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Editors' Note

The articles in this special issue have been developed from papers delivered at the 2006 Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought seminar in response to J. Wentzel van Huyssteen's Gifford Lectures, which were presented in 2004 at the University of Edinburgh. Those lectures were published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company in 2006 as *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology*, which in 2007 was awarded the first Andrew Murray-Desmond Tutu Prize for the Best Christian and Theological Book by a South African. The Highlands seminar was chaired by Michael Raposa and Jon Taylor, and featured the eight authors included in this issue, who presented original research in the areas of paleo-anthropology, evolutionary anthropology, epistemology, theology, neuroscience, and linguistics.

Radical Embodiment in van Huyssteen's Theological Anthropology

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Introduction

Wentzel van Huyssteen's *Alone in the World?* is a prodigious feat of multidisciplinary interpretation, dialogue, and theorizing.¹ It blazes a trail for other works of the same multidisciplinary kind and sets a high standard for them. This is rare in theology and we are in his debt.

Alone in the World? presents an interpretation of human uniqueness in the form of a dialogue between classical Christian theological affirmations and cutting-edge scientific understandings of the human and animal worlds. Van Huyssteen conceives of this dialogue transversally, which is to say as guided by fruitful intersections between significantly autonomous rational discourses. Theology has its way of proceeding, and so do the sciences, and neither can be eliminated through reduction to the terms of the other. Yet neither are theology and science utterly independent of one another, because the basic resources for any rational activity derive from our character as human beings in the world. So some kind of connections between theology and science ought to be possible.

Human uniqueness has the great virtue of being a profound theme for both theological reflection and scientific research and theorizing. This is why he chose this theme for the 2004 Gifford Lectures at the University of Edinburgh, from which the book derives. Van Huyssteen argued at length in an earlier work, *The Shaping of Rationality*, for a dialogical approach to exploring transversal points of contact where they arise.² Dialogue is crucial because, for van Huyssteen, no other form of rational discourse can properly comprehend the autonomy of both theology and science. And that is why *Alone in the World?* takes the dialogical form it does, with theological and scientific voices having their say and the reader

¹ J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006).

² J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

overhearing the gradual conversational construction of a sophisticated interpretation of human uniqueness.

In the framework of van Huyssteen's method, it is possible that very little emerges from a dialogue over a transversal connection, or that the parties to the conversation disagree more than they agree. We have to allow for that when we acknowledge significant rational autonomy in both theology and science. In the case of the theme of human uniqueness, however, a relatively well-coordinated interpretation of human being emerges, and this interpretation is fascinating.

I think that the central feature of van Huyssteen's interpretation of human uniqueness is the bodily character of human life, which has a host of dimensions of meaning. Van Huyssteen recognizes that some theological traditions have tended to underestimate the importance of embodiment, contenting themselves with what he describes, in a lovely turn of phrase, as "esoteric and baroquely abstract notions of human uniqueness," deriving from theological formulations of the meaning of the biblical claim that human beings are made in the image of God (the *imago Dei*; Gen 1:26).³ To his credit, van Huyssteen is deeply dissatisfied with these theological abstractions and sees significant resources within Christian theological anthropology for articulating the claim that human beings are bodied creatures. Likewise, the physical orientation of the natural sciences and the social focus of the human sciences support embodiment as a fruitful category for making sense of human life. The presence of "embodiment" or allied terms in the native language of all partners to the dialogue is why it plays such a central role in *Alone in the World?*

The term "embodiment" is potentially problematic because it might suggest the en-fleshing of a non-physical soul rather than the presence of soul within and as the complex organization of a physical system, thereby implicitly biasing the conversation between theology and the sciences. I shall use the term *bodiment* throughout this essay, minimizing the misleading connotation of enfleshing a non-physical soul, while allowing that the term is still subject to interpretation in the process of the conversation on human uniqueness that van Huyssteen conducts in *Alone in the World?*

³ Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?*, 267.

