

Three Affirmations of the Being of God Suggested by the Anthropological Idea of God

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My thesis in this investigation is that the anthropological idea of God may be of interest and might possess value for both believers and nonbelievers, theists and atheists, precisely because it will satisfy neither. I assume that an initial moment of intellectual dissatisfaction can be followed by a grasp of satisfying new paradigms, that thinking is “an effort rather than a pleasure.”⁽¹⁾ Thinking people for whom the anthropological idea of God might prove helpful may well not be able to set aside their resistance to its oddity long enough to enjoy the possibilities for new thinking that it opens. In one corner, imagine (for example) a certain type of scientific materialist atheist who never grows weary of attacking belief in God as unsophisticated, immature, or stupid (see Sam Harris; Eagleton on Dawkins). In the other corner, imagine a certain type of devout religious believer who stands grimly unwilling to grant modern science the epistemological authority it seems to have earned even despite the reality that the “the objectives that characterize science as the thing it is” include epistemological self-limitation (Rescher 246).⁽²⁾ To the extent that the representatives in each corner bind themselves to dogmatic integrity, no idea however potent will move them. The dogmatic by definition is that cast of mind which resents any appeal that it try out new thinking (even by way of hypothesis), whether the appeal offers a new object of faith or a new truth of reason. The dogmatic (we might say) expels the hypothetical. My audience consists of those puzzled by people who would refuse to reflect even momentarily on the possibility of an anthropological idea of God; it consists of those who witness the dialogues of the deaf between “religious believers” and “secular atheists” with alternating resignation and impatience. I note in passing that the founder of generative anthropology has declared as one of his priorities the hope of providing something like a new language that might mediate between science and faith in a hypothetical “enterprise of reconciliation” (OT 41): “Perhaps the deepest motivation for Generative Anthropology is the need to raise the level of our discourse about the

existence of God" ("Does God Exist?"; see also SF 14-15).

I propose to develop this thesis by exploring three affirmations of the Divine Being proposed by the anthropological idea of God, in relation to the ways that those affirmations might be related to positions of religious believers and secular atheists in turn. I will, however, first offer, as a friendly extra for the non-initiate, preparatory to the exposition of the anthropological idea of God, a quick exposition of the originary event. The affirmations and their respective exfoliations will follow.[\(3\)](#)

Why the "generative" in generative anthropology? It is an anthropology based on a hypothesis about the specific set of circumstances that might or must have *generated* the emergence of humankind from its nearest animal ancestors.

Generative anthropology takes representation, specifically human language, as the essential component of the human; it proposes, boldly challenging the ruling wisdom of ascetic Darwinian evolutionary gradualism, the punctualist thesis that human language emerged in an event. An event consists of the transition from one set of circumstances to another. Likewise, an event requires a scene: it must happen somewhere, in some place. GA is scenic anthropology: because it takes linguistic representation, the reciprocal exchange of signs, to be the essence of the human, its peculiar preoccupation is with the hypothetical place that it calls the scene of representation. This is the hypothetical scene on which human language originated and on which human language continues to be used. The scene of representation is that place in which a hypothesized generative set of circumstances produced the event of originary signification. Generative anthropology proposes that human beings are best understood not as grammatical subjects of propositional truth alone, afloat in a metaphysical universe of context-free falsifiable claims, but rather as anthropological entities acting in a historically identifiable scenic context, aware of each other and aware of central objects of desire and resentment and aware of the signs they are using. For generative anthropology, human culture is one, and culture is scenic.[\(4\)](#)

Why "minimal" anthropology, as we frequently hear the adjective repeated—whence the obsession with minimal thinking? The originary hypothesis describes *in minimal terms* the set of circumstances (again, the event) that generated human beings from our animal ancestry as those which led to the abortive gesture of appropriation which came to be remembered as the first human sign. Its pursuit of minimality reflects its adherence to the scientific principle that "mysteries should not be multiplied beyond necessity" (OL 1). If the human is one, it is now as it was then. A specific set of circumstances, an event, when described, is best described, if one wishes to aspire to science rather than myth-making or fictionalizing, in minimal terms. Information gathered for the mere sake of gathering can impede understanding, block hypothesis formation, and distract one from the work of

proposing a model for the explanation of the very empirical observations one is collecting. The mere accumulation of data, the collection of examples, and the thick description of particulars do not in themselves make an anthropology. A minimal, generative anthropology is interested in the minimal conditions for the generation of the human from the pre-human in a scenic event: the human after all is “the only animal for whom collectively remembered scenes, or events, exist” (SF 7).

Here is a quick re-sketching of the generative set of circumstances proposed by the originary hypothesis. Our protohuman ancestors are hominoid creatures who possess a highly developed social order (as many primates studied by contemporary ethology have); they exhibit a noticeable degree of social co-operation in (for example) the hunt; they use tools; they use indexical signs, as many animal species do. But they are also more intensely mimetic than any other primate species. Their being more intensely mimetic than any other species on earth means that they have a heightened capacity for mutual imitation which leads them into “violent” intraspecific competition for objects of appetite; this rivalrous competition is so extremely intense, it frequently threatens to destroy the group.

Imagine the scene of a group of these our hypermimetic proto-human ancestors surrounding an object of appetite. Imagine them pointing at that object of appetite in gestures of appropriation, moving toward it. Imagine a certain equality of aggressive, mutually reinforcing imitation-as they point toward the object, they are aware of each other pointing toward the object, and aware of the object. They are aware of each other being aware of the object. But this mere pointing is not yet the human sign. This is still only indexical reference, not paradoxical ostensive symbolizing. The object is just a food object and the animals pointing at the object are “aware” of the object only as an object of appetite. This is *almost* the “abortive gesture of appropriation” that marks the passage from the human to the non-human, but it is missing the abortiveness. It is not quite a human sign yet because at any instant, one of the animals in the violence-threatened dominance order may break the mimetic competition and appropriate the object all to himself. The pecking order, the dominance hierarchy, will then re-establish itself and do the best it can, via the forms of “instinctual” restraint, to preserve the existence of this hominoid group.

The first use of the human sign, by contrast, happens when, in the midst of extremely intense mimetic crisis, one of those hominoids making indexical gestures of appropriation *aborts his gesture of appropriation and becomes aware of his gesture of appropriation as a thing in itself*. For this hominoid, the gesture has become, paradoxically, a thing in itself. The sign has become a thing in itself, even though it is not really the thing. The gestures and sounds themselves become-however fleetingly-objects of the creature’s attention. The abortive gesture

of appropriation has deferred the creature's violence, however momentarily. The first user of the human sign, because he is aware of the sign as a thing in itself, *intends his gesture*. He is aware that he is using a sign as an intentional thing-in-itself. His abortive gesture of appropriation *represents his intention not to appropriate the central object*. But this awareness of the sign as a thing-in-itself produces a new form of awareness of the object: the object is now significant, made so by the sign. He is aware not only of the object of appetite, but aware of the object as differentially significant, as something which his intention not to appropriate, as represented in his abortive gesture of appropriation, is making significant on a scene of representation. The central object is not merely being pointed at, it is now being signified: it has become at once the first object of non-instinctual attention (the first *significant* object) and the first object of intentional non-appropriation. All this happens in an instant.

