

Chapter 1

A Foreword to Comparative Philosophy of Religion

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The present volume of essays and the series to which it belongs seek to contribute to a "comparative philosophy of religions." This common purpose includes not only contributions that exemplify such philosophy but also, in part through those exemplifications, an attempt to understand generally the practice or activity so named. The present essay pursues directly that general understanding. My particular purpose is to help clarify the task of comparative philosophy of religion, and I will seek to do so by defending the following thesis: Comparative philosophy of religion may be identified as interreligious dialogue that has become critical reflection. In saying this, I mean that comparative philosophy of religion and interreligious dialogue are distinguished from other forms of human activity by the same question, and the two differ solely in the fact that the first is and the second is not critical reflection.

At the outset, I will identify the inclusive philosophical task simply as critical reflection on the most general understandings of human activity. On the assumption that forms of reflection may be identified in terms of the questions they address, we may also say that philosophy critically asks and an-

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swers the question: What most general understandings of human activity are valid? It should be noted that "most general understandings of human activity" is ambiguous, because it may itself be understood as either an objective genitive or subjective genitive phrase. As the former, the phrase intends understandings of which human activity is the object and, as the latter, human activity's understandings. I will assume that the character of human activity generally is the object of philosophical inquiry. Given that humans live with understanding, however, to comprehend the most general character of their activity is to comprehend the most general understandings of which it is the subject. Hence, I mean to include both senses of the phrase "most general understandings of human activity" in the question by which philosophy is identified.

This formulation, I judge, is explicitly neutral to most contemporary disagreements, at least in Western thought, regarding the task of philosophy. If some say, with Karl-Otto Apel, that philosophy pursues "fundamental grounding,"¹ and others say, with Richard Rorty, that philosophy is at best "muddling through on a large scale,"² this disagreement may be represented as a difference between claims about the most general understandings of human activity, in both senses of the phrase. Again, the claim that philosophy's proper object is in some sense language may be reformulated as the claim that the most general character of human activity and, therefore, its most general understandings are themselves properly understood in or through an understanding of language and its use.

Assuming that there is something properly called "philosophy of religion," then, this specific form of philosophy may be initially defined as critical reflection that addresses the question: What most general understandings of religious activities are valid? *Comparative* philosophy of religion, in turn, may be initially defined as critical reflection that asks: What most general understandings of the similarities and differences among religious activities are valid? This last question may be reformulated, somewhat more economically: What are the most general similarities and differences among religions? It is apparent that

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a clarification of the task so identified requires a philosophical definition of religion. It is worth noting, then, that the attempt to define religion philosophically asks about a most general similarity among all religions. Assuming that there is something properly called "comparative philosophy of religion," in other words, the attempt critically to clarify its task is itself a part of that very task.

But the assumption that there is something properly called "comparative philosophy of religion" is widely suspect. Many scholars in religious studies find that the phenomena properly or plausibly called "religious" are so varied and complex as to preclude the possibility of any general definition. As a consequence, these scholars choose to study one or some but not all instances of such phenomena and insist that any explicit or implicit definition of religion will be selective, so that it can be justified only with respect to some particular purpose in religious studies. This conclusion is also implied in the claim that "religion" is a "family-resemblance concept" in the sense that each of its referents "is similar in important respects to some others in the family, though not in all respects to any or in any respect to all."³ Since phenomena, not all of which are similar in at least one respect, do not exemplify a single definition, one or another definition of religion will be justified only with respect to some particular purpose in religious studies. Even if one allows that religion can be generally defined, moreover, one might hold that its definition is not among or implied by the most general understandings of human activity that are valid and, therefore, does not permit comparative philosophy of religion.

Still, the conclusion that religion cannot be philosophically defined is itself a philosophical claim. To say that an understanding of religious activity is not included in or implied by the most general understandings of human activity that are valid is itself to assert a most general understanding of human activity, so that this is a claim subject to philosophical assessment. Nor is the result of this assessment dictated by the fact, if it is a fact, that the term "religion" is commonly used in reference to phenomena so varied that all are in no respect similar to each

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other. For critical reflection on the most general understandings of human activity is not bound simply to report the common use of terms but, rather, is required to assess whether the common use should, in the interests of philosophical understanding, be reformed.