My task here is the limited one of evaluating the theological anthropology that emerges from van Huyssteen's argument, particularly in respect to its emphasis on bodiment. Van Huyssteen's book is extremely rich, and I will not attempt to summarize its numerous findings except insofar they are directly relevant to the topics I am covering. In beginning, however, it is crucial to say that I consider van Huyssteen's conclusions substantially correct on most points and largely consistent with the scientific and theological pictures of human nature. He rightly points out that our ability to respond to our world religiously depends on the symbolic, imaginative, cognitively fluid aspects of our minds, and that these features of human being emerge from nature itself through the evolutionary process. This is the proper conceptual framework for rethinking human uniqueness in terms of the theological concept of the *imago Dei*. Moreover, the transversal dialogue shows that there is more to human religiosity than paleoanthropology and the neurosciences can explain; religious experiences have a value for people and traditions that cannot be reduced to the terms of the sciences, even though the sciences play an essential role in interpreting them.

With this extensive agreement in place, I shall focus my attention on three challenges to the argument of the book. First, while van Huyssteen makes good use of bodiment to frame dialogue between theology and the sciences on the theme of human uniqueness, he actually underestimates its importance, and this materially impacts the theological anthropology of *Alone in the World?* Second, van Huyssteen ignores or rejects certain valid disciplinary connections (transversal intersections) that would also materially affect his theological anthropology. Finally, I contend that there is an underlying reason for van Huyssteen's selection of transversal intersections to explore, namely, that the interests of a valuable theological tradition are overactive in the inquiry, producing results more favorable to that tradition than the data warrant. This suggests a pervasive methodological problem that allows a bias to creep into the argument, unchecked. I have analyzed van Huyssteen's method for interdisciplinary inquiries elsewhere, and will not develop that theme further here.⁴ But I do think it is important to draw to the surface an

⁴ See Wesley J. Wildman, "Rational Theory Building: Beyond Modern Enthusiasm and Postmodern Refusal (a Pragmatist Philosophical Offering)," in LeRon Shults, ed.,

underlying current within the argument that sweeps away without due cause some of the considerations that may challenge van Huyssteen's theological viewpoint.

II. Bodiment In the Book

Alone in the World? attempts to take bodiment with appropriate seriousness in constructing an interpretation of human uniqueness, but the result can be assessed quite differently depending on one's perspective. On the one hand, in the context of certain Christian sub-traditions that have hesitated to take bodiment seriously—perhaps especially van Huyssteen's own Reformed tradition—this move is quite radical in its implications. On the other hand, relative to other theological traditions in which bodiment has been taken for granted for some time, especially feminist and naturalist theologies, van Huyssteen's approach to bodiment seems restrained, and perhaps even reluctant. For example, a more radical understanding of human bodiment explicitly rejects supernatural ways of providing or authorizing knowledge. This has important consequences for religious epistemology and the origins and reliability of theological ideas, but these sharp implications are significantly blunted in van Huyssteen's approach.

I freely acknowledge that I have more sympathy with the second, somewhat external perspective on *Alone in the World?*, and that my criticisms strongly reflect this point of view (though I will not take up the particularly dramatic point about naturalistic religious epistemologies mentioned above). My perspective may seem unexpected to Reformed theologians and perhaps other theological readers who feel themselves helpfully challenged by *Alone in the World?* to embrace a more bodily understanding of the *imago Dei* and human uniqueness. But the critique illumines a pervasive feature of the book to which some readers will be highly attuned, and I think that presenting it helps to grasp the achievement, the limitations, and the context of the book. I will illustrate the critique by discussing four motifs, each of which expresses one way in which van Huyssteen's

theological anthropology is materially different because he does not treat bodiment radically enough.

(1) Radical bodiment and the ideology of the “cognitively normal”

Van Huyssteen does note in passing that there are different styles of cognition among human beings, but he says nothing about how a properly radical view of bodiment changes our view of this fact. In fact, radical bodiment stunningly reframes the cultural ideology of the “cognitively normal.” I do not refer here merely to supporting the “culture of caring,” which ordinary compassion demands and van Huyssteen strongly approves. Nor do I refer to eliminating the ideology of cognitive normalcy in the name of compassion and justice by refraining from making value distinctions. Rather, radical bodiment (1) blurs the line between the cognitively normal and abnormal, (2) recognizes potentially adaptive value in cognitive variations, and (3) invites value judgments *within the domain of the cognitively normal*. This is potentially socially explosive.