But to stop there would be misleading, even inaccurate. The first human sign user alone can not and does not create human language: the human sign emerges only in a communal context. Strictly speaking, if no other hominoid in the group imitates the first, if no other second (third, fourth) grasps the invisible intention not to appropriate of the original sign user, the group will not be changed, nor will humanity have emerged.⁽⁵⁾ The sign will not "take": the human emerges as a community or it does not emerge at all.⁽⁶⁾ Other members of the proto-human group must notice this first sign-user's abortive gesture of appropriation; they must imitate the sign as a gesture *intending* not to appropriate the central object, making their own abortive gestures of appropriation. However brief and fleeting this shared discovery/invention of the sign might have been, the users of the sign, after the violently appetite-satisfying consumption of the food object, *remember* the use of the sign. Its transfiguration of the object offers each of them, in an originary form of esthetic pleasure, momentary relief from the violence of mimetic competition (relief from the violence of their resentment of the central object's absolute inaccessibility, relief from the violence of their enduring the absolutely unsatisfiable desire for it). They have experienced the freedom to represent the thing, the freedom to choose representation of the thing as different from the thing itself; and that experience of the event of scenic representation has been memorable. After having consumed the object, the group of humans, the originary human community, together remembers the scenic event, the temporarily peace-bringing effect of the mimetically induced human sign. An event, by definition, must be memorable. The sign gives the originary human community access to a new level of being—the level of the shared communal event, the being of that which is collectively memorable.⁽⁷⁾

Why is this event memorable? It is memorable because in the violent intensity of mimetic competition for the object, the shared sign defers violence through representation. The central object has become something different from a mere

object of appetite or instinctual attention. It remains that, but it is now more than that. The central object occupies a new level of being. It has been transfigured. Once it has been represented, it has become an object of *desire* (as distinct from appetite): each member of the community desires it all the more, precisely because no one can possess it to one's self as long as the ostensive sign defers everyone's appropriative violence at once. Once represented, what was the object of appetite becomes an object of communal human resentment: all in the community on the periphery attribute to the central object an intentional self-withholding equivalent to their own intentional uses of the sign. What the nascent human beings now share, what now makes them "equal" to each other in the originary community, is their access to the exchangeable ostensive sign as a means of deferring violence through representation. Just as their use of the sign defers both their violent appropriation and consumption of the central desire-object and their violence toward each other, so too does that central desire object seem now to possess its own transfigured power of agency, to be resisting their desire for consumption of it in a new way. The central object toward which all were reaching and which all refrained from appropriating is the *first sacred object* revelatory of the central Being, because it is the object of communally universal desire and communally universal resentment. The level of being created by the originary sign is that of the Being of the sacred and significant. The category of the sacred, however, is not the idea of God. It is undifferentiated. One can conceive of many sacred objects that one need not identify with God. The central sacred object itself is no more God than the pyramid is ancient Egypt or the sleeping body is the soul of the beloved.

We are now prepared to consider originary thinking's anthropological idea of God. Here are two passages from the relevant chapter in *Originary Thinking* (1993).

This revelation can only be understood, and this from the very beginning, as God's appearance rather than his subsistence in the [particular physical] being in question. For the idea of God is the idea of what subsists in the physical being's absence, and this *supratemporal subsistence of the scenic center* with respect to the presence of the temporal being that fills it is a direct consequence of the originary experience of representation. [...] The sign can only designate what occupies the center of the scene, and the being of this center, the center-as-being, is what we call God. If this is true for us now, it must have been true from the beginning, for there is no point at which God, however he may have been understood through the mediation of figural representations, could have been understood as less than this. (38)
[emphasis added]

And a second:

Use of the sign creates the scene as much as the scene provokes the sign. [...] Some subsistent signified must be defined to which the sign as such can universally refer. This signified, conceived not as a mental construct but as a being, is what we call God.

God is the central locus of the scene of representation conceived as a being. This being does not reveal itself as such; it is revealed only in the figure of whatever occupies this locus in the originary scene. God and human are born simultaneously from this scene; this is the immediate consequence of the hypothesis. (40)

If I were to choose one sentence from these passages to encapsulate the anthropological idea of God, it would be: "God is the central locus of the scene of representation conceived as a being" (40). This formulation sounds so abstract that the experimental scientist smelling of laboratory chemicals might shrug it off as a philosophical irrelevance, while the theologian brushing from his shoulders dust from library books about Yahweh, Jesus, or Buddha, might complain of its austere impersonality. Nevertheless, I contend that in the context of the wider literature of the founding texts of GA it is no stretch to venture the assertion that the being of this God may be affirmed as Being. Gans has written that "the originary hypothesis does not require us to believe in God because it does not presuppose the anteriority of the sacred to the human" ("Does God"). Yes; but meanwhile, however, the hypothesis invites us to believe in a God whose minimal Being for us becomes indispensable with the emergence of the human. The anthropological idea of God creates a space in which we may "believe in" God even while believing "in modern science" without reservation, hesitation, or embarrassment. The being of this God may be affirmed as that of a formally and paradoxically necessary Being; as that of an afigural Being; and as that of a Being whose sensed presence is inseparable from the ever-renewed process of human love. According to the anthropological idea of God, where and as humans love each other, God is.

This God may be affirmed as a formally necessary being. By "formally necessary," I mean both that the human sign cannot come into operation without the collective belief in this being; and, equally, the collective belief itself is a formal necessity of the originary event that GA proposes. Generative anthropology's hypothesis of language origin is a formal theory of representation. In the originary use of the sign, the human community owes its coherence to a shared memory of the Being who comes to be understood (much, much later in historical time) under the name of God.[\(8\)](#) What prevents the event we have described from happening just once but

not again? The working of “significant memory.” In the process of using ostensive symbolic reference to recall the sacred central object, our first ancestors came to understand the central locus of the scene itself as being occupied by a Being separable from the particular object that revealed it: “As the center of the scene remains after its occupant has been dismembered in the sparagmos, so the sign remains that refers to it. On this hypothesis, the being we call ‘God’ is the permanently subsisting *signified* of the originary sign, the being whose permanence corresponds to the permanence of the sign itself” (“Why Do We”). It is only that *invisible* being, the Being understood to have been revealed by the (now destroyed-and-consumed) sacred, beautiful, or desirable object in the center, which deserves to be named God. The invisibility of the sacred Being may be considered an effect of the invisibility of the intentionality of the first sign-user.[\(9\)](#)

The formal necessity of the Being who deserves the name-of-God derives from the fact that the paradoxical relationship between sign and object, between peripheral sign-user and sacred central object, is the relationship that itself generates the mimetic intentionality which distinguishes human representation from animal sign-systems. The transfiguration of the central object of appetite into a sacred object resented and desired, and the subsequent remembering of the Being who subsists in the central locus in the absence of the consumed central food object, are real-world effects that could not possibly have followed from any property of the food object alone. The immanent object of appetite, as revelatory figure of divine being, may be perceived; but the Being of the sacred center itself is imperceptible by definition because its being, on a new level, is the effect of the object being intended as the transcendental signified of the sign-users’ abortive gestures. The transfiguration and being-remembered of the central locus conceived as a Being are effects of the particular set of circumstances that moved our proto-human ancestors onto the level and scene of human being, and yet our ancestors chose to be so moved. That event-choice instantiates the originary paradox of the cosmic necessity of human *freedom* from the cosmos.

