Is a non-relativist post-modernism possible? The attempts of William Dean and Wentzel van Huyssteen

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Abstract
This paper aims at creating a third option to foundatio-
nalism and relativism. It criticizes William Dean's his-
toricist radical empiricism for going too far toward a
relativist deconstructionism, and Wentzel van Huys-
steen's critical realism for not leaving modernism.
Both, however, succeed in creating a third option. This
paper examines their respective contributions to a non-
relativist, reconstructionist post-modernism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Some emergent positions in religious studies are developing a third option to foun-
dationalism and an arbitrary form of relativism. William Dean's historicist radical
empiricism and Wentzel van Huyssteen's critical realism are two that merit atten-
tion. They differ in theological roots (the 'Chicago School' of theology vs Pannen-
berg, Bartley and Sauter) and philosophical resources (James and Whitehead vs
recent philosophy of science). Both thinkers are criticized for having failed to make
this third option to foundationalism and relativism – Dean for going too far toward
a relativist deconstructionism, Van Huyssteen for not leaving modernism. Their
language exposes them to these criticisms, but an alternative reading suggests they
succeed in creating a third option.

This paper defends such a reading and examines their respective contributions to a non-relativist, reconstructionist post-modernism. A fuller discussion of comparative strengths of Dean and Van Huyssteen appears in the recent University of Port Elizabeth dissertation of Barend J du Toit, *Text and experience: A comparative study of American religious empiricism and critical realism.* This contains a discussion of the American context of Dean's work, including the 'Chicago School of Theology' and the current work of Nancy Frankenberry. Du Toit gives a helpful analysis of the development of Van Huyssteen's theology and has some insightful comments on postmodernism in theology. Du Toit's interpretation of Dean makes him more of a deconstructionist than I do. I am thankful to Du Toit for the stimulus he has given me and to his help in understanding Van Huyssteen's important work.

2. WENTZEL VAN HUYSSTEEN

Wentzel van Huyssteen has been head of religious studies at the University of Port Elizabeth in South Africa for a number of years. In January 1992 he was appointed McCord Professor of Theology and Science at Princeton Theological Seminary.

Van Huyssteen's critical realism is an attempt to affirm, on the one hand, a referential function of religious language, a truth status to that language, and rationality, explanatory power, and the possibility of progress in theological inquiry. On the other hand, he seeks to avoid foundationalism by a strong assertion of the metaphorical nature of language and of fallibilism.

Nancey Murphy has criticized Van Huyssteen for his failure to move beyond modernist foundationalism. Van Huyssteen's commitment to realism and the rational and progressive nature of theology expose him up to this criticism. However, when his moves toward holism and the roots of language in a community are explored, as well as his fallibilism, he will be seen to be a post-modernist, opening up a genuine alternative to both foundationalism and arbitrary anti-foundationalism.

We shall begin with an exposition of the constructive part of his 1986 book, translated in 1989 as *Theology and the justification of faith* (Van Huyssteen 1989). I am omitting all discussion of his work as historian of post-Barthian theology and post-positivist philosophy of science, of his critical realistic hermeneutical theory, and his broader concerns to develop a notion of post-modern rationality.

2.1 Critical realism

Critical realism is defined by Van Huyssteen in opposition to a subjectivism or rela-
tivism which denies a referential function to language, and to a naive-realistic
assumption of the literal and definitely certain character of correct language. Criti-
cal realism 'attempts to say something about a reality beyond our language by means
of provisional, tentative models' which are clearly seen as 'human constructs'. The
critical qualification cautions that the metaphoric nature of language shows that
'models should never be absolutized or ideologized, but should retain their open-
ness and provisionality throughout the process of theorizing' (Van Huyssteen 1989:
142).

The critical realist believes that, when a model is employed, 'something new and
valid is being said about reality which the user of the model believes describes it bet-
ter, more appropriately than other competing views' (Van Huyssteen 1989:157).
However, there is 'no uninterpreted access to reality and...in the process of interpre-
tation the role of metaphor is central' (Van Huyssteen 1989:158). Thus theological
concepts and models are 'provisional, inadequate, and partial' yet 'actually refer and
are as close as we can get to speaking accurately of reality'. Thus the metaphors and
models of religion are 'to be taken seriously but not literally, for although they refer
in an ontological or cognitive sense, they are always partial and inadequate' (Van
Huyssteen 1989:158).