The human species embraces wide variations in cognitive abilities, in relation to language, sociality, and understanding. From a bio-historical point of view, all human beings are deeply related to one another, and there is no basis for decisive cognitively-based separations among us. We are they, no matter who they are, how they think, whether they can talk or reason, or how they experience emotion. If our Paleolithic ancestors are us, as van Huyssteen argues so forcefully, then certainly autistics, schizophrenics, and the mentally retarded are us. This realization challenges easy cultural assumptions that the cognitive insights of such people are absent or useless, which in turn leads us to look for the adaptive value in such genetic variations. It also demands that we take full responsibility for our claims that there is greater value in some cognitions than in others. For example, there is no justification for dismissing outright the cognitions of people in psychotic states; if we are rationally to assign less value to the extraordinary cognitions of schizophrenics we need to give reasons.

At the same time, we need value judgments for educational theory, social policy planning, health care, and crime prevention. What would it look like to make value judgments about cognitive superiority? In fact, there is a sound empirical basis for defining genetically based

“minimally adequate cognition” among human beings. We just need to consider some of the cognitive challenges posed by psychiatric or neurological conditions to see this. For example, psychosis often involves cognitive errors. Abnormal sociality such as that of autistics often interferes with life skills. Impaired language often prevents useful communication. Minimally adequate cognition among human beings involves avoiding these deficits. On this basis, we can make differential value judgments about the cognitive characteristics of human beings.

Yet such value judgments don't sustain a sharp distinction between the cognitively normal and abnormal because psychosis, sociality, and language vary tremendously in the human population and even within a single person at different times, stages, and circumstances of life. Rather, the continuity of human characteristics justifies extending value judgments into so-called “cognitively normal” humans, with potentially dramatic consequences. Society would then treat genius less as an exception to the norm and more as a task of detection and cultivation. Society would prize high functioning autistics (e.g., so say some, Newton and Einstein) as wondrous gifts because of their potential genius characteristics. Such people would be diagnosed early, they would be protected from harm and misunderstanding, and their gifts would be identified and nurtured. Society would regard the occurrence of manic-depression (e.g., Sting, Virginia Woolf, and a vast array of artists, writers, and others) as hitting the genetic-cultural jackpot. Such people would be nurtured and their often extraordinary gifts deliberately cultivated. Perhaps most dramatically of all, society would regard ordinary stupidity and thoughtlessness in the so-called “normal” population as genetically based problems to be addressed through education, concentration, and care of the afflicted.

In relation to the argument of *Alone in the World?*, this insight challenges van Huyssteen's repetition of the widespread claim that language is a key (if not *the* key) characteristic of human uniqueness. Cannot autistic and mentally retarded humans with little or no language abilities still be gifted artists and appreciate symbols? Cognitive scientists may be wildly wrong about the evolution of human intelligence when they extrapolate backwards from the so-called cognitively normal modern humans. They may overlook the special adaptive possibilities in certain contexts of so-called abnormal cognition. They may fail to see that symbolic forms of understanding (art, music, dance) may precede language by millions of years. They

may forget the possibility that what we today would call cognitively abnormal human beings established genetic resources that could be co-opted for language when vocal tract physiology made it possible. A deeper awareness of bodiment in *Alone in the World?* would open up all of these issues in ways that might profoundly affect van Huyssteen's theological anthropology, including decentralizing language as the key to human uniqueness.

A proper appreciation of cognitive variations among human beings should also force a reevaluation of human uniqueness in terms of the *imago Dei*, and this in two ways. On the one hand, despite van Huyssteen's attempt to escape from the formulaic abstractions of traditional theological interpretations of human uniqueness, he repeats one of their fundamental mistakes when he speaks about human uniqueness and the *imago Dei* as *one* thing, as if there were not vast variations among human beings. On the other hand, acknowledging that cognitive variations reflect the *imago Dei* invites and demands a theologically potent interpretation of human beings whose cognition does not achieve what we think of today as a minimally adequate level, and also of so-called cognitively normal human beings who are stupid or suffer from character defects.

(2) Radical bodiment demands a more intense approach to sociality

Neuropsychologists working with primates and social psychologists working with human beings have uncovered compelling evidence that human identity is forged socially. This is a key aspect of bodily human life. The commonsense version of this claim is obvious and masks its striking implications. Sociality was crucial for driving the evolutionary process toward what we call modern humans. Sociality is essential for the formation of a brain that we can recognize as human even among modern humans; when human babies are born their genetically engineered brains are incomplete in numerous ways, and they require sensory and social experiences to complete the wiring. Human experience is ineluctably social, as witnessed especially by the facts that attachment responses seem hard-wired and that mirror neuron ensembles are primed for social engagement.