Let us pause over the originary paradoxical truth of the coeval emergence of God and the human. The scenic set of “deterministic” circumstances and the hair’s-breadth space in which there was the “free will” to use the sign must be described together, as a formal paradox. The originary event was a paradoxical situation, a situation of crisis in which (I repeat myself), were we to view it from the outside, we could not perceptually distinguish the purposeful from the accidental. We freely chose to use the sign; we had no choice but either to use the sign or never to have become human. In our humanness we are never outside this scene of the deferral of violence through representation; we remain inside it; we are its heirs.[\(10\)](#) To claim that the event might never have happened is to tell a truth; but to tell that truth is equally only a way of acknowledging our awareness that it has in fact happened.

Why resent the scandal of the possibility that it may never have happened,[\(11\)](#) when the originary event has in fact “always already” happened, as our awareness of the scandal in itself tells us? [\(12\)](#) The intentionality we exercise in proposing the originary hypothesis itself is one with the intentionality of our earliest human ancestors who deferred their violence in their shared performance of the name-of-God.

Similarly, to claim that our originary freedom to choose the sign and so name God depended on or resulted from a particular set of chance-evolved “random” cosmological circumstances is no more demeaning to us as humans than it demeans the cosmos to say that we are the only species able to represent it. The scientist who says this “paradoxical formal necessity” of God makes God an irrelevance is one who wishes to reduce God to something other than the paradoxical, transcendental Other of the human; such a scientist wants to confine the being of God to the space of the grammatical subject of a proposition that can be falsified, verified, tested, disproved. He wants God to be a “thing” either on or off the scene of representation. But God is the One without whom there would have been no remembered scene in the first place. God is “the central locus of the scene of representation conceived as a being.” The point is to recognize that the being of God can not be so grasped, as if God were a perceptible entity on the same level with a sasquatch, a unicorn, the ghost of one’s grandmother or the angel on one’s shoulder. Any truth of faith must be an ostensive truth, and the truth of God’s being is that of an invisible intentionality the verification of the existence of which is by definition inaccessible to “logic and evidence” alone.[\(13\)](#)

Meanwhile, the religious believer who says this “paradoxical formal necessity” reduces God to an epiphenomenon of language refuses in a different resistance GA’s offer of a minimal common ground between belief and nonbelief. For originary thinking invites us not at all to condescend to God as a mere epiphenomenon of language, but rather to recognize God as the One whose name is that of the very Being without belief in whom human language, and humanity itself, would never have come to be. We had to name God; God had to be for us, even if we now enjoy the freedom to leave God behind. The invisible Being named by the name-of-God was, is, will be, and always will have been the originary transcendental Other of the human community. The human sign operates its intentional effects on the basis of a faith in that level of being unique to the human sign, the level of the *meaningful*; if the day ever comes when the human has been reduced to the utterly *meaningless*, that day will be one in which we have witnessed the total disappearance of human faith in the sign as a shared meaningful gesture. Equivalent to such a total disappearance of faith in representation would be not the universality of the denial that God “exists,” but (something worse) the universal denial of the very possibility of the transcendental intentionality of the human sign, of which God was the first

signified. I am inviting the religious believer to notice the way that it would be inappropriately demeaning for God to be anything less than, or anyone Other than, the unique Being whose inaccessible, inimitable centrality on the scene of representation makes possible the meaningfulness of human language.[\(14\)](#) The atheist who fears and wishes to avoid human *servility* to God can likewise find meeting ground here with the believer who fears and wishes to avoid human *denigration* of God in the space opened up by our anthropological idea: in the light of the originary hypothesis, to affirm that the being of God is formally necessary is no more to make the human shamefully dependent on God than to make God dependent on the human.

The being of this God may be affirmed as that of an afigural Being. In its minimality, generative anthropology owes much to the Mosaic revelation in particular as the first revelation of the monotheistic God. As Gans claims, the “primary figure” of Judaism is Exodus, withdrawal: “God withdraws from the figural, which is also the sacrificial” (SP 152). When Yahweh announces to Moses his name in the form of a declarative sentence, Yahweh rejects all possibility of being assimilated to any particular figurable entity: “God’s withdrawal in Exodus from the figure itself signifies the revelation that the basis of human scenicity is not figural, that it inheres in the circular-minimally, triangular-structure of mimesis” (SP 109). The afigurality of God is the guarantee of Divine Being’s never being rivalled by another, for anything figurable can be the rival of a substitute figure. Nothing and nobody can substitute for the God whose one unique presence creates the human; God must be without rivals. The radical iconoclasm of Jewish narrative monotheism affirms the absolute difference between God and the human, the absolute difference between the Being who subsists as the occupant of the unfigurable sacred center and the human sign-users on the periphery of the scene of representation who seek to find the appropriate name for this Being, only to discover, at the limit, the refusal of the Being to be named anything other than God the unfigurable.[\(15\)](#)

This afigurality of the minimal notion of God proposed by generative anthropology seems to impose on the Western religious believer, especially those of us unpractised in “mystical thought” and attached to imagining the personhood of God, certain constraints which may initially feel uncomfortably ascetic.[\(16\)](#) For all anthropomorphic images attached to God, all human qualities ascribed to God by metaphorical slippage or esthetic indulgence, in the context of the minimality of the anthropological idea of God need to be delicately and respectfully set aside for a time.[\(17\)](#) Generative anthropology is far from hostile to the essential human need for esthetic pleasure (an understatement!), but equally it invites us to distinguish between the rigorously enforced communal austerity of sacred experience and the freer pleasures of the esthetic experience, with its oscillation between the

recognized inviolability of the central object and its (pleasurable) imaginary possession. The esthetic is an effect that cannot be coerced (OT 122-23), which characteristic itself presupposes its freedom from the institutional constraints that generate the experience of the sacred. The afigurality of the Being proposed by the anthropological idea of God is one with the minimality of GA's description of the essential components of the human as those able to be conveyed in the description of one event. If we wish to entertain the anthropological idea of God, we will need to detach ourselves from the numberless colourful, vivid idols we are tempted to place in the sacred center. The anthropological idea of God is certainly not one of a sky-occupying deity; it is not an idea of, to borrow some phrases from Errol Harris, "a kind of omnipresent ghost, who arranges natural objects and directs natural events independent or in spite of scientific laws, or some supernatural potentate able to punish men when they sin and reward them when they are virtuous, protect them when they are threatened and comfort them when they are in distress" (47). Local fundamentalisms are politely requested to consider suspending some of their esthetic pleasures so as to permit themselves the opportunity to profit, however tentatively, from the bracing effect of trying to grasp the exchangeable universal of the minimal anthropological idea of God. The idea is not a constitutional common denominator in which all religious people must believe. Rather, it is the non-violent presupposition of the presence of the Being who guarantees the exchangeability of human signs that itself enables dialogue about plural objects of belief.

Meanwhile, the liberal theologies that go through epistemological contortions designed to find room for a God of the Gaps to "intervene" in human history—whether via notions of GDA (general divine action) or SDA (special divine action), notions of God as the ultimate mathematical planner or of God the designer of cosmological evolution who ensures that the human species somehow fulfills a purpose cancelling out the "waste, chance, and pain" that atheistic Darwinians rub our faces in with sadistic glee—such liberal theologies find a friendly challenge here. For the anthropological idea of God quietly sets aside the dilemma of what we ought to do with the vast eons of cosmic activity prior to the emergence of the human. It permits us to affirm the being that God is, but this Being is a God who is for us even to the extent that he simply may not have existed before we (of the human community) did. Or we might as well say that if God did exist before we did, what he was "doing" then really does not matter to us as *humans*. The rocks and the glaciers, the protoplasm and the dinosaurs have no need of God as we do. The believer need not necessarily find this coeval emergence of God and the human an insult to God. A little reflection opens the possibility that the anthropological idea of God, on the contrary, increases our intimacy with the being of God and unites God with us in ways hitherto impossible for a God trapped in metaphysical theology needlessly preoccupied, perhaps vainly preoccupied, with the unanswerable question of the ethical meaningfulness of the existence of gravity and galaxies and

gases, microbes and nanoseconds and quarks. None of these need God, nor need they be thought of as calling upon God so that they might exist. Only we humans came into being by calling upon the Being whose Otherness was memorable enough to bring us together in remembering its goodness, beauty, power and the like. Only we need God in our human way.