Of course, it might be asked how or in relation to what philosophy might assess the claim that religion cannot be philosophically defined. The answer can only be that this claim is assessed in relation to a philosophical definition of human activity, because philosophy is critical reflection on the most general understandings of human activity. I will assume as non-controversial that "religious activity," however varied its applications, is not another term for human activity in general or as such, so that applications of this term may be distinguished from instances of political or scientific or other specific human activities or aspects thereof. The question to be pursued, then, is whether a general definition of human activity includes or implies certain distinctions among its specific forms or aspects, that is, whether human activity as such is self-differentiating, and, if so, whether one of its forms or aspects can be defended as an appropriate referent of "religious."

This approach requires that one first develop a general understanding of human activity, and that is the course I will attempt to follow. In the first section of this chapter, I will seek to clarify and defend an understanding of human activity as such, at least in the measure and manner that our present purpose requires. In the second section, I will argue that human activity so understood is self-differentiating, in the sense that it implies certain specific forms or aspects, and that one such differentiation is properly called "religious." In the final section, then, I will pursue the implications of this definition of religious activity for an understanding of comparative philosophy of religion.⁴

1. Human Activity

It is widely agreed that human existence is distinguished by self-reflection or self-understanding. Humans, as has often been

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said, not only *are* but also *understand that they are*. Of course, human beings or human individuals are not always aware of themselves. We sleep and can become unconscious in a manner that excludes all understanding. More precisely, then, a human individual may be distinguished as one that has the capacity for self-understanding. At those times when individuals are aware of themselves, they are, we may say, in their distinctively human state. I will define human activity to mean this distinctively human state, that is, human activity is activity constituted by a self-understanding. A human individual, then, is a series or succession of activities, all of which exemplify the identity of that individual and at least some of which are distinctively human.⁵

Because a human activity understands itself, it also understands at least some other reality, at least in some measure. This is because understanding necessarily distinguishes; to understand anything at all is to distinguish what is understood from other things that it is not, so that the other things are also understood. In one sense, then, it makes no difference whether we say that human activity is constituted by a self-understanding or simply constituted by understanding—since to understand others as others is to distinguish them from the self and, thereby, to understand the self. In terms of *what* is understood, however, self-understanding is the inclusive term, because the self includes its relations to others, at least insofar as the others are understood. In other words, the self that understands is constituted by relations to others or is internally related to at least some others in some measure, whereas the others that are understood are not necessarily constituted by relations to the self.

Moreover, a self-understanding also includes an understanding, at least in some measure, of some larger reality of which the self and others are parts, because it is only with respect to this larger reality that understanding distinguishes between self and others. To distinguish is to identify not only difference but also similarity; complete or absolute difference is not a definite difference at all and, therefore, not an understanding of different things.⁶ But to understand the similarity of self

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and others is, in one respect, to identify some larger reality in which both are somehow included. In order to avoid misunderstanding, I should perhaps underscore that I mean by "a larger reality" nothing other than whatever is implied by that fact of similarity between things that are understood. Thus, for instance, one might hold that the similarity implies nothing more than a mere collection of self and others. It remains, in that event, that this collection is the larger reality with respect to which one understands its members. Summarily, then, human activity is constituted by an understanding of itself and, therefore, of the larger reality of which it is a part.

