breaks the rules of intuition. Marion writes:

“In order to introduce the concept of the saturated phenomenon in phenomenology, we have just described it as invisible (unforeseeable) according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, but also unconditioned (absolved from any horizon) according to relation, and irreducible to the I (incapable of being looked at) according to modality” (Marion 2000, 211).

What is remarkable about Marion’s finding, is that besides identifying a case in which the Kantian classification of phenomena is reversed, it contradicts and exceeds Husserl (Marion 2000, 211). Husserl’s definition of the phenomenon presupposes two basic conditions: the I, and the horizon. Because the saturated phenomenon is both ‘irreducible to the I’, and ‘absolved from any horizon,’ it does not fulfil these two basic conditions formulated by Husserl and is thus an entirely new type of phenomenon (Marion 2000, 212; Husserl 1931, 43-45).

“Husserl [...] must himself be surpassed in order to reach the possibility of the saturated phenomenon” (Marion 2000, 212).

### 3.4.3 Rudolf Otto: *Das Heilige*

For the last part of my investigation, I will consider a work which is quite different from those of the French phenomenologists: Rudolf Otto’s book *Das Heilige*, or the English translation *The Idea of the Holy*. I concentrate on giving an impression of those parts of the book which are particularly apt to understand religious experiences.

*The Idea of the Holy* was exceptionally well-received and praised by phenomenologists such as Gerard van der Leeuw, author of *Phänomenologie der Religion*, as well as by Husserl himself. Otto aims to analyse the Numinous, the awe-inspiring and non-rational element of the holy. According to Otto, this aspect constitutes the core of all religions and is therefore crucial for understanding religion (Otto 1958, 6). It is that part of a religious experience which is unlike any other experience and therefore cannot be described. In William James’ terms, it is *ineffable* (Otto 1958, 5-6).

Otto uncovers two *modes* in which the numinous can be experienced: *Mysterium Tremendum* and *Mysterium Fascinosum*. A religious experience is directed at something called *Mysterium* (Otto 1958, 25). *Mysterium* refers to the ‘wholly otherness’ of the numinous, which makes it inexplicable and impossible to understand if not experienced. This ‘otherness’ is perhaps similar to the otherness described by Chrétien, the otherness of the addressee of the prayed word. *Mysterium Tremendum* is an aspect of numinous experiences which evokes feelings akin to fear, the *gottesfürchtig* fear-like awe for God. It also includes an impression of “might and overpoweringness” and forceful energy (Otto 1958, 12-23). *Mysterium Fascinosum* is the other aspect of numinous experience, which entails more positive emotions arising from the perceived benevolence, love, and holiness of the other (Otto 1958, 31).

Otto further explores the means by which religious experiences can be expressed. To be properly understood, indirect means (such as art and music) are more apt to express religious experiences than direct means (like giving definitions). Religious experiences cannot be taught. They can only truly be understood if ‘awakened’ in the one who is seeking to understand (Otto 1958, 60).

“More of the experience lives in reverent attitude and gesture, in tone and voice and demeanour, expressing its momentousness, and in the solemn devotional assembly of a congregation at prayer, than in all the phrases and negative nomenclature which we have found to designate it” (Otto 1958, 60).

What is remarkable about Otto’s work is that it highlights not only the difference fundamental between rational and subjective accounts of truth, but also the different ways in which an individual may arrive at such truths. While for the former strictly defined criteria and rules for classification may be necessary, they are merely complementary if at all helpful for the latter. The parallels which can be drawn between *The Idea of the Holy* and *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* highlight the importance of James’ contribution to the field of phenomenology of religion, and therefore also the adequacy of the connection I have drawn between phenomenology and psychology.

### Conclusion

What are we to take away from this, us who feel conflicted between our scientific education and religious upbringing? I started this inquiry with a critique of 'epistemological reductionism' which is implied by those who see a conflict between science and religion. We saw that epistemological reductionism relies upon rationalism and found an alternative way to conceptualize truth, as pragmatic truth. After having opened this door to other accounts of truth, we looked at the phenomenology of religious experiences, a research field which bases itself on exactly this type of pragmatic truth in order to investigate religious experiences.

We looked at different kinds of phenomenological analyses of religious experiences. First, Chrétien's phenomenological description of prayer, then Marion's investigation into the possibility of divine revelation as a saturated phenomenon, and lastly Rudolf Otto's work *The Idea of the Holy*, which not only provides an exceptionally well-received description of religious experiences, but also highlights that one cannot arrive at religious truth by rational means.