Nor does saying that God and the human are coeval imply that our originary ancestors intended to make up God, like the cynical priests of resentful Enlightenment fantasy against whom Voltaire directed his imperative *écraser l'infame*. The anthropological idea of God proposes rather that our ancestors intended the formally necessary *affirmation* of the being of God, which is something quite different from making up a fiction for our convenience. Indeed, there was nothing convenient in our naming of God: at the moment of originary mimetic crisis, we were-paradoxically-just as much bound by the necessity of naming God as we were suddenly presented with the freedom to name God or not. The paradox might be put thus: in exercising the freedom to speak the name-of-God, we were doing what was necessary for us to become human. God comes into being for us as we become human. Therefore, we may enjoy the truth of our common minimal human faith in saying that God at the origin did not coerce us into naming his divine Being, but neither was that naming possible without its having had to be God alone whom we must have found worthy to be so named. The anthropological idea of God is not an argument that a God who existed before we humans did made us in such a way that we had no choice but to make him up, victims of Freud's necessary illusion or Marx's stupefying opium smoke. Rather, the anthropological idea of God proposes that humanity was "made" in a unique event which could not have come about without the presence of a Being understood by the originary human community as a Being whom we would have to name God because of Its difference from us, as the One revealed by our intention *not to destroy* the central object of desire and resentment by which the being is revealed, but rather *to signify* the object (and thus reveal the Divine Being who alone makes the object into an object of *human* attention).

The being whom we name God is the Other of humanity in the sense that our experience of transcendence (as modelled by our experience of the sign) is most minimally described as the experience of the subsistent central Being on the scene of representation whose minimal presence makes the maximal difference between the human coming into existence or not. The afigurality of the God of humanity dovetails properly with the minimality of generative anthropology.

What implications does the afigurality of the minimal God whose being is affirmed by generative anthropology have for atheistic cosmology? On the one hand, the atheist will have to give up the very same thing the idolatrous believer must give

up: a preoccupation with idols themselves. It is a fact worth noticing that the cartoon idols, anthropomorphic divinities and “supernatural” agents dear to naïve religious believers are just as dear to atheistic iconoclasts: the intensity of attachment to the central object *as figure* is equal in each case to that of the other. The difference is only that the believer wishes the sacred figure to be kept securely intact for serene contemplation while the atheist wishes the figure to remain eternally available for repeated episodes of pleasurable demolition: “resentment of the divinity outlasts faith in it” (SP 68-69). On the other hand, the atheist is presented with a polite invitation here. We ask that the atheist concede only that “the process of [the] forgetting” of the idea of God (OT 42), which process has been going on since the very dawn of human history (when humans began to realize via the plurality of signifiers that the persistence of the scene of representation itself did not require the presence of the sacred central being in a single incarnation), is a process that “can never be concluded” (OT 42). The atheist must always remain “someone who rejects belief in God, not someone for whom the very concept is empty” (OT 43).

But what would it mean to refrain from claiming that *the very concept of God is empty*? Why does generative anthropology ask the atheist to make this concession, ask the atheist not to insist on such an emptiness? The gesture of generative anthropology is to go beyond the declarative sentence to the ostensive gesture that founds human language, to propose for our reflection the originary ostensive gesture that determines the scenicity and eventfulness of human culture. It is certainly possible in the universe of purely philosophical discourse (of “metaphysics” as Gans defines it) to keep submitting “God” to the test as if God were just another thing *in* the universe that we can name or not name, another entity the existence of which we can verify or not verify. This is God as the subject of the human concept, God as a being subject to the form of the philosophical concept. But the point of the anthropological idea of God is to free us, and to free the idea of God, from the category error that consists precisely in failing to recognize the difference between the domain of the ostensive truth of faith (of which religion has been up until now the only guardian) and that of the declarative truth of reason (of which philosophy, including natural philosophy or modern science as we know it now, has been the champion).

Let us submit God to the test. Let us say: God exists. Let us say: God does not exist. (She loves me, she loves me not.) In forming these sentences, we step outside the scene of ostensive signification already, because we are imagining alternative models of the cosmos, one universe that includes a being called “God,” one universe that excludes the being called God. But the ostensive truth of faith, without the prior operations of which the declarative truth of reason never could have evolved, operates in a domain where one does not have the luxury to propose

alternative models of the universe: “In times of crisis, God is present, not in some ineffable sense, but as the interlocutor of last resort. God is whoever is named by the name we call out in our panic” (“Unique Source” 51-52). The luxury of considering alternative models of the universe follows only from the advent of declarative language.

The invitation indirectly extended to positivist philosophy by way of this request for the sacrificial concession of the claim *the very concept of God is empty* may be described as an invitation to philosophy that it engage with anthropology by acknowledging the need, which belongs to philosophy as well after all, to find a hypothetical model that might explain the origin of the human language philosophy itself deploys with such admirable care and sophistication. “Language just evolved” explains nothing. Generative anthropology hypothesises the place of a paradoxical ostensive sign at the origin of human language, the sign that freely names the sacred Being because the sacred Being must be named. The suggestion is that before we can have imagined God *not* existing, we must have already affirmed that God is; nobody plays “she loves me, she loves me not,” unless he already has a meaningful “she” in mind. In minimal terms, the level of being called “the meaningful” must itself emerge before we can decide whether this or that particular proposition is true or not. Fiction is not a deformation of originary truth; on the contrary, “fiction is from the beginning the deferral of truth; one has no conceptual existence without the other” (SP 63).

The suggestion then takes the form of the question: what concept in the history of human belief can we find more meaningful than that of God? Where is the philosopher who, attacks on naïve idol worship aside, is complacently able to say that the very idea of God is totally *meaningless*? We can find such philosophers, certainly. They are around. But they are philosophers who seem apparently not to get it. They do not get that the meaningfulness of human signs in all their dazzling, amazing plurality may be taken to have its most economical originary type in the meaningfulness of the single idea of God.[\(18\)](#) Meaning is not empirical verifiability alone, nor is meaning confined to the falsifiable or to the correspondence truth of reason. Meaning is that experience of the deferral of violence through representation that we share by means of the human sign; what we share in intending the meaningful sign is not absolute proof of the “existence” of the being revealed by the intended object to which the sign refers, but rather the deferral of appropriative violence through the intentional representation of that object itself. Whether “God exists” or “God does not exist” is irrelevant to the question of whether the idea of God is meaningful: the Being who defers our violence through representation is the Being the respect of whom brings into existence the real possibility of our making the meaningful come into existence. An ontology of the human that seeks to reduce meaningful human experience to nothing except

experience rationally linked to the pursuit of empirically verifiable correspondence truth, is truly a sacrificial ontology that makes Procrustes look like the Pillsbury Doughboy.