Since Van Huyssteen does so much of his thinking in conversation with the phi-
losophy of science, it is not surprising that the post-Kuhnian situation is significant
for him. Given the realization that scientific knowledge is 'never independent of
social context', the question becomes urgent for both science and theology: if 'scien-
tific as well as theological assertions are thus socially created', are the ways of both
science and theology to reality firmly barred? What prevents them 'from becoming
mere social ideologies' (Van Huyssteen 1989:148)? At this point Van Huyssteen
has found corroboration in Ernan McMullin's 'scientific realism'.

> For the scientific realist the theoretic language of science is...meta-
> phoric and thus open-ended and ever capable of further develop-
> ment....Scientific realism...not only highlights the role of metaphoric
> reference in scientific theory formation while honoring the provisiona-
> lity and sociohistorical nature of all knowledge, but it also enables us
> to retain the ideals of truth, objectivity, rationality, and scientific pro-
> gress in an exciting and reinterpreted way.
>
> (Van Huyssteen 1989:154f; c p McMullin 1982:32; 1984:35).

Van Huyssteen warns against a superficial transferring of the concept of realism
from the philosophy of science to theology. It is not an established theory, but a

'promising and suggestive hypothesis struggling for credibility' (Van Huyssteen 1989: 155). In short, critical realism in theology is a key part of a post-positivistic conception of rationality. It involves the assertion that 'our theological constructs are something like, or in an anticipatory and provisional sense disclose something of the Reality for which our metaphoric, relational theological language reaches out' (Van Huyssteen 1989:162).

2.2 Religious and theological language

The relation between language and experience for Van Huyssteen could be thought of as an interplay. No experience, or at least no religious experience, is pre-linguistic, or pre-theoretical. Language not only represents or reflects reality, it also constitutes reality. Religious experience, indeed all intellectual activities, including theology, are sociocultural forms and thus governed by the language and traditions of specific groups (Van Huyssteen 1989:128, 137, 140, 168).

The metaphoric language of religious experience should be transformed into theological concepts in order to achieve conceptual clarity. This is a three-stage process, with models as the midpoint between metaphorical language and theological theory. In this, theology parallels science. Following McFague, a model is 'a dominant metaphor, a metaphor with staying power', an extended and systematized metaphor (McFague 1982:23; cp 67, 103). Thus the metaphors of God as Father or Jesus as Saviour became models for Christian believers while the metaphor of inspiration developed into the various theories of inspiration. Models provide not only a way of speaking of the unknown in terms of the known but, as networks of language which strike a balance between simplicity and detail, as comprehensive interpretive networks, models open up new dimensions by providing suggestiveness and fertility.

Theoretic language needs to remain in touch with its metaphoric roots in order to preserve the metaphoric tension inherent in all language, a tension which can so easily stagnate. The importance of models is as a space within the continuum for this tension, a place for metaphor to nourish theory and for theory to lend perspective to metaphor (Van Huyssteen 1989:141).

Van Huyssteen (1989:125) joins other recent writers who stress the referential character of metaphor, that it is not merely decorative or expressive in function. Metaphor opens up new insights into our world (Van Huyssteen 1989:134f). Metaphor redescribes reality, helps us gain new insight into the world. As disclosive of the world, metaphor leads into realism. But since insight is not precise or literal, metaphor also leads to critical realism. The antithesis of subjective and objective

thought is replaced by a relational conception of truth. All knowledge is metaphorical and thus tentative, dynamic, historical, relational and also cannot be completely conceptualized (Van Huyssteen 1989:137).