Granting that understanding of self, others, and some larger reality occurs, some may still contest the claim that this understanding *constitutes* such activity. Some modes of thought attempt to treat understanding as an "epiphenomenon," such that no mention of or reference to it is required in order to identify any given activity, and human science may proceed "objectively" or in a manner that seeks causal relationships similar to those pursued by the sciences of nonhuman existence. But to treat self-understanding as an epiphenomenon is in truth to deny that it occurs, because an activity that understands itself must in some measure thereby determine itself. Whatever effects other things may have on the activity, others cannot effect an understanding of their effects. Self-understanding, in other words, necessarily transcends other-determination, and, therefore, an activity in which self-understanding occurs is in some measure a product of self-determination or is constituted by that understanding. This is not to deny that a human activity, because it includes an understanding of other things, is internally related to and, therefore, determined in some measure by them. However extensive that other-determination, it remains that the completion of a human activity waits on how it chooses to understand itself. ⁷

One might ask how an activity's self-understanding differs from its understanding of other things. When one understands oneself, *what* is it that one understands in addition to the others to which one is internally related? The answer, I judge, can only be one's purpose. If to understand others is to understand those

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by which one is determined, then to understand oneself is to understand that by which others will be determined. The choice of a self-understanding can only be the choice with understanding of a particular purpose. To complete the self is to determine the effects one pursues, and our distinctive activity, we may say with Alfred North Whitehead, "arises as an effect facing its past and ends as a cause facing its future."⁸ Alternatively stated, an activity unifies its relations to others in a particular purpose, so that it *is* its purpose. On this account, then, all understanding is pragmatic, that is, understanding is always a part of some chosen purpose.⁹ The choice of a self-understanding is the way in which a human activity chooses to add itself or make a difference to the larger reality of which it is a part.

So to define distinctively human activity, however, is not to say that its understanding is in all respects *explicit*. I mean by "explicit understanding" one's conscious thoughts. It is, I assume, undeniable that the conscious thought constituting any given human activity is partial or fragmentary, that is, no human activity explicitly understands all things completely. As a consequence, every human activity also includes or is constituted by understandings that are only implicit, that is, those excluded from conscious thought and without which conscious thought could not be what it is. One's explicit understanding may attend, for instance, to certain aspects of the nonhuman world or to the activities of certain other humans, so that one's understanding of self remains implicit. Alternatively, one's conscious thought may attend to one's purpose, so that some of one's understandings of other things remain implicit.

In part, the understandings implicit in a particular activity were explicit in some previous activity or activities of the individual in question. As I have suggested, we may understand an individual as a series or succession of activities, each of which includes or inherits from its predecessors the identifying character of that individual. With respect to any given conscious moment, then, we may distinguish between understandings explicit in the activity of the moment and understandings that were previously explicit in the individual's existence and are nonconsciously remembered in the present. If, for instance,

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Abraham Lincoln's activity in signing the Emancipation Proclamation was explicitly constituted by whatever conscious thoughts he had at the time, this activity was also constituted by an extensive complex of implicit interpretations of the Union, its order and disorder, that had been conscious thoughts at one time or another, in Lincoln's previous activity. In general, we may say that the measure and respects in which explicit understanding is possible for a given activity depend on the measure and respects in which prior learning is implicitly understood.

Some may claim, further, that the implicit understandings of any given activity are exhausted by the individual's prior learning, that is, new understandings must be explicit before they can subsequently be implicit in an individual's activity. But this claim entails that self-understanding could never be implicit, because a self-understanding is always a new understanding. Since a human activity is self-determined, every human activity is something new, so that a self-understanding is a new understanding. Were implicit understandings exhausted by prior learning, moreover, there could never be new explicit self-understandings either, because new thoughts have new implications. Lincoln, for instance, could not have conceived of his signing the Emancipation Proclamation, because, in doing so, he implicitly conceived of a certain future for the United States, namely, one in which all future events would be conditioned by the event of the Proclamation, and that implicit understanding of the Union's future was not a possible understanding prior to his conception of the event.