The primary characteristic of the sign is to create a new level of being. This level of being is the meaningful. As at once the most universal and (according to the originary hypothesis, the most minimal) human symbol of the meaningful, as the very gesture toward that sacred Other Being from which the human community differs minimally and in respect of which the human community finds its shared ability to name the meaningful, *God is*. This autoprobatory performance of the originary revelation of God holds true whether God “exists” or not, in that the meaningfulness of the idea of God (not to be confused with the “existence” of God as some figurable cosmological entity) is best placed beyond dispute. We will never be able to find perceptible evidence for the existence of God as an entity, in the same way that we will never be able to find perceptible evidence for our fellow humans’ *intentions* toward us. Behaviour is visible; verbal professions of intention are audible; but the intention itself is never empirically verifiable. She loves me; she loves me not. I must trust that my partner loves me if I am to believe that she loves me; if I must *decide* every instant of every day based on the available scientific evidence that my partner loves me, I do not believe in her love. We experience the truths of faith as revelations; we can not *decide* to believe them on the basis of evidence alone; if we do, they cease to be truths of faith. The ostensive truth of faith is the truth of autoprobatory revelation; by contrast, declarative truth is the truth of reason, of a hypothetical model of reality which may be tested against reality and found to correspond with it. The procedural verifications of correspondence truths are repeatable and partake of a public ritual character, but the ostensive truths of unique revelations are not open to be repeated in that way.

The relation of the intentionality of the human sign to its meaningful object and the transcendental being which the object reveals always remain invisible and must be taken on faith. This is the ostensive faith that founds the human community: the simplest model of our faith in each other as language users is our faith not in the verifiable existence but in the shareable *meaningfulness* of God. We all have *some* idea of who God is, whether we believe in the existence of God or not. This is why generative anthropology asks the atheist to make only the concession of aborting his movement toward the nihilistic violence of the revolutionary claim that *the very concept of God is empty*. The atheist need not suffer any humiliating concession to irrationality in what we ask. Nor will his freedom not to believe in God be violated. On the contrary, paradoxically, we are asking the atheist to recognize that the decision not to “believe in God” *means* something. Perhaps like originary verification, it points toward what is taken to be the hiding of “a definitive absence” (SP 62). Generative anthropology has no hesitation in granting to the atheist his

freedom to deploy a theatrical insistence on the paradox of the real fictionality of God. It is just that the fictionality is real, and its reality meaningful.

The being of the God who may be affirmed by generative anthropology is (finally, third) that of a Being whose presence is inseparable from the process of human love. Here is one of Gans' longer expositions of the set of hypotheses that move toward the formulation of an anthropological theology of Love.

If the first sign is the name-of-God, then God is significant difference itself. The love of God is not the worship of his superiority, but the willingness to accept [divine] difference, like the sexual difference of the beloved, as a source of mutuality. The sacred Being we call God is what remains when the central being desired by all and renounced by all is no more [having been consumed in the *sparagmos*]. We cannot understand this Being as love unless we replace the traditional substantive notion of God as a supernatural entity with the insight that what stands behind the significance of the central object is not a substance but an interaction. The Being that defers our violence through representation *is* no more than our act of deferral itself. ("God is Love")

The skeptic or atheist might gleefully seize upon this passage as proof that generative anthropology, a "secular" mode of thought, releases us from all obligations to think about the personhood of God because the Being of God *is* our act of deferral itself, according to the hypothesis. Such deconstructive glee would be mistakenly premature, however. For the "act of deferral itself" includes, paradoxically, the originary naming of the Divine Being as a Person—however minimally—whose personhood is the originary nonhuman model for human personhood. A being is not necessarily a person; but the divine Being, insofar as that Being is one who may be described as loving humanity or giving of its Selfhood to humanity, must be described as a person.[\(19\)](#) Gans has repeatedly said that it is the vocation of originary thinking to do with hypothesis what religion has always done with myth: to encourage reflection on the necessarily *evenemential* quality of the origin of the human.

Perhaps it should not then come as a surprise that generative anthropology invites a respect for the human-divine difference in somewhat the same way that religion (including the "secularized" religions of scientific progress or socialist utopianism) requires the presupposition of an extra-human purposiveness in history: "Religion can do without gods, but it cannot do without a will whose subject stands outside the human community" ("Return of the Sacred I"). In keeping with the formal necessity of God and the afigurality of God, for generative anthropology, the first

Person, the person of God, is not a human person: “God as the originary object of human love is also the originary person. But from the minimalist perspective... this originary person *is not understood as human*. Personhood is not in the first place characteristic of me, but of the sacred Other whose humanity is not primordial, as the romantico-existentialists would have us believe, but derived” (“*Amo quia absurdum*”) [emphasis added]. Originary personhood is Divine Personhood, but Divine Personhood is not human. On the contrary, the Personhood of originary Being is utterly *inimitable* in its otherness.

At the origin of the human, the central locus of the scene of representation conceived as a Being must be Other than the being of the humans on the periphery. It bears remembering that the central object which *reveals* the Being of God to us at the origin is a *victimary object*: we destroy that object which occupies the “nonhuman center” and our debt to this Being is infinite, can never be repaid.[\(20\)](#) But the forgiveness of this Being, like that of the God of the Judeo-Christian heritage, has no limit. The process of divine love will take on the character of a Self-giving by means of which the Divine Being even in its absolute “personal” otherness gives itself up only so that humans can become sacred centers one to another. [\(21\)](#) It is as if the Divine Being had only one “intention” in resisting our desires and our resentments, in being at the origin absolutely Other to us: its Divine intention as sacred person was that of a paradoxical willingness to be desacralized so as to maximize human freedom.[\(22\)](#) This originary divine “intervention” makes all the other interventions, from the perspective of generative anthropology, nonessential—which is not at all to imply that the originary event/intervention itself was anything less than essential to the beginning of the history of *human* interventions in the cosmos.[\(23\)](#) We learn in history to become significant to each other as human beings and thus to love each other as human persons only because at the origin we always “have had” (the implied consumption in *having* is not coincidental) the mystery of God our shared other as the source of our originary difference.

This is a Being who, at the horizon of an unreachable future, will neither demand nor require our worship: “The independently self-sufficient God who gives his substance in a one-way gift is not the God of love; such gifts arouse resentment. God-as-love is substantive being caught in the process of its generation from human desire” (“God is Love”). Substantive being so “caught” does not threaten us with the damnation of indebtedness so much as elude our grasp in the ephemerality of priceless revelations. The “gift” of this God, therefore, is not a debt we must feel guilty about never being able to repay; on the contrary, we can only “catch” this God experientially in the process of loving one another. We do not know human love as a pale, derived, trivial imitation of the love of God; rather, we know the love of God only as revealed by the love of other humans for us. We may think of God as

the One who differs from all of us so that we may differ from one another in mutual care, deferring our resentment of one another. The deferral of violence and resentment that our shared difference from Divine Being made possible at the origin is one with the tenderness and care shown us by the people who have cared for us.

Human love is not simply care and tenderness for the other, however, but care and tenderness for the other ever renewed by the promise of the *significance* of that caring as something intended rather than a mere animal behaviour: “Love means treating another person as an unverifiable being, as something infinitely different from oneself. But not as an object on a pedestal; true love is not worship. Or rather, true worship is love; only sacrificial idols belong on pedestals” (“Love and Transcendence”). Love is not politicized compassion. Love is the deferral of resentment performed in imitation of the infinite openness to freely accepted obligation conferred by the model of the Self-giving of the one God.