2.3 The role of commitment

An issue for Van Huyssteen's version of critical realism is the role of the personal commitment of the theologian, or of any theoretical worker for that matter. The theologian is a believer, reflecting a commitment to Jesus Christ. This is a problem for an appeal to rationality. But to recognize this 'personal or subjective religious commitment' is not to opt for irrationality. (Van Huyssteen has here an appreciative reference to Polanyi, who speaks of the fiduciary rootedness of all rationality.) Objective thought implies committed thought, since criteria of validity always need subjective empathy for their appropriate applicability. Commitment is not a sign of imperfect knowledge, but rather 'an essential component of all rational cognitive development' (Van Huyssteen 1989:131).

Theological reflection 'takes place within the context of an ultimate faith commitment to God as a personal and transcendent Creator' (Van Huyssteen 1989:159). On the level of theoretic reflection in theology, this ultimate commitment functions in the same way as the realist assumption in the other sciences (Shades of D C Macintosh!). Thus commitment is not an irrational retreat to commitment.

2.4 Theology as problem solving

Van Huyssteen's ideas here are shaped by a dialogue with the contemporary philosopher of science, Larry Laudan. For both writers problems and progress (that is, the solving of problems) are contextual. 'Problems – whatever their nature – always arise in a specific context of inquiry....Whether something is seen as problematic depends largely on the models and theories of the conceptual framework we bring to bear on the world around us (Van Huyssteen 1989:174). This contextual nature of problems applies to all forms of intellectual problem including theology. Thus theology shares with science the basic need to identify the real problems or questions of its situation and to develop theories as solutions to them.

Van Huyssteen finds this understanding of intellectual disciplines as the search for adequate solutions to contextually focused problems to be a further move down the road away from the hegemony of a positivistic account of justification, a road down which Kuhn has started.

Among the problems of theology are the nature of sin, theodicy, the experiential basis of faith, ethical and sociopolitical issues, and conceptual problems arising from classical theological doctrines, such as the Trinity, predestination, and christology. Other problems include the choice of hermeneutical theories, problems about the sacraments arising from ecumenical encounter, questions concerning truth and error in the Christian faith, and the nature of a valid model of rationality for theology.

2.5 Progress in theology

Laudan argues that scientific progress is a matter of contextual problem-solving. The locus of progress is not a specific theory so much as the potential for further problem-solving in a research tradition. Further, the rationality of a theory or research tradition may be defined in terms of its capacity for solving problems.

Given Laudan's willingness to extend these joint concepts of progress and rationality to all forms of intellectual endeavour, Van Huyssteen applies these notions to theology. Thus we find that the rationality of a theological statement or model does not depend on its 'ability to state the truth unproblematically', but rather on whether it can show progress in solving the empirical or conceptual problems of theology (Van Huyssteen 1989:190). Further, the identification of a problem is itself progress.

Examples of progress in theology include conceptual problems in the Reformed tradition caused by an obsolete scriptural theory being finally replaced by a new theory recognizing both the religious dimension of the Bible and the fact that it is an ancient Near Eastern volume composed of many writings of different literary forms. The insight into the plural literary genres of the Bible is itself a form of progress, including the recognition that the historical material is not historiographical in the modern Western sense, but rather a collection of confessional, narrative, archetypal histories. Our theory of scripture no longer forces us to raise the question as to whether the world was actually created in six days or whether Adam and Eve were the first people. Instead our theory of Scripture leads us to seek the deeper religious intent of the text. This is a matter of theological progress (Van Huyssteen 1989:190-194). Finally, insight into the role of theoretical construction and conceptualization in theology is itself a form of progress.

Real progress in theology is compatible with its tentative and provisional character (Van Huyssteen 1989:195). 'Hence the language of theological theories is – in terms of a critical-realist model – always tentative, provisional, and capable of further development. For precisely that reason systematic theology must be tolerant

of a multiplicity of theories' (Van Huyssteen 1989:196). However, this does not leave us with a fallen Tower of Babel. The diversity is intersubjectively illuminating. The various models can criticize and supplement each other and theologians from diverge contexts can help each other (Van Huyssteen 1989:145).