This is not to deny that the possibility of Lincoln's new thought and its new implications depended on his prior learning. The point is that the understanding constituting a given activity, explicit or implicit, depends also on the self-understanding, explicit or implicit, the activity chooses, for instance, what Lincoln chose to do with his prior learning. Thus, if implicit understandings are those excluded from conscious thought and without which conscious thought could not be what it is, they are those so excluded without which the self-understanding could not be what it is—and these include the logical implica-

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tions of its choice, whether or not they were previously learned by the individual in question. ¹⁰

Still, an activity's implicit understanding, like its conscious thought, is always fragmentary. Since implicit understandings are those excluded from conscious thought and without which self-understanding could not be what it is, these implicit understandings could be complete rather than fragmentary only if the self to be understood were constituted by complete relations to all things. I will assume as noncontroversial that the activities of human individuals are always fragmentary, that is, never related to all things completely. Indeed, if there are activities completely related to all things, then they are, it seems proper to say, divine rather than human. Accordingly, the understandings implicit in any human activity are also partial. We might formulate this point by saying that explicit understanding represents a fragment of an activity's fragmentary understanding. To be sure, this formulation says that what is understood explicitly is also understood implicitly, but, given the dictum that any proposition implies itself, that consequence need not be troubling.

It is because all understanding is fragmentary, moreover, that both explicit and implicit understandings are fallible. If we understood all things completely, then it would not be possible to misunderstand anything. Since our understandings are partial, we may attribute to some things features that in truth belong or could belong to others. In other words, we misrepresent things by confusing their characteristics. For instance, one misunderstands Abraham Lincoln if one believes that he defended slavery in the Lincoln-Douglas debates. One correctly understands that a defense of slavery is a characterization that does or could belong to some human activities, but, failing to understand all things completely, one attributes this characterization to the relevant activities of Lincoln.

Fallibility with respect to self-understanding merits special attention. Given that a human activity chooses its particular purpose with understanding, one can never be simply ignorant of that purpose; since to understand oneself is to understand

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one's purpose, we can never be simply ignorant of ourselves. To be sure, our conscious or explicit self-understandings may be incorrect, in the sense that one may understand one's particular purpose to be other than it is. If this occurs, however, one's conscious thought can only be a misrepresentation of the implicit self-understanding by which one's activity is constituted. Given that distinctively human purposes are chosen, the falsity of one's explicit self-understanding implies the choice of another understanding of oneself.

Accordingly, the fallibility of explicit self-understanding includes the possibility of self-deception. Having learned the possibility of exploiting other individuals for her or his own maximal advantage, for instance, an individual presently attempts to do so and believes explicitly that she or he pursues what is best for the other individuals. The individual's activity explicitly deceives itself or conceals from its explicit attention the implicit self-understanding by which it is constituted. Moreover, self-deception means that one's implicit self-understanding is self-convicting or duplicitous; that is, one chooses a purpose of which one also disapproves or that one proscribes. Seeking to exploit other individuals, for instance, one may also implicitly believe that one ought not to do so, and it is by virtue of this implicit duplicity that one explicitly conceals one's true purpose. In order to be what it is, the conscious understanding that is false excludes the following implicit self-understanding: to exploit others notwithstanding that I ought not to do so and, therefore, to deceive myself implicitly. ¹¹

If the fallibility of explicit self-understanding means that one's implicit self-understanding may be explicitly misrepresented, then it may seem to follow that one's implicit self-understanding must be infallible. But I have also said that *all* human understanding is fallible, and the sense in which this is the case with implicit self-understanding must be explained. It is certainly true that one's implicit self-understanding is correct, in the sense that one understands the purpose by which one is constituted, because this purpose is chosen, at least implicitly, with understanding. Still, we may say that this self-understand-

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ing is fallible precisely because, as we have just seen, it may be duplicitous. One may choose an understanding of oneself that one also understands to be invalid; one may choose a purpose that one understands to be morally wrong. To be sure, duplicity is a possibility for all human activities only if human activity as such is bound by a norm that our self-understandings might contradict. But we are now in a position to see that our choices are always moral choices because every particular self-understanding includes, at least implicitly, a comprehensive self-understanding.

Because every human activity chooses its particular self-understanding, it also chooses, at least implicitly, an understanding of human activity in general. This is simply an application of the logical dictum