It may seem strange to derive such a notion of Divine Love from a hypothesis about the origin of human language that appears so austere and minimal. We do well to notice, in the context of such a pause over appearances, that perhaps the most audacious feature of generative anthropology is the faith it displays in the ontological weight of human language: “God and the sign of human language are inseparable. There is no reduction of God to language that is not at the same time the subordination of language to God” (“Rhetoric”). In its fundamental claim that human language, the minimal core of culture, operates as *the deferral of violence through representation*, generative anthropology eschews apocalyptic modes of thinking. The apocalyptic is the dream of a final cleansing violence by which (perversely) God will do all the resentful work that belongs properly to humans alone. Apocalyptic modes of thinking believe in ultimate revelations, once-and-for-all revelations, revelations that suffice, that do it all, that finish the job, that give us everything we need to go ahead and conquer in the world of human conflict, even if by pacifying that world, epistemologically imperialistic and pragmatically self-assured as to the trouble-eradicating truth we possess. Generative anthropology has no such final confidence in something other than the human; its confidence is rather in the infinitely renewable resources of representation to defer conflict.

There is no ecological limit on the exchangeability, reproducibility, and power for goodness of the human sign; in this sense, the infinite availability and inexhaustibility of the resources of language (including all the resources of scientific representation) may be a source of joy to all of us, in the same way that faith in God’s omni-characteristics are a source of wonder to some of us. Generative anthropology is a way of thinking that invites us not to wax apocalyptic but, instead, even in the face of the manifest extremes of incalculable goodness and

unanswerable evil on display in the historical record of human action, to try for a certain mindfully wary serenity. This wilful serenity should not be mistaken as a facile cheerfulness. As Saint Augustine split the command respecting the two thieves, generative anthropology neither presumes nor despairs regarding the destiny of humankind as to be damned or to be saved. What generative anthropology invites us to do, as we have seen, is to identify the human with the one minimal gesture that made us human in the first place: the abortive gesture of appropriation, intended as such and shared with one another. The cosmological mystery of the uniqueness of humankind is defined by the uniquely mysterious thing we do, the exchange of intentional signs that transfigure the objects of our sacralizing resentment, desire and consumptive distribution into things paradoxically immanent and transcendent at once. We exchange signs, and in doing so, we make the cosmos signify: we make the universe significant. (There may not be any other beings “out there” who make it significant in the way we do; but if not, we have no need to fear that possibility of their non-existence—because we have the minimal divine Being of our Other as revealed in the sacred central locus of the uniquely human scene of representation.) We may all affirm the presence of this God: “Language is always already non-presence; we have no quarrel on this point with Derrida. But unlike the presence of metaphysics, which subsists within the context of the declarative, ostensive presence is not conceivable as the presence of the sign alone” (SP 58).

“The fundamental model of human interaction is the reciprocal exchange of signs” (“Originary and Provisional”). But what are we doing when we exchange signs? We are deferring our intraspecific violence through representation; and this deferral of violence, as the vigilant exercise of a peace-making intention, is the minimal form of communal love. At the interpersonal level in private life, detached from the social scene, human love may be described as the deferral of resentment: rather than resenting our lover or child or friend for a failure to reciprocate a self-giving gesture, we defer that resentment in the faith that the gesture we have made will be returned in time. It is the work of the human sign precisely to create a temporality *other than* the temporality of our material existence. Our bodies die, our flesh is as grass, our corpses turn to dust and each of us is no more. There is certainly something tragic in this mortal animality of the human, in that it reminds us of the difference between the sign and the object, the timeless life which our uniquely human representations make us able to imagine, if not intend, and the timed life that ticks away with the impersonal movement of natural cycle, calendar and clock.

God is there and here in all this—in the exchanges we make, in the resentments we defer, in the representations we labour to share with one another. For what do we want *God is love* to mean? The invitation of generative anthropology is to entertain the paradoxical idea of a God whose minimal subsistence on the scene of

representation accompanies our every exchange of signs as the basis of our linguistic faith—not a cosmological basis, as if God were an object or agency we might locate, but on the contrary as the sacred invisible crystallization of the anthropological basis of our shared faith in our mutual promises to get along with one another. God is the Being who by differing absolutely from us always in the first place, gives the Divine Substance to us as process, as “a source of mutuality” in the first place. In representing the sacred otherness of the one hypothetical Divine Being we can subsequently bring other objects of desire and interest onto the scene of representation as never-adequate but nonetheless-valuable substitutions for the originary revelation of that divine Being.

The absolute otherness of God in the originary necessity of his afigural being is one with the historical demystification of God as a being whose self-erasure and self-cancellation are not to be felt as a betrayal and abandonment of the human, but on the contrary, as a maximization of human freedom. For what do we want the sentence *God is love* to mean (again)? *God is love* does not mean God will kill our enemies, heal our sick loved ones, rescue us from misery and reward us with prosperity if we obey. God is neither a Being on our side against other people nor one with us against the terribly indifferent cosmos; rather, God is always “on the other side of” the transcendentalizing effect of the human sign. The being of God is that of the other Being whom our signs can represent for us but never be for us. As Gans has said many times, our experience of the sign is the model for our experience of the transcendental, which includes our experience of God.⁽²⁴⁾ The anthropological idea of God is that of the minimal being assumed to subsist between us as we exchange representations.

It is not improper to suggest that the personhood of this Being resembles that of a paradoxically passive but enabling Witness whose presence we need never “verify,” whose presence accompanies our moves of reciprocal interaction on the scene of representation.⁽²⁵⁾ But this Being, despite the minimality of its single originary “intervention,” makes the maximal difference of opening the possibility of linguistic faith, faith in the resources of language. Our minimal faith must be a faith in human language, because the human community is the unique community of those beings who use language. The minimality of the being of God is not to be feared: it is that minimal anthropological equality (in our never being God, but being able to think together about God, a process of thinking which can never be completed) which maximizes our freedom to become human. God “must be thought of as a being, even as a person” (OT 31); God subsists as the “central locus of the scene of representation conceived as a being” (OT 40). The value of shared respect for the Being of this locus as the Other of our intentional gestures is an anthropological truth that all humans and each human may share as a basis for the “fundamental mode of human interaction, the reciprocal exchange of signs.” The declarative truth

that this Being may never be exhaustively or adequately thematized does not make the ostensive truth of the minimal Divine presence one iota the less wonderful.

We asked the atheist to concede that the process of the forgetting of the idea of God can never be concluded. A process of forgetting implies, in one of those numberless oxymoronic jewels Eric Gans has given to his readers, trying to forget something. But it is an odd thing to walk around trying to forget something. It implies a paradoxical remembering to forget. If we picture the perfect nonbeliever as one who always every moment of every day *remembers to forget* the idea of a paradoxical, afigural God-who-is-as-love, then we might picture the perfect believer as one who *forgets to remember* the freedom to forget the idea of God with equal constancy. But why make God a memory? God is the Being who is never “on our side” because the Divine is always on the other side of all human sides. The anthropological idea of God, precisely because it is a minimal idea of God, evokes the stillest, smallest voice within us, in our being as only human, a voice that keeps telling us, from the other side of potentially immanent and annihilation-threatening mimetic crisis: *quiet-quiet-look at your signs of me-which will never be me-look at the others who like you make signs of me-exchange your signs.*

God is Love for us who enables love *among* us. Why should we ever give away such a source of mutuality, a Being whose mystery is that of a minimality that makes the maximal difference between our never becoming human in the first place and our continuing to be human always? We are free to affirm that the process of the forgetting of the anthropological idea of God can never be concluded so long as we remain human, because the process of remembering the idea of God may never be concluded. Originary thinking, the shared exercising of originary memory, as long as the human persists, will never be concluded.