In relation to the argument of the book, the social dimension of human bodiment is underdeveloped. For example, van Huyssteen interprets ritual chiefly as a means of seeking the transcendent. But

ritual is also socially framed repetition that soothes through focusing cognitive attention, controls through shared cognitive states, binds through costly signaling, and triggers psychosomatic healing through promoting dissociative states. This means that ritual-promoting activities such as religion can have enormous significance for the development of human nature through processes of gene-culture co-evolution. Modern Western humans seeking the transcendent within the restrained rituals of suburban lifestyles may offer some insight into the social bodiment of early hominids. But it is equally valuable to look at ritual activities that involve handling snakes, walking on coals, self-flagellation, body modification, entheogen-induced altered states of consciousness, chanting, and dancing to rhythmic music all through the night. The minimization of these socially charged forms of ritual activity in van Huyssteen's argument tends to distort the picture of human nature, both past and present.

Perhaps the clearest expression of this problem is the subordination of morality in the book's account of the evolution of religion. But the intense sociality demanded by taking bodiment with full seriousness centralizes morality in any adequate account of the evolutionary origins of religion. In all, it seems that a fully developed appreciation of human sociality would change van Huyssteen's argument in such a way as to impact materially his theological anthropology and his account of human uniqueness.

(3) Radical bodiment and limits on cultural flexibility and religious ideals

The twists and turns in the ongoing nature versus nurture debate reflect how seriously scientists are taking radical bodiment. Meanwhile, religionists and theologians have tended to lag far behind. Admittedly this might be wise at times, given the pace of change in the sciences, but I think that theologians need to come to terms with the emerging cross-cultural picture of human life. Lately, social constructivists (the pro-nurture folk) have been taking it on the chin as neuroscientists, social psychologists, and cultural anthropologists have shown recurrence across cultures of certain characteristics, such as conceptual and linguistic categorization, social organization and behavior, moral intuition and judgment; and cognitive operations such as reasoning strategies (sometimes universally mistaken) and

interpretation of sensations. This shift toward the nature side of the nature-nurture debate rebalances the scales, which have been tilting toward social constructivism since the collapse of social Darwinism many decades ago. Taking bodiment with due seriousness requires that we recognize the extent to which we may have a great deal in common with people in quite different cultural settings, due to the sheer fact of being bodied in our particular planetary ecology.

Limits on flexibility in human nature as seen from cultural anthropology occur at two levels. On one level, structural universals derive from problems that all cultures must solve to exist and survive. Such problems are associated with family or kinship groups, status differences, division of labor, property control, and religious belief or practice. On the other level, cultural universals are culturally specific solutions to structurally universal challenges, such as particular family or kinship structures, particular communication gestures, particular economic arrangements, and particular languages. Human cultures are not determined by structural universals, but cultures explore a landscape of possibilities within the constraints set by structural universals. In fact, cultures can even alter the landscape of possibilities. There is similar evidence of limits on cultural flexibility in many other disciplines, from cognitive science to social psychology.

To acknowledge limits on cultural flexibility is neither political despair nor moral pessimism. It does not necessarily express an ideology driven by a philosophy of history that posits futility of human effort. Nor is it succumbing to genetic determinism. Rather, this acknowledgment is based on new discoveries about the genetically programmed dimensions of bodily human life. This suggests that there may be deep limitations on the realization of religious ideals. This in turn has important implications for assessing the realism of religious ideals pertaining to individual holiness and social transformation, and for strategizing about how to organize human political life and how to implement religious ideals in a realistic form of social organization.