3. NANCEY MURPHY'S CRITICISM OF CRITICAL REALISM
Nancey Murphy has recently come out with a very interesting neo-Lakatosian position in her *Theology in the age of scientific reasoning*. In it she has two criticisms of critical realism:

> First, critical realism is a problematic position philosophically – it is difficult to get clear about what it would mean unless one interprets it either as a truism or as an outrageous claim to have some knowledge of reality apart from our ordinary human ways of knowing. Second...it is not clear how it solves the problem for which it is invoked, namely to give an account of how theology and science interact.
>
> (Murphy 1990:198)

Now, for the first criticism, critical realism is neither a truism nor an outrageous claim. In response to the interpretation that critical realism implies a claim 'to have some knowledge of reality apart from our ordinary human ways of knowing', Van Huyssteen replies that:

> No sophisticated form of critical realism, however, would make this strong, dated and truly foundationalist claim. A modest and qualified form of critical realism takes seriously the holist approach of current postmodern and postfoundationalist thought and makes tentative claims through the epistemic access provided for us by the metaphorical nature of human language.
>
> (Van Huyssteen 1991:12)

As for the second of Murphy's criticisms, at least in Van Huyssteen's case, critical realism is not primarily an attempt to show how science and theology can interact. It is primarily an attempt to state how theology can make referential claims without overstating the precision or certainty of those claims. Philosophy of science, specifically 'scientific realism', is used to illustrate and clarify this position. This does show, in a derivative sense, how the philosophy of science and the analysis of theology can be compared, but this is more like a second-order dialogue between philosophy of science and theology, unlike the more nearly first-order interaction between science and theology proposed by Murphy (1990:198f).

The upshot of all this discussion is that Van Huyssteen's proposal is misunderstood by a postmodern theologian. This misunderstanding is not occasioned by Murphy's obtuseness. She is an astute and careful delineator of much current thought and her analyses are very helpful. The difficulty is that Van Huyssteen, like Dean, is delineating a postmodern form of discourse that avoids the standard dichotomies and both writers can easily be misread by people on the opposite sides of the dichotomies.

4. WILLIAM DEAN

William Dean is a strong advocate of radical empiricism and historicism. Nancy Frankenberry and he are calling for a radical empiricism in religious studies and for a retrieval of the empiricism of James and Whitehead and the Chicago School of Theology (Dean 1986, 1988; Frankenberry 1987). He is a sympathetic critic of American neopragmatism and deconstructionism, a helpful cartographer of the *Zeitgeist* and is currently developing a postmodern American public religious discourse capable of providing both resource and judgement for culture and public policy (Dean 1989, 1991a). I am omitting Dean's historiography of retrieval of radical empiricism and the Chicago School of Theology, his dialogues with current thinkers, and his work in American intellectual history towards an American critical public discourse.

Dean sees an affectional sensibility as a way into the full dimensions of history. Rejecting the view that facts are value-free while values are subjective projections, Dean sees history as full of a variety of meanings and values, both precarious and stable, both threatening and beneficial, both boring and interesting. Radical empiricism is the theory which gives central place to the sensibility or discernment of these meanings. This empiricism is distinguished from earlier British empiricism by including more than the five senses and by replacing the natural science paradigm of knowing with a historical model.

I find it helpful to say that he has replaced the metaphor of a foundation with that of an anchor. Values sensed through this affectional discernment are a local anchor for otherwise unjustified or even unacknowledged value commitments. An anchor is temporary and local and is not guaranteed to work, but might work. Its job is to provide a temporary and contextual resting place for a particular craft. It works if the craft is secure for the time being. Something like the axioms of a post-*Principia Mathematica* axiom system, an anchor provides both contextual root and a point of vulnerability, since the anchor is now to be tested just as the axioms are

open for inspection. Thus Dean's version of empiricism is an attempt to approach a value-full history to provide a non-foundationalist yet realist and local anchor for value commitment.

Dean seeks to develop a historicist theory of historical interpretation. The interpretation of the past is a reconstruction in the present of past experience (since the past always comes to us interpreted). However, this reconstruction is not arbitrary, since the past restricts the range of possible interpretations. The modern outlook is that, if we cannot achieve objectivity in interpretation, we are left only with arbitrary subjectivity. Dean offers a way of looking at history that avoids this dichotomy.