With thanks for his visit to Vancouver of August 9-12, 2007, I dedicate this essay to my brother Bruce Roy Bartlett.

Notes

1. “Thought is not reducible to the desiring contemplation of the imaginary referent of language. It is an activity of reflection on the contents of one’s mental processes, *an effort rather than a pleasure*. Indeed, this effort requires us to renounce our pleasure in the immediate contemplation of the mental image from which our desire constructs the image-as-we-would-like-it-to-be; thinking is a deconstructive search for the original and ultimately for the originary components that underlie the idea/image” (Gans, *Signs of Paradox* 97) [emphasis added]. Further references to the major works of Eric Gans in this essay will be made with the following abbreviations: OL for *The Origin of Language: A Formal Theory of Representation*

(1981); EC for *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (1985); SF for *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (1990); OT for *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (1993); SP for *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (1997). If a quotation is presented without an author identified, it comes from Gans. [\(back\)](#)

2. “It must be stressed that what we are dealing with here is something that is not a defect or a shortcoming. It is a disability imposed by the aims of the enterprise—the objectives that characterize science as the thing it is. The characteristic cognitive task of science is the *description* and *explanation* of the phenomena—the answering of our *how?* and *why?* questions about the workings of the world. Normative questions of value, significance, legitimacy and the like are simply beside the point of this project. The fact that there are issues outside its domain is not a defect of natural science but an essential aspect of its nature as a particular enterprise with a mission of its own. It is no more a defect of science that it does not deal with belles lettres than it is a defect of dentistry that it does not deal with furniture repair. It is no deficiency of a screwdriver that it does not do the work of a hammer” (Rescher, *Limits* 247). [\(back\)](#)

3. It must be declared here at the outset that I am certainly not hoping perversely to make a “religion” out of generative anthropology. Gans is forthright about the impossibility of such a pseudo-spiritual programme: “The minimal faith GA shares with religious dogma is not enough to create an ethos, a common ‘emic’ internality of conceptual vocabulary, but it is sufficient to permit the religious believer to understand GA’s analysis in his own terms” (“Return of the Sacred II”). The *permission to understand GA’s analysis in the terms of* my own religious belief in God is the object of my intellectual pursuit in this study. Compare these remarks as well: “The God minimally constituted by the originary hypothesis is the kernel of religious belief, but not yet the deity of any conceivable religion. What the believer believes... is necessarily more than this formal definition. Even a minimal description of belief requires a thematization of God as a substance other than the mere subsistence of a locus” (OT 41). We will see, however, that in its formulations of God-being-love, GA does begin to thematize God both as a paradoxically minimal substance “caught” in the process of its generation from human desire and as a Person who “intervenes” to make the history of human personhoods begin. [\(back\)](#)

4. An elaboration: to remove humans from the evenemential scene of their origin is to remove the “anthropology” from philosophical anthropology, leaving nothing but philosophy—the conceptualization of the human as the subject of declarative sentences (*subjected to* the way of thinking represented by the proposition) rather than the being whose origin lies in the use of the ostensive sign. [\(back\)](#)

5. There is something I want to stress in this perhaps clumsily slow-motion redescription of the originary event. The intention, it must be said, is invisible. If we could get inside a time machine, travel back in chronological time to the real moment of this event in terrestrial history, there would be nothing for us to “see” or to “hear,” there would be no “empirical” verification of that first sign user’s intention not to appropriate the object. We might see the gesture, we might be able to measure some hesitation; the performance of the abortive gesture of appropriation would have a temporal duration, certainly. But one can not “prove” with empirical tests the existence of the intention. The impossibility of such proof perhaps helps explain the obstinacy of materialist scientism in its contempt for the transcendental. To evacuate the scene of representation of human intention is to abolish the human itself. The originary humans were *free* to imitate each other or not; nothing in the material universe compelled their choice to try the sign. Their trying it was no more a random accident than it was a cosmic necessity. The human can only be experienced as the freedom to not necessarily do what is predicted of us: nothing in the cosmos predicted our originary freedom. The originary event may be said to instantiate the paradox of the *necessary freedom* of the human. See “Free Will and Cosmological Idiocy.” [\(back\)](#)

6. Human beings emerge together in undifferentiated community with the other central Being or they do not come into existence at all. We may each as individuals possess one organic chemico-material brain; but the human mind, by contrast, is fundamentally interactive just as the human sign emerges only mimetically. Human mindfulness is irreducibly a shared thing. [\(back\)](#)

7. “Non-human species have no scene of origin; specific experiences may modify or ‘condition’ their behaviour, but can effect no irreversible change in their relation to the objects of their appetite. Man is the only animal for whom collectively remembered scenes, or events, exist” (SF 7). “Representation defines and is defined by events, which are peculiar to the human species; only we have an event-consciousness” (“The Supernatural”). “Everyone talks about the human need for stories; it is not yet generally understood that the need for stories is a need for events. Events are what stories are made up of. By postulating an originary event, GA does not create a new myth but rather makes clear the minimal presuppositions of human culture that thrives on events. Events can not derive imperceptibly from non-events; there must be a ‘first’ event because events by definition are noticed” (“Originary Thinking, Cognitive Science, and Religion”). [\(back\)](#)

8. “Our intuitive comprehension of this term [‘name-of-God’] is the simplest indication of our attachment to the originary scene. We could not conceive of the existence of God, even in order to deny it, without basing our conception on an experience of the sacred, an experience of which the name-of-God is the

crystallization. In contrast, the construction of a concept of God that needs no name is the task of metaphysics" (SP 208, note 2 to ch. 6). [\(back\)](#)

9. See note 5. [\(back\)](#)

10. "Since humans may be shown to exist and God or gods cannot, a secular hypothesis of origin might seem more 'minimal' than a religious one. But the hypothesis of human origin is not a question that can be posed outside the human experience; and within that experience, the transcendent Being personified in the Judeo-Christian tradition as God is not detachable from the communal guarantee that makes language and other representational forms possible" ("We are all generative anthropologists now"). [\(back\)](#)

11. A scandal which may be expressed in the outrageous discovery that "God did not determine our human freedom!" The very freedom to recognize that God is not a prediction-machine should cancel the human desirability of relishing the discovery of God's failure to make us behave in the way we fantasize him wishing to force us to behave, as if he were some Cosmic Brainwasher. "Oh scandal! We are free from God in the universe, free in a universe without God!" But why resent a God who does not force us to believe in his Existence? The "real" object of the revolutionary atheist's resentment is not God but other humans who believe in God; the revolutionary atheist remains a sociable human animal only so long as the real object of his resentment remains obscured in the mode of ironic self-reflection: "The persistence of irony is proof that resentment of the divinity outlasts faith in it; the ironist is an atheist who condemns God for his failure to exist. Raised to the status of a life principle, this atheism becomes 'romantic irony'" (SP 68-69). Remove "romantic irony" from the programme of revolutionary atheism, and the humourless terrorizing secularism of which the guillotine is the archetype will rush into atheism's already vulnerable place. [\(back\)](#)