By acknowledging phenomenological research into religious experiences as a legitimate form of psychological investigation, as well as that the truths of rational-scientific insights and religious ones are not of the same nature, we have found a way to combine these two seemingly incommensurable fields. If I look closely, I find that I have never doubted the legitimacy of rational-scientific insights, nor dismissed the transcending experiences of myself or others as illusory. I find that I have been living in a world, my lifeworld, in which they have co-existed peacefully all along.

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# Hoe Emoties Ons Bewegen

## *Lichamelijke Intentionaliteit en het Effect van Defect Affect in William James' Emotietheorie*

Arwen Vonck

Heb je je ooit afgevraagd waarom jij de wereld anders lijkt te ervaren dan een ander? Wanneer er een liedje wordt gedraaid op de radio kan het bijvoorbeeld zomaar zo zijn dat de ene persoon spontaan begint te dansen, terwijl de ander een traantje moet wegpinken. Ondanks dat de auditieve input bij het gehele publiek hetzelfde is, brengt het liedje totaal verschillende emoties teweeg bij elke luisteraar. Vele emotietheoretici, waaronder William James, verklaren dit fenomeen aan de hand van de *affectieve intentionaliteit* die kleur geeft aan ieders ervaring. Iedereen reageert anders op hetzelfde liedje, omdat iedereen het op een andere manier beleeft en er een eigen invulling aan geeft. Je persoonlijke wereldbeleving komt namelijk tot stand doordat jouw eigen meningen, ervaringen en gevoelens zich versmelten met de wereldlijke feiten. Elk deel van ons menszijn is zo aan het werk bij het vervaardigen van de wereld. Dit heeft als gevolg dat onze cognitie volgens denkers als William James nooit neutraal is, maar altijd onder invloed staat van het affect.

Critici stellen echter dat James helemaal geen voorvechter is van de affectieve intentionaliteit, omdat hij prioriteit geeft aan de rol van lichamelijke reacties in de totstandkoming van emoties. Hierdoor ontstaat er een disbalans tussen de cognitie en de lichamelijke veranderingen, waardoor affectieve intentionaliteit niet langer mogelijk is. Dit is problematisch, aangezien een zuiver somatische wereldervaring geen recht doet aan de rijke emoties die wij voelen: het reduceert de mens tot een onverschillige verwerkingsmachine.

In dit essay zal ik de stelling verdedigen dat affectieve intentionaliteit en cognitie – ondanks dat deze termen niet expliciet worden benoemd in James' werken – wel degelijk een centrale rol spelen in James' emotietheorie. Een dergelijke loskoppeling van lichaam en cognitie leidt volgens James namelijk tot een pathologische wereldervaring die onvermijdelijk zal uitmonden in een staat van wanhoop en depressie. Dit zal ik illustreren aan de hand van twee casestudies van James. Ten slotte zal ik toelichten op welke manier zo'n pathologische staat, en vooral de terugkeer hieruit, van waarde kan zijn in de pluralistische samenleving die James beoogt.

### 1. William James over emotie

James' bekendste geschrift over emotie is *What is an emotion?* (1884) waarin hij een belichaamde theorie van emoties presenteert. In tegenstelling tot de cognitivisten stelt James dat emoties zich niet bevinden in ons hoofd, maar in ons lichaam: emoties zijn percepties van lichamelijke veranderingen (James 1884, 190). Neurologische processen functioneren slechts als verbinding tussen ons fysieke lichaam en de buitenwereld. Hoe emoties dan wel ontstaan, is door het verwerken van prikkels uit onze omgeving. Als wij een stimulus waarnemen, dan veroorzaakt deze een fysieke opwinding in ons lichaam. Als je bijvoorbeeld je geliefde ziet, dan gaat je hart sneller kloppen, beginnen je ogen te stralen en trekken je wangen zich op in een brede lach. De waarneming van deze veranderingen in je lichaam is volgens James hetgeen wat wij 'emotie' noemen. Dit betekent dat je verliefd bent *omdat* je lacht en straalt, en niet andersom (James 1884, 189-190).