Uniting this theory of historical understanding with the theory and practice of Van Rad, the sociohistorical branch of the Chicago School (especially the Shirley Jackson case), and some current figures in biblical studies, Dean finds that God is known as we know any friend, through a chain of successive interpretations. However, each link is neither arbitrary nor unlimited in possibility since it is anchored to the preceding chain of interpretations.

For Dean, history is in the matrix of nature which itself has history. Thus, contrary to the implicit or explicit nature-history dualism of much postmodernism, we have a cosmic and scientific matrix to history. Thus, for Dean, everything – including nature, man, and God – is known through a chain of interpretations.

Do we have a foundation for our basic convictions? If we want absolute assurances to dispel a Cartesian anxiety, we will not find it. There is no unassailable categorical imperative or basic principle of justice to distinguish clearly between the Third Reich and the Third World. But if we cannot tell the difference between the Third Reich and the Third World we either have not looked or we have allowed the wool to be pulled over our eyes. We need not restrict our options to either a secure foundation or the despair or celebration of the lightness of being without a firm foundation. For between a universal foundation and being unhooked from the sun, we can often find a local, transient, yet real and valuable support. This support, when we can find one, is neither in an objective, value-free world, or in arbitrary language-games, in subjective leaps of faith, bliks, or in the ghettos of isolated traditions, but in an affectional sensibility that is in touch with the full dimension of a value-full history. Such affectional sensibility is an aesthetic response to the concreteness of value in the processes of nature and history, prior to the abstractions of the intellect, and points to the full measure of value in nature and history. The term 'affective' here does not have the connotation of 'subjective' but is, indeed, 'objective'. In such a fashion we are in touch with divine history as it touches us or, which means the same for Dean, as we interpret those touchings as divine.

Thus Dean urges us to use imagination and bodily awareness of the world of worth to write an interpretative history, focusing on local events to evoke a feel for the divine struggle in history. Reflecting on these events Dean has developed a post-positivist, historicist theory of empirical value-perception.

5. EVALUATION OF WILLIAM DEAN

Dean is easily construed as a deconstructionist with no protection against arbitrary willfulness. (Charley Hardwick 1989:95 sees Dean as more than a deconstructionist, but as allying himself too closely to this position. Hardwick is not alone in this reading.) My claim is that Dean must be distinguished from deconstructionism. I have five reasons to support my claim:

* Crucial to distinguishing between Dean and deconstructionism is his interpretation of Derrida:

   Even if to write history is...to newly interpret the old interpretations, to add a difference to a sequence of differences, still, it is not to make a totally free and arbitrary gesture....Rather, the signifier is always to some extent a function of the signified, the subject always to some extent a function of the writing that precedes the subject.

   (Dean 1986:45).

   It is Abrams and Hirsch who read Derrida as having 'stolen the author's right to give the text an objective meaning. But if the objective meaning of the text is gone, the text is meaningless – or, to say the same thing, the meaning of the text is simply invented in the subjectivity of the reader' (Dean 1986:46). Note the dichotomy here: either objectivity or invention that is wilful arbitrariness.

   In place of this dichotomy Dean (with Lentricchia) suggests that a 'historicisit view of the inseparability of the self and the world offers a third form of knowledge, neither objectivist nor subjectivist, but historicist' (Dean 1986:47). The Yale Derrideans (J Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, and Geoffrey Hartman) read Derrida the way Abrams and Hirsch do, rather than the way Lentricchia does, except that they evaluate the putative extreme subjectivism with glee. They are joined by the theological Derrideans – Carl Raschke, Charles Winquist, Mark Taylor and Thomas Altizer.

   We need not settle on which interpretation of Derrida is preferable. Dean (1986:48f) says that 'Derrida's historicism is congenial to the empirical philosophies of James, Dewey, and Whitehead' and that 'in these ways, then, James's, Dewey's, and Whitehead's works, and, in effect, the empirical theology groun-

ded on these works all contain the elements for a notion of historical develop-
ment that is consistent with Derrida's'. The claim is that these are consistent
with the less extreme reading of Derrida by Lentricchia. Note that Dean moves
immediately in the second passage to underline a major difference between
himself and Derrida – namely, the inclusion of nature within the realm of inter-
pretation and thereby the rejection of the lingering Kantian dualism of world
and self, of science and humanistic studies in Derrida.