12. "Our awareness of the scandal itself" is awareness of the sense that we are *free* to be scandalized even to the extent that we can resentfully deny the "existence" of the God in whom we must have "believed" at the origin. But again, there is no necessity *now* to resent what we must have believed *then* precisely because we are no longer compelled to believe it. God always did and does give up the Divine Self for us. To resent the gift is self-punishing. It is perversely to wish the human free even of the minimality of this one difference from its originary Divine Other; it is, in effect, to wish the human were not human at all but simply assimilable to the cosmological. It is to wish the responsibility of the transcendental away. [\(back\)](#)

13. "Logic and evidence" is the hobbyhorse catchphrase of the most uncompromising of contemporary public atheists, the Darwinian religion-hater

Richard Dawkins. See the “Beyond Belief” website for three days’ worth of video of a fascinating November 2006 conference at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies which brought scientists together to discuss the most recent phase of the renewed science-religion conflict, particularly as ignited by the works of Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. I recommend especially Session 9, in which Melvin Konner and Jim Woodward disagree openly and articulately with the anthropologically tone-deaf scientism of Dawkins and Harris. Anybody acquainted with GA will be saddened that the participants, who know nothing of GA, are perfectly unaware of the contribution that the originary hypothesis and its accompanying insights might have made to their discussions. [\(back\)](#)

14. “God is more than a signified or meaning, an Idea or concept. He is the substance that grounds the possibility of meaning, the sacred being that must be before we can designate some particular thing (the central object of the originary scene of representation) as sacred” (“Does God Exist?”). [\(back\)](#)

15. “The originary sign *names*, in all the ambiguity of the term—at the same time giving a name to and repeating the name of. The idea of God is the originary source of this ambiguity; the sign names what is already worthy to bear the name, what therefore already possesses it, for were it not already God’s name it could not be used to name him. The name-of-God is on the one hand infinitely ‘proper,’ confined to the unique object that occupies the center, but on the other, it is infinitely generic, designating a central locus that may ultimately be occupied by anything whatever. But as this is understood and other signs for other referents become available, the generative relationship between the unique central being and the anything-whatever of significance—*God as the source of language*—becomes itself a theme for cultural preservation in ritual and subsequently in mythical narrative” (SP 54) [emphasis added]. If God is the source of language, God is also the source of the human; our self-awareness as language users is inseparable from our self-awareness as ones indebted for our human being to an Other whom we name with our signs. [\(back\)](#)

16. “The question may well be asked whether there is any way of signifying centrality without thus evoking a specific being. Mystical thought remains in meditation before this question. The philosophical gesture of putting a capital B on Being cannot encompass the religious intuition expressed in the Mosaic revelation, which not so naively retains the personal nature of God” (SP 104). [\(back\)](#)

17. Gans has reflected on “the prudential advantage of the anesthetic position” in the postmodern era, during which “the historical revelation of the single son of God can not but provoke the envy of those not so honored, whatever assurance we are given of his infinite imitability” (SP 160). What is missing in this reflection is

consideration of the assurance against envy we may be given by (on the contrary) the *inimitability* of Christ. These assurances can only be, admittedly, as Gans argues, ultimately esthetic ones. But the esthetic experience of “contact” with the resistant person of Jesus, for the Christian, invites perpetual meditation on the way Jesus is a human unlike any other because he is *inimitable* in a way unlike any other. The paradox of the impossible desirability of imitating the *Inimitably obedient*, is, for the Christian, one with the paradox of the human Divinity of Jesus, of Jesus’ appearing to us as having been the *first* human to be obedient in a unique way. [\(back\)](#)

18. I choose the term “type” because of the following echoes: “I would go still farther: language brings into being *an entirely new kind of entity*, the category or type-as in the type-token distinction fundamental to language—that is nowhere to be found in the real, material world” (“Why Do We Believe in GA?”). [\(back\)](#)

19. “But God cannot be thought of in this way, as a nominalization of ‘holy,’ ‘divine,’ or ‘sacred.’ The sacred is something quite different from God, who must be thought of as a being, even as a person” (OT 31). Compare: “The degree to which the central Being is personified is not on the same axis as the degree of sacrality to the social order” (“Originary Resistance”). Compare: “God is more than a signified or meaning, an idea or concept. [God] is the substance that grounds the possibility of meaning, the sacred being that must be before we can designate some particular thing (the central object of the originary scene of representation) as sacred” (“Does God?”). [\(back\)](#)

20. The originary central object revelatory of divine Being is also the object of originary *human* violence, *significant* collective violence, as opposed to mere unremembered animal aggression: “It is not trivial to ask why God permits evil; nor is it possible to discuss evil as a fundamental anthropological category independently of the idea of God. Only creatures who possess this idea [of God] can do evil, precisely because evil—‘eating of the tree of knowledge’—is what gave us the idea of God in the first place” (SP 143); “[E]vil is in the first place directed against the nonhuman center. Man’s first crime is against God rather than man” (SP 145). [\(back\)](#)

21. “Personhood is the quality of the being that defers its own appropriation, that opposes its will to the appetites of the members of the community, whose own sense of self is given to them as derived from this deferring force. In the face of the resistance of the center, the human self discovers its own relation to it as desire. Religious understanding detaches the personhood of the center from the object that inhabits [the center] and attributes [the personhood] to a being existing prior to the scene and ontologically independent of it; the central object becomes the locus in

which this being chooses to reveal itself. It is this detachment of being from scene that provides the context in which the scene of representation is opened up to beings in general" (SP 103). Human history, the history of human persons acting intentionally in the world, begins when the scene of representation is "opened up to [human] beings." [\(back\)](#)

22. "The desacralization or secularization characteristic of Western society since the Renaissance is the historical questioning of *the necessity of the intentionality of the center* to the most parsimonious formulation of the (origin of the) human" ("Originary Resistance") [emphasis added]. Compare: "The history of civilization has been a long process of desacralization. Clearly the domain of the sacred has shrunk; whether it can ever shrink to nothingness, as the unbeliever affirms, is an independent question" (OT 42). In both formulations there is a measure of skepticism about that brand of radical skepticism that would debunk, deny, deconstruct and destroy the belief in human intentionality. That measured skepticism implies a wise humility regarding the value of preserving the memory of that Other whom we believed at the origin to have possessed a Being of its own, and regarding the minimal faith which accompanies every use of human signs. [\(back\)](#)

23. "The birth of the sacred is not analogous to the *coup de pouce* given by the watchmaker-God of Deism, after which no further divine intervention is necessary. Signification is not a *mechanism*; its functioning depends on the fact that each use of a 'symbolic' sign reactivates, with vastly diminished effect, the originary sacred context" ("Return of the Sacred I"). [\(back\)](#)

24. Consider the following passage as an example of one among many of those times Gans has said things to this effect: "But the existence of neurons, even 'mirror neurons,' does not explain the existence of language. On the contrary, it is the existence of language that explains the neuronal evolution of the species that uses it. It is a serious category error to affirm that the secrets of language or religion can be discovered by examining the structure and functioning of neurons. Language involves virtual beings of a new kind that 'exist' nowhere but in the communal domain of language itself. Once we realize that the ontology of words and meanings, which must be 'believed in' by a speech community to exist at all, is altogether different from [the ontology] of worldly objects of any kind, we will find belief in God—which shares many characteristics of this ontology-less of a mystery" ("Why Do We Believe in GA?"). [\(back\)](#)

25. "I prefer to think of God as the presence in which the two of us are present to each other, the guarantee that each ephemeral look or touch bears its meaning of infinite tenderness for all eternity" ("Love and Transcendence"). [\(back\)](#)

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