James keert hiermee de gebruikelijke causale opvatting van emoties om, die stelt dat de emotie voorloopt op de lichamelijke verandering. Om zijn argument te ondersteunen, vraagt James ons om een emotie voor

te stellen zonder daar lichamelijke componenten bij te betrekken (James 1884, 190). Hoewel je als lezer deze uitdaging vol overtuiging aanneemt, blijkt al snel dat wij dit helemaal niet kunnen: angst is niks zonder de plakkende zweethanden, knikkende knieën en versnelde hartslag die wij ervaren als we iets zien wat wij eng vinden. Zonder deze lichamelijke veranderingen blijft er volgens James simpelweg niks over van de emotie. Hiermee sluit James het idee van een puur cognitieve emotie uit (James 1884, 193).

James onderbouwt zijn somatische emotietheorie verder door te stellen dat deze zelfs de geringste veranderingen in stemming kan verklaren. Denk bijvoorbeeld aan de schijnbaar onverklaarbare irritaties die je kan voelen doordat stress zich na verloop van tijd heeft opgebouwd in je lichaam. Hoewel deze stress misschien niet direct merkbaar is voor jouzelf, is deze wel al meetbaar in je lichaam. Deze bevindt zich bijvoorbeeld in je verhoogde bloeddruk of een spanning in je kaak. Emoties komen bij James dus nooit zomaar uit de lucht vallen, maar zijn altijd al aanwezig en meetbaar in het lichaam (James 1884, 192).

## 2. De critici van James: hoe zit het met intentionaliteit?

Of lichamelijke veranderingen genoeg zijn om een emotie genoemd te kunnen worden, blijft echter een felomstreden vraag. Als er geen ideeën of gedachten voorafgaan aan emoties, lijken het slechts lichamelijke, onredelijke energieën te zijn die de mens bewegen zonder dat hij daar zelf inspraak in heeft (Solomon 1993, 102). Is de mens volgens James' emotietheorie dan niet simpelweg een speelbal van zijn omgeving?

Dit is dan ook de kritiek die Robert Solomon aandraagt tegen James. Hij stelt dat emoties veel geraffineerder zijn dan louter affecten. Volgens hem zijn emoties *oordelen* waar een rationele structuur aan ten grondslag ligt (Solomon 2003, 37). Als onze gevoelens slechts zouden bestaan uit affecten, dan zouden we 'net zo praten over emoties als over misselijkheid' (Solomon 2003, 37). Je kan dan geen zinnig oordeel vellen over emoties, omdat deze simpelweg niet terecht of onterecht kunnen zijn; ze *zijn* gewoon. Om alsnog waardeoordelen te kunnen vormen over emoties is het dus een vereiste dat ze intentioneel zijn; er moet een samenwerking plaatsvinden tussen het lichaam en de cognitie. Solomon vindt dat James' theorie hierin tekortschiet, omdat James een onderscheid aanbrengt tussen de emotie en het object in de buitenwereld dat de emotie veroorzaakt. Hierdoor worden emoties slechts een bijzaak van het 'automatisch' functionerende lichaam dat reageert op zijn omgeving (Ratcliffe 2006, 183; Solomon 1993, 91). Dit maakt emoties in de theorie van James epifenomenaal en onzijdig.

Een soortgelijke kritiek wordt geleverd door Jan Slaby, die betoogt dat James' emotietheorie zowel fenomenologisch als intentioneel ontoereikend is (Slaby 2007, 434). Emotie is volgens Slaby niet puur lichamenlijk, maar bevindt zich zowel in ons lichaam als in ons bewustzijn van de wereld. Wij zijn niet alleen ons fysieke lichaam waarin automatische processen plaatsvinden (*Körper*), maar we zijn ook ons beleefde lichaam (*Leib*) waarmee we ons affectief verhouden tot de wereld (Slaby 2007, 437). Doordat we op ons lichaam kunnen reflecteren, beseffen we dat deze zich bevindt in een wereld die bestaat uit objecten en situaties die potentieel waardevol voor ons zijn. *Körper* en *Leib* vormen zo samen de bron van onze affectieve, intentionele ervaring: als één van de twee wegvalt, dan is de emotie incompleet. De samenwerking tussen deze twee onderdelen is dus essentieel, omdat deze voorkomt dat de inhoud en kwaliteit van de emotie van elkaar gescheiden raken, wat voor James' theorie wel een probleem lijkt te zijn (Slaby 2007, 442).