In relation to the argument of the book, van Huyssteen is sensitive to suggestions that genes limit religion. But he tends to label such possibilities as reductionist and says they infringe on the proper domain of religion. This inevitably suggests a less than properly radical view of bodiment. Taking bodiment with full seriousness may demand that we reconsider our traditional theological assumptions. For example, what would it mean to say that the genetic heritage of human

beings is now largely fixed because it is dominated by cultural evolution? What if this places permanent limits on how good human beings can be, how well they can learn, how intelligent they can be? What if the cognitive canals that bound the mercurial flow of cultural and religious expression can only be subverted through genetic engineering? Can (or must) religious traditions embrace this? *Alone in the World?* minimizes or evades such questions by incorrectly treating the framework that leads to them as necessarily reductionist in its approach to religion. Even if some scientists do take a reductionist approach to religion because of the existence of genetic constraints on religious and moral expression, the data and theories themselves still deserve careful theological treatment.

(4) Radical bodiment interferes with the cognitive autonomy of religion

Van Huyssteen insists that the naturalness of religion grounds its rationality. This is a gentle but persistent claim repeated throughout the book. He does not cash this claim out in theological reasoning, but it addresses a deep worry among theologians. The worry derives from the following objection: the naturalness of religion as a set of evolved traits means that we are *determined* to have religious beliefs and so the cognitive claims of religious belief cannot be taken seriously. Van Huyssteen's basic reply is that the evolved character of religious belief means that it must be adapted to reality, and thus the naturalness of religion is evidence for the rationality of religious belief and the credibility of its cognitive claims.⁵ But a properly radical view of human bodiment entails that things are more complex than this reply suggests.

Fully acknowledging bodiment requires paying attention to the way cognition actually works in our bodies. On this topic, evolutionary psychology and neuroscience are the key disciplinary partners for theological anthropology. A vital distinction is between *adaptations* and various types and degrees of evolutionary *side-effects* (exaptations, spandrels, and functionless byproducts).⁶ Evolutionary side-effects are

⁵ The discussion is in van Huyssteen, 75-106.

⁶ I present an introduction to these ideas aimed at theologians and religionists in Wesley J. Wildman, "The Significance of the Evolution of Religious Belief and Behavior for Religious Studies and Theology," a commentary and analysis essay for Patrick

features of organisms that arise not due to selection but as unselected consequences of adapted traits. Some evolutionary side-effects prove to be functional, others are not; some are subsequently exposed to selection pressures and others are not. Evolution has produced many more side-effects than adaptations. This means that features important to distinctive human identity may never have been selected as adaptations.

Most theorists believe that the cognitive operations involved in religious belief are side-effects of evolved traits such as: pattern recognition skills (based on face recognition), causal detection and intention attribution systems (deriving from survival skills), cognitive universals (underlying folk psychology and folk biology), the memorable character of minimally counterintuitive beliefs (aiding the perseverance of religious beliefs), and hypnotizability and dissociation (the bases for colorful religious experiences and psychosomatic placebo healing effects). A helpful analogy is with visual illusions. They demonstrate how adapted traits of vision have byproducts. The byproducts are mostly harmless and amusing, which is why we are fascinated by visual illusions. Magicians use these evolutionary byproducts to fool people, and charlatans use them to take advantage of people. In much the same way, the cognitive features of religion may derive significantly from evolutionary side-effects, except that in the case of religion we lack the feedback mechanisms that we use to discern what is really going on in visual illusions.

In relation to the argument of the book, fully recognizing bodiment answers a question that van Huyssteen raises as a challenge to evolutionary psychologists, but differently than he does. The question is, “Why should we, so suddenly and only at this point—the development of this metaphysical aspect of our cultural evolution—so completely distrust the phylogenetic memory of our ancestors?”⁷ The answer to this question is clear in light of recent work in evolutionary psychology and cognitive neuroscience: *We only now, as never before, are developing a compelling understanding of the cognitive mechanisms whose side-effects produced many of the features of religion, so we must revisit our assumptions about the content of*

McNamara, ed., *Evolution, Genes, and the Religious Brain*, vol. 1 of *Where God and Science Meet: How Brain and Evolutionary Studies Alter Our Understanding of Religion*, 3 vols. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006).

⁷ Van Huyssteen, 94.

religious belief and the reasons we take it to be reliable. Of course, this does not imply that religious belief is mistaken but only that the task of securing the rationality of religious belief and the reliability of the contents of beliefs is much more complex than van Huyssteen's questionable claim that religious belief is a cognitive adaptation. His restrained approach to human bodiment prevents this potent answer to his question from getting a fair hearing.