Dean flirts with Derrida, but a Derrida interpreted not as the extreme
deconstructionist, the *enfant terrible* of wilful arbitrariness, but a less extreme
Derrida controlled with a scientific analysis of the world (See point 4 below.
See also Bob Mesle's 1989, helpful comments in the Dean issue.)

* A second reason for challenging the construal of Dean as a deconstructionist is
his criticism of Mark Taylor. According to Dean (1988:136), Taylor 'not only
refuses to offer any proposition about God at any moment and in any local
world - as the classical American theologians did....Taylor refuses to discuss any
specifically religious meaning to the historical process, even to ask what the
word "God" might add to our understanding of that process'. This quotation
makes clear that Dean distances himself from Taylor's refusal to offer any affir-
mations about God, no matter how local and temporal (and no matter how
hypothetical and vulnerable). Dean has a desire to make such affirmations
about God, as he sees James, Dewey and Whitehead doing. These are the affir-
mations that 'force has a tropism, a spin, something urging the growth of value
in the historical process and that it opens particular truths for their own times'
(Dean 1988:136).

Dean (1988:143) appreciates deconstructionism 'as a corrective to the her-
meneutical naiveté of the empirical and process theologians – of their tendency
to indulge in the "hopeless attempt to make correspondence to undescribed rea-
lity serve as a criterion"'. I would add that while correspondence to undescribed
reality cannot serve as a criterion, this does not eliminate a third option: tran-
saction with description-laden reality can serve as a foothold towards improving
our language.

* Dean affirms that we are not restricted to language unattached to a non-linguis-
tic signified in his discussion of 'The Elusive "It"' of radical empiricist aesthetic
interpretation (Dean 1986:97-99). Dean notes, in a brilliant analysis, a 'curious
linguistic move' by William James, Dewey and Whitehead.

Whitehead...said that the key to explanation 'is the feeling of each
objective factor as an individual "It" with its own significance'.

(Whitehead AI, 262.) Why the inarticulateness, especially from Whitehead...? The answer may be that by using 'It' in the way he does, he is attempting to point to a primal, physical, and immediate experience only vaguely and incompletely expressible through ordinary language. Virtually the same linguistic awkwardness appears in the writings of his American compatriots, James and Dewey. In *Essays in radical empricism*, James wrote, 'the instant field of the present is... plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple that' (James 23).

In *Art as Experience*, in his efforts to define that imperceptible 'quality' in our experience of the immediate world, Dewey stumbles from language about having 'an experience', to illustrations such as 'that was an experience', and 'that meal'.

<div style="text-align: right">(Dean 1986:97f; italics Dewey's)</div>

Dean continues by noting how this reference to qualities of experience is extended by Whitehead to religious experience and that in this he is in accord with James. This discussion shows that for Dean language, at certain crucial places, does refer beyond itself.

* Dean makes explicit reference to principles which place a limit on interpretation. This makes it difficult to place him simply with the deconstructionists. One principle is that past interpretations place limits on present interpretations (Dean 1988:42). The second principle is that history is in contact with extra-historical processes, although the contact is mediated through language and tradition.

    I believe that these two principles help prevent the wilful arbitrariness which Hardwick rightly is concerned about. Unfortunately Dean does not take care to guard himself against a deconstructionist interpretation of his writing. However his article on 'Humanistic historicism and naturalistic historism' helps to clarify his position here. I suggest that a transactional realism would account for the fact that research can change a historian's mind and would explicitly guard against wilful arbitrariness (see Stone 1992:127-135).

* In 'Humanistic historicism and naturalistic historicism' and elsewhere Dean sketches a naturalistic (or naturalistic-humanistic) historicism in contrast to a merely humanistic historicism. Deconstructionism is an example of a humanistic historicism, along with the neopragmatists and narrative theologians. Dean's (1991b) argument in this article also shows how he differs from deconstructionism.