## 3. De redding van James' emotietheorie

Het grootste probleem dat critici dus hebben met James, is dat hij emoties als niet-intentioneel zou beschouwen. Matthew Ratcliffe ziet dit echter anders en schiet James te hulp door een onderscheid te maken tussen het denken van de vroegere en de latere James. Solomon en Slaby richten hun pijlen vooral op de

theorie die James ontwikkelde in *What is an emotion?* (1884), één van zijn eerdere werken. Hierdoor trekken zij volgens Ratcliffe voorbarige conclusies over James' emotietheorie. In latere werken weidt James namelijk verder uit over de functie van emotie, waar intentionaliteit een onmiskenbaar deel van uitmaakt (Ratcliffe 2006, 184).

Intentionaliteit zit volgens James namelijk altijd al besloten in de ervaring van de stimuli die de lichamelijke veranderingen in gang zetten, doordat onze eigen emotionele waarden zich in onze wereldoriëntatie versmelten met de fysieke feiten van de samengestelde wereld (*compound world*) waar wij in leven (James 1917, 151). Aangezien de lichamelijke emoties zo altijd door de persoonlijk geladen intentionaliteit worden gekleurd, kunnen wij er alsnog waardeoordelen over vormen. De specifieke lichamelijke veranderingen die plaatsvinden in jouw lichaam zijn immers een reflectie van jouw gehele menszijn (Ratcliffe 2006, 190).

Bovendien maakt James helemaal geen radicaal onderscheid tussen het fysieke en het beleefde lichaam – wat hem wel verweten wordt. Voor James is het lichaam namelijk niet slechts een incasserend object, maar is het bovenal een actieve 'ik' die constant reageert op zijn omgeving (Pott 2014, 16-17). Als mens zijn we dan ook geen onverschillige verwerkingsmachines, maar geven we zin en betekenis aan onze ervaringen doordat ons Leib en Körper integraal samenwerken. Door deze samenwerking kunnen wij ons eigen bestaan begrijpen. Uiteindelijk is emotie volgens James dus omvangrijker dan slechts een perceptie van lichamelijke veranderingen; het is ook een versmelting van onszelf met de wereld om ons heen. In de emotie komen de wereld buiten ons en onze eigen interne belangen en gedachten samen, waardoor wij doordacht en betekenisvol kunnen handelen (Pott 2014, 18).

Ook anticipeert James op de kritiek van Solomon, die stelt dat emoties geraffineerder zijn dan louter affecten (Solomon 2003, 37). Om problemen te voorkomen met het cognitivisme, kent James in zijn latere gedachtegoed daarom een cruciale rol toe aan de cognitie in de totstandkoming van de emoties (Ratcliffe 2006, 188). Hij stelt dat het affect en de cognitie niet zonder elkaar kunnen, omdat affecten *bestanddelen* zijn van de cognitie. De affecten bieden als integrale onderdelen van de cognitie structuur aan ons denken en handelen. Als de samenwerking tussen deze twee onderdelen niet op correcte wijze plaatsvindt, dan kunnen wij ons niet meer goed oriënteren in de wereld. Dit zal uiteindelijk uitmonden in een pathologische staat van depressie of melancholie (Ratcliffe 2006, 187-188). Hieruit blijkt de cruciale rol van de samenwerking tussen de cognitie en het lichaam in de emotietheorie van James.

#### 4. De invloed van een defecte affectieve intentionaliteit op het leven

Ondanks dat het nergens expliciet wordt benoemd, is intentionaliteit dus van enorm belang in James' emotietheorie. Als de cognitie en het lichaam niet goed meer samenwerken, dan functioneren de affectieve emoties ook niet meer op de gewenste manier. Dit heeft verstreckende gevolgen op het leven, omdat onze gehele wereldervaring gebaseerd is op deze – normaal zo vanzelfsprekende – samensmelting van de wereld en onze eigen capaciteiten, behoeftes en bedenkingen die wij eraan toevoegen in onze emotie. Lichamelijke emoties vormen een constante achtergrond voor onze wereldervaring en zorgen ervoor dat wij de wereld op een stabiele en consistente manier ervaren. Als emoties niet meer of in mindere mate aanwezig zijn en dus op een andere manier functioneren, dan is je wereldervaring defect, waardoor alles wat voorheen vertrouwd voelde nu vreemd is geworden. Dit kan een depressie of langdurige staat van melancholie als gevolg hebben (Ratcliffe 2006, 190).