III. Bodiment Out of the Book

Van Huyssteen appreciates the idea of transversality because it suggests an intersection of fundamentally independent domains, thereby preserving the autonomy of both science and religion, and establishing dialogue as the key to exploring transversal intersections. In *Alone in the World?*, however, some important transversal intersections are unnoticed or ignored or denied. This shows at the very least that the book's method is incompletely or inconsistently executed. Moreover, it is intriguing that some of the transversal intersections that are not explored in the book would challenge van Huyssteen's anthropological conclusions. Of course, authors have to choose their topics, and van Huyssteen has made his choices. But some of the paths not taken would materially affect the resulting theological anthropology. I furnish three examples here, but the more important task is to understand why this occurs. I will discuss that in the final section.

(1) Connections between evolutionary psychology and religious epistemology

The field of evolutionary psychology is vast.⁸ Evolutionary psychology has important implications for religious beliefs and behaviors because it offers part-explanations of their origins and

⁸ The writings of John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have done a great deal to stabilize terminology and concepts within the field of evolutionary cosmology, and include excellent overviews; see, in particular, "Evolutionary Psychology: A Primer" at <http://www.psych.ucsb.edu/research/cep/primer.html> (January 13, 1997; accessed August 15, 2006). For an introduction well suited to psychologists, see Leif Edward Ottesen Kennair, "Evolutionary Psychology: An Emerging Integrative Perspective within the Science and Practice of Psychology," *The Human Nature Review* vol. 2 (Jan 15, 2002): 17-61.

functions. Evolutionary psychology is often speculative in relation to the original context in which cognitive capacities evolve. There is plenty of room to debate evolutionary niches, hominid behaviors, and selective pressures. There are also lots of opportunities to debate the philosophical and theological implications of the fact that evolutionary psychology tells an evolutionary story about human cognitive mechanisms. This is a topic that van Huyssteen might well have engaged in much more detail in search of an interpretation of the cognitive aspects of human uniqueness.

Alone in the World? deals with evolutionary epistemology to some degree. The treatment of evolutionary psychology focuses on the work of Pascal Boyer.⁹ Strikingly, van Huyssteen's style of argument changes dramatically when he comes to Boyer. In relation to other scientific theories, van Huyssteen tends to engage details; he looks for transversal connections and weighs plausibility. In relation to Boyer's work in evolutionary psychology, by contrast, van Huyssteen switches to a defensive mode of argument, aiming to show merely that Boyer cannot hurt his account of theological rationality. Van Huyssteen uses abstractions such as "reductionist" to delegitimize Boyer's ideas¹⁰ and rightly criticizes Boyer's overblown claim to "explain religion."¹¹ But van Huyssteen does not intensively engage the ideas themselves, looking for such philosophical and theological importance as they may have independently of Boyer's own line of interpretation.

The defensive approach is expressed in the following conclusion: "[B]oth evolutionary psychology and evolutionary epistemology cannot explain, or explain away, the rationality or irrationality of religious belief, nor can they discuss the plausibility or implausibility of the reality claims intrinsic to most lived religions."¹² But this is quite mistaken. Evolutionary psychology cannot *definitively settle* such questions, of course, but it certainly can help to explain religious belief, and it certainly has a bearing on the plausibility of religious truth claims. Assessing evolutionary psychology's impact on theological interpretations of the rationality of religious belief is an exceptionally complex matter. It cannot be settled merely by

⁹ The discussion of Pascal Boyer is in van Huyssteen, 261-66.

¹⁰ For example, see van Huyssteen, 261.

¹¹ See van Huyssteen, 263-64.

¹² Van Huyssteen, 264.

establishing the *possibility* that religious reality claims are true, which is obviously the case.

To justify not exploring the transversal connection in depth, van Huyssteen argues that the transversal method allows the theologian to end dialogue when ready; the parties are able to “just go their separate ways once the transversal moment of shared interest has passed.”¹³ But should not dialogue continue as long as there is traction between evolutionary psychology and theology? Van Huyssteen seems to cut the dialogue short when things get tough for theology, switching to defending possibility rather than arguing for plausibility. The shift in strategy suggests that a non-transversal, non-dialogical agenda is in play.