The difference is that naturalistic historicism includes interpretations of nature, including scientific interpretations, in the chain of interpretations to which the present interpreter adds. Histories about nature, as well as about human culture, would be written. Humanistic historicism limits historical data to interpretations of human culture, omitting the interpretations of science and other histories of nature. It lacks the critique of science, thus losing a major defence against premodern authoritarianism, supernaturalism and biblical literalism.

Such a historicism would still be historicist, relative to a time and place (for even the testimony of the scientific community is relative to a time and place). Nevertheless, since scientific language refers to observations and experiences, however theory-laden, of a non-human world, our language is limited by the critique of science which would be a defence against supernaturalism. For naturalistic-humanistic historicism the range of testimony would be wider and the pragmatic tests available would be stricter than for humanistic historicism. Such a historicism would not be foundationalist or objectivist. Scientific observation and experience limit scientific language in a non-foundational way. This does not introduce a correspondence theory of truth. It does introduce a pragmatic test of scientific hypotheses.

Put together, these five reasons are my attempt to buttress my claim that Dean is not a deconstructionist, even though a *prima facie* case can be made that he is.

6. CONCLUSION

There are a number of questions that could be put to both Van Huyssteen and Dean. Both of them need, I think, to clarify somewhat their notion of God. Dean's needs to specify what kind of chain of interpretation characterizes God, or if that is too essentialist, what kind of link does he now propose to add. Also, what is the relationship between God and the tropism toward complexity? How widespread is this tropism and how closely does he wish to shave with Occam's razor? Both thinkers may need to think dialogically about other religions, alternative chains of interpretations or other basic models. What does their *via media* between foundationalism and arbitrariness have to say about the pluralism or parity among the world's religions? Van Huyssteen may need to clarify the nature of the basic commitment of a theologian. How does it differ from a scientist's basic commitment? If it is non-negotiable, is it provisional or corrigible? Does it necessarily commit one to a personal Creator?

Finally, does the notion of a transactional realism help what they are doing? I propose a transactional realism, although this adds to the already numerous varieties of realism. By transactional realism I mean that experience is a type of encounter between persons and their world, neither one independent or necessarily dominant in the transaction. It is not language all the way down, nor are there uninterpreted observations or experiences of any significance. Rather, there is an interplay between many factors which, for simplicity's sake, we may call a transaction between language and world.

The point is not that we can 'get it right', but that we can get it better. Realism – and I am not committed to the term – is used not to imply a 'real' starting point or an attainable goal, but to point to the need for improvement. The transaction is a process and 'realism' I use as a slogan to guard us against complacency by resting in the process, to have a general distrust of both inherited beliefs and untutored experience. Arbitrariness lies in accepting, rather than revising, the present stage of the transaction.

We are often in touch with the world or, better, we are often in touch with part of the rest of the world and it is in touch with us. We often misinterpret the touchings. The moral of the story of the blind men and the elephant is not just that they could not tell they had an elephant, whereas sighted people can tell. Rather the men were in touch with the elephant and, when they compared their touchings, probably went back for another feel. While some may have been stubborn and insisted that they felt a rope or a wall, I suspect that some of them went back and reconstructed or improved their experience. I use the phrase 'improved' not 'corrected their experience'. 'Improve' has less of a sense of truth, of a clear standard by which to correct.

> What we have is a courageous hope that the standards that we dimly grasp are not too misleading. Transactional realism is an anticipatory realism, a realism of hope....The claim is not that our theories and models, when true, map the world as it really is, but that the process of revision toward what the world really is can be worth the struggle, even though we will never know how adequate the mapping is. The claim is, further, that when our theories, models, and visions have been subject to appropriate scrutiny, despite our propensity to error, they are worth the risk of relying on, acting on, living by.
>
> (Stone 1992:130)

Although I have some misgivings about the possible misunderstanding of the term 'realism', I do propose the notion of a transaction between subject and object as a serious candidate for reflection. The term comes from Dewey, although whether it

commits one to a religious naturalism is another question. My chief question for both writers is whether they find the notion of a transaction helpful in developing their non-relativist, or at least non-arbitrary, post-modern, non-foundationalism. If it is not helpful, what metaphor would they suggest?

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