In zijn Gifford collegereeks behandelde James een aantal casestudies waarin er sprake was van een dergelijke dysfunctionele intentionaliteit. James was hierbij vooral geïnteresseerd in de ontregeling van existentiële gevoelens. Eén van de gevallen die James besprak, is het verhaal van de Russisch schrijver Lev

Tolstoj, wiens wereldbeleving plotseling werd ontdaan van al haar betekenis. Tolstoj leed aan anhedonie: hij kon geen vreugde meer ervaren. Hoewel de wereld vroeger kleurrijk was, voelde ze nu kleurloos en koud aan. Tolstoj raakte zijn originele manier van oriënteren kwijt, en daarmee alles wat hij vroeger dacht te kennen. James beschrijft Tolstoj als een ‘zieke ziel’ (*sick soul*), omdat hij zich bevond in een staat van cognitieve ontregeling (James 1917, 152-155).

Toch bleef Tolstoj zich er zelfs in deze staat nog van bewust dat de wanhoop die hij voelde niet natuurlijk kon zijn voor de mens (James 1917, 155). Daarom zocht hij naar antwoorden op de vragen die het leven weer betekenis zouden geven. Hij vond deze niet, wat hem tot de conclusie bracht dat het enige onbetwistbare stukje kennis dat hij nog had, precies datgene was wat hem tot wanhoop had gedreven: het leven is absurd en betekenisloos. Toch was er iets wat hem ervan weerhield om een einde te maken aan zijn leven. Hij beschrijft dit als een bepaald bewustzijn van het leven dat zijn gedachten een andere kant op dwong, weg van de wanhoop. Dit plotselinge verlangen in zijn hart, wat Tolstoj zelf beschreef als zijn ‘dorst naar God’, verzachtte zijn existentiële angst en dwong hem om zijn denkwijze volledig om te gooien (James 1917, 156). Tolstoj beschrijft dit proces van genezing als een plotselinge verlossing die zijn gehele wereldervaring en emotionele staat wederom transformeerde, maar dit keer op een positieve manier. Hij keerde niet terug naar wie hij hiervoor was geweest, maar voelde zich herboren (James 1917, 156).

Een ander voorbeeld van defectieve affectieve intentionaliteit dat James aanhaalde in zijn collegereeks, is een verhaal over een anonieme man die een verlammende angst ontwikkelde voor zijn eigen bestaan. Later is uit onderzoek gebleken dat dit verhaal over James zelf gaat (Taylor 2002, 33-34). Wat bijzonder is aan de existentiële angst die James beschrijft, is dat deze zich niet door de tijd heen ontwikkelde, maar dat deze hem plotseling overviel. Door James’ hoofd spookten allerlei beelden van een epilepticus die hij ooit was tegengekomen in een psychiatrische inrichting. Deze patiënt had in zichzelf gevouwen op een bankje gezeten en zijn hele lichaam was verstijfd geweest – alleen zijn donkere ogen bewogen nog. Er was weinig menselijks meer over aan de man. Wat James zo beangstigend vond aan het beeld van deze man, is dat hij zich op geen enkele manier kon behoeden voor een dergelijk lot, mocht het hem zelf ooit overkomen. De angst hiervoor werd zo overweldigend, dat James’ hele wereldervaring veranderde. Alles was ineens onzeker en hij had geen grip meer op de werkelijkheid. Zijn waarnemingen, en daardoor ook zijn emoties, raakten vervormd. Volgens de latere, reflecterende James was deze negatieve wereldtransformatie mogelijk, doordat onze wereldoriëntatie onlosmakelijk samenhangt met onze gevoelens en gedachten. Als deze opeens veranderen, zoals het geval is wanneer je wordt overvallen door angst, dan veranderen je wereldervaring en zelfbeleving ook (James 1917, 160-162).

In geen van de gevallen die James beschrijft was er sprake van intellectuele waanzin of waanideeën over de feiten in de wereld, maar er was wel sprake van een alomvattende melancholie die het slachtoffer in een vervreemdende staat van angst bracht, waardoor de gehele wereldervaring in een oogwenk veranderde (James 1917, 162). Lichamelijke veranderingen vonden nog wel plaats, maar op een verlammende manier, waardoor er alleen nog maar ruimte was voor verzwelgende negatieve gevoelens. Toch kan deze pathologische wereldervaring ook weer passeren. Dit gebeurt volgens James vaak net zo abrupt als de melancholie begon. De genezing is namelijk een acute realisatie van de mogelijkheden die zich bevinden in onszelf en de wereld om ons heen (Kazin 1993, 253). Deze realisatie is zo ondoorgrondelijk en intens, dat veel mensen, waaronder Tolstoj en James zelf, het beschrijven als een religieuze ervaring. Volgens James beschrijven slachtoffers de genezing vaak als een ‘wedergeboorte’, omdat het proces van het terugvinden van de zin van het leven er eentje is waarbij je je opnieuw gaat verhouden tot de wereld (Ratcliffe 2006, 188).

## 5. Het belang van communicatie over wereldbeelden

Met de terugkeer naar de gezondheid leert de melancholicus zich opnieuw verhouden tot de wereld. Hij keert niet terug naar zijn vroegere wereldervaring, maar vervaardigt de wereld op een nieuwe, unieke manier. Volgens James is dit proces van *world making* iets wat wij allemaal constant doen. We voegen op een actieve wijze onze eigen gedachten, gevoelens en verlangens toe aan de wereld. Hieruit blijkt dat het kader van alle zaken die meespelen in het totstandkomen van jouw wereldbeeld nog veel meer omvat dan alleen je emoties: je wereldervaring is een weerspiegeling van wie jij bent (Ratcliffe 2006, 191).

Je kunt je afvragen of al die verschillende wereldbelevingen dan niet zullen botsen. Volgens James is dit niet het geval, omdat verschillende ideeën goed naast elkaar kunnen bestaan binnen de pluralistische samenleving die hij beoogt (Ratcliffe 2006, 192). Vaak komen wereldbeelden ook voor een groot deel overeen, waardoor er over het algemeen sprake is van een stabiele, publieke leefwereld waarin wij ons probleemloos kunnen bewegen met anderen. Het wordt pas een probleem wanneer iemand ‘in een andere wereld leeft’ ten opzichte van anderen, zoals het geval is voor de melancholici (Kazin 1993, 254). In dit geval kan het zinnig zijn om deze persoon in contact te brengen met het wereldbeeld van een ander. Anderen kunnen ons namelijk wijzen op de mogelijkheden die voor onszelf tijdelijk overschaduwd zijn.

Bovendien is het voor gezonde mensen ook belangrijk om de communicatie aan te gaan met de melancholici, omdat zij volgens James vaak een dieper en realistischer begrip hebben van het leven, doordat zij weten hoe het is om zonder de – voor de gezonde mens zo vanzelfsprekende – alledaagse betekenis te leven (Pott 2021). In de confrontatie en vereniging tussen verschillende wereldbelevingen kunnen wij dus nieuwe zienswijzen ontwikkelen en een diepere betekenis en waarde leren geven aan onze emoties.

## 6. Conclusie

Hoewel William James emoties in eerste instantie op een puur somatische manier definieerde, blijkt dat we ze breder moeten opvatten dan slechts als percepties van lichamelijke veranderingen. Door op impliciete wijze het verbindende concept van intentionaliteit te implementeren in zijn theorie, beschermt James deze voor de kritiek van de cognitivisten. Hierdoor kan de mens niet langer gereduceerd worden tot een gedachteloze verwerkingsmachine, maar kunnen we betekenisvolle relaties aangaan met onszelf en onze omgeving. Bovendien behoedt de intentionaliteit ons ook voor de pathologie die op de loer ligt. Doordat intentionaliteit een integraal onderdeel uitmaakt van onze emoties, ontwikkelt iedereen een eigen, unieke kijk op de wereld. Hierdoor bestaat er een pluraliteit aan mogelijke representaties van de werkelijkheid die allemaal even waardevol zijn, ook al kunnen sommige ervan ook beangstigend zijn.

Hoe jij de wereld ervaart is dus grotendeels een reflectie van wie jij bent als persoon. Je gehele menszijn is aan het werk wanneer de elementen van de objectieve buitenwereld versmelten met jouw eigen persoon. In onze onderlinge communicatie en het bijeenkomen van verschillende wereldbeelden wordt duidelijk dat affectieve intentionaliteit aan het werk is in onze wereldervaring en we inderdaad de wereld allemaal op een geheel eigen manier ervaren. Zo verklaart de affectieve intentionaliteit waarom de tonen van hetzelfde liedje de één aan het huilen maken, terwijl ze de ander laten dansen.

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