(2) Connections between bio-historical anthropology and divine nature

Van Huyssteen appreciates Gordon Kaufman’s elaboration of humans as bio-historical beings, in part because Kaufman’s emphasis on biological evolution, radical historicity, and creativity expresses a conception of human bodily reality that supports van Huyssteen’s interpretation of human uniqueness.¹⁴ But Kaufman defends a non-personal or supra-personal conception of God as the best way to make sense of the fact that human beings are bio-historical beings, calling this idea of God “serendipitous creativity.” This does not sit well with van Huyssteen.¹⁵

The reader might expect van Huyssteen to engage the details of Kaufman’s argument, weighing its *plausibility*, as he does in other cases of transversal connections. But van Huyssteen once again switches to defending merely the *possibility* of personal theism in relation to both his and Kaufman’s theological anthropology.¹⁶ This is

¹³ Van Huyssteen, 264.

¹⁴ The Kaufman discussion is van Huyssteen, 279-83, and he refers to Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004). Kaufman’s argument is elaborated most fully in *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Van Huyssteen calls Kaufman’s proposal about God “problematical” upon introducing it, implicitly refuses to admit it into the realm of theism, and calls it “a post-Christian and generic, abstract notion of God”; see van Huyssteen, 281-82.

¹⁶ The key argument showing the shift from evaluating plausibility to defending possibility is van Huyssteen, 281-82.

the easier case to make (of course personal theism is *possible*) but it does not take up the challenge of Kaufman's ideas.

Van Huyssteen also attacks Kaufman's proposal on methodological grounds, claiming that Kaufman's argument draws a "covert scientific conclusion" and manifests "a serious interdisciplinary failure" because he allows that "biological evolution may completely determine what may or may not be achieved on a cultural level."¹⁷ But this misrepresents Kaufman's argument. Kaufman does not argue for complete determination of theology by anything, but only for plausibility constraints on theology based on the entire scientific worldview. That is not scientism. In fact, it is precisely what successful investigation of a transversal interdisciplinary connection entails.

Should not van Huyssteen engage this issue in the same way he engages other transversal connections between the sciences and theology? Why argue merely for the *possibility* of personal theism when there is a transversal connection that creates stress on the *plausibility* of such theological ideas of God? The shift in strategy suggests that a non-transversal, non-dialogical agenda is in play.

(3) Connections between bodiment and sexuality

Finally, van Huyssteen is well aware of the place of sexuality in human life and human identity. But *Alone in the World?* is notable for its silence about sex despite its emphasis on bodiment. This is striking given that scientists have learned a vast amount about sexual desire and sexual behavior in the last couple of decades, showing that sexual feelings and behaviors are biochemically continuous with the rest of nature even while human sexual behavior is incredibly complex and distinctive when compared with the rest of nature. In fact, it is arguable that nothing more compactly expresses the meaning of human uniqueness than what human beings do culturally and morally with their bodied sexuality.

Most theologies stressing bodiment in our time very explicitly treat questions of sexual identity, and exhibit the profound implications for theological anthropology of a full and rich understanding of human beings as sexual creatures, though they also tend to underplay the

¹⁷ Van Huyssteen, 282.

complicated scientific material on the subject. It is strange that van Huyssteen neglects this issue, and limits his substantive discussions of sexuality to the specifically theological question of whether the *imago Dei* must be articulated in terms of the man-woman relationship.¹⁸ Is this transversal connection passed over due to the controversial status of the question within certain religious communities, including van Huyssteen's own Reformed tradition? We do live at a time when the question of sexual identity is tearing many religious groups apart. The neglect or suppression of this crucial question suggests that a non-transversal, non-dialogical agenda is in play.

IV. Bodiment of the Book

Nobody can do everything in one book, so it is not fair to expect *Alone in the World?* to cover all relevant transversal connections. Yet van Huyssteen made choices about what to cover and what not to cover, and these choices materially affect the resulting theological anthropology and its view of human distinctiveness. Are these choices determined by the method itself? I think not, despite the fact that van Huyssteen sometimes appeals to his method to explain why he pulls out of a promising dialogical moment. There is something more going on here. Why not go further with bodiment? Why marginalize certain transversal connections that threaten to challenge the prevailing theological interpretation? Does selectivity in transversal connections show that van Huyssteen's transversal approach to interdisciplinary dialogue actually serves an undisclosed end?

The hypothesis I advance to explain both the unduly restrained approach to bodiment (bodiment *in* the book) and the pattern of omitted or curtailed transversal intersections (bodiment *out* of the book) is this: legitimate interests of a valuable tradition are overactive but undisclosed in this inquiry. This shows the book's social context (bodiment *of* the book). These contextual interests impact active plausibility structures, styles of argumentation, and handling of evidence, and I have given examples of each. The book's method demands that the presence and effects of special interests should be acknowledged as a condition of dialogue, but this is not the case here. I'll sketch one (contestable) view of the book's bodiment with the aim

¹⁸ See van Huyssteen, 150-54, where Barth figures prominently in the discussion.

of making sense of the patterns in the argument to which I have drawn attention.

To begin with, van Huyssteen loves the world as science discloses it and respects the public, disciplined process that produces scientific understanding. He sees scientific understanding as casting light on God's creation. He believes that we have every reason to be grateful for and attentive to science, and that we need not fear it so long as science does not overreach. So van Huyssteen embraces scientific understanding even as he relentlessly diagnoses its enthusiasms and resists its reductions.

Meanwhile, van Huyssteen appreciates the beauty and integrity of religion and senses its uniquely authoritative claim on human lives. He honors his religious community and, despite some tension, he identifies with it, seeks to nurture it, and wants it to flourish. He is also confident that his tradition need not abandon or radically modify its core traditional commitments. He reasons as follows, in summary: (1) the core traditional commitments have proved themselves in many historical and cultural settings, (2) metaphysical arguments for radical change are overblown, (3) there is no compelling scientific argument for radical change, and (4) radical innovation just introduces worse problems. Thus, van Huyssteen remains confident in his theological tradition, basically accepting its core commitments, though without the rancor and rigidity that some Reformed theologians display. He is comfortable with a minimalist, faith-seeking-understanding approach to theology, which was driven by love and gratitude in Augustine, Anselm, Barth, and is similarly driven in van Huyssteen.

These two sets of convictions about the value and character of science and theology are reinforced by van Huyssteen's deep convictions about the threat of group parochialism and disciplinary arrogance to civilization and to the achievements of culture. His experience in South Africa at the end of the apartheid era is a touchstone for his resistance to parochial religion that refuses dialogue and legitimates injustice. Thus, van Huyssteen sees dialogue and interdisciplinarity as keys to achieving heightened awareness of the world, respect for others, understanding of one's own perspective, and social justice.

This leads directly to the reasons van Huyssteen articulates his transversal method: it protects disciplinary autonomy while permitting transversal insights to cut across boundaries and create new insight and

understanding. But van Huyssteen's transversality contrasts with alternative metaphors such as resonance and traction in very particular ways. It suggests *independent* domains of experience (life worlds) and reasoning (language games). And in practice, it stresses *confirming* connections rather than disconfirming ones; it emphasizes flashes of insight that create *understanding* while marginalizing arguments requiring us to weigh plausibility. And I have tried to show how these features of the method are amply present in *Alone in the World?*

With this (contestable) interpretation of the book's context in place, we can now return to the contrast between possible reactions to it. On the one hand, van Huyssteen's insistence that theology should pay attention to scientific understandings of human nature is quite challenging for some readers who believe that this already interferes with the proper domain of theological reflection. Many of these people will feel stretched by van Huyssteen's argument and will need to weigh it carefully. This sort of reaction might be widespread within van Huyssteen's Reformed religious community, and he seems to anticipate it well. For example, he makes such readers feel comfortable by defending the rational autonomy of theology, and by sharply critiquing scientific reductionism.

On the other hand, from outside that community, *Alone in the World?* can provoke a very different reaction. I suspect that many will admire the astonishing effort of learning and integration that the book represents; this is why it will have an impact. But those who are already deeply committed to bodiment may feel that the book does not go far enough, moves too slowly, adopts a method that serves undisclosed special religious interests, worries too much about satisfying a silent audience of Reformed theologians, and stifles scientific work when it might have awkward implications for Christian theology.

Seeing the book in its social context helps us to grasp the reasons for its apparent limitations (such as those I have pointed out) seen "externally" from beyond the borders of van Huyssteen's home religious community. It also helps us to appreciate its artfulness as a work of integrative multidisciplinary theology when read "internally" as a ground-breaking contribution to his home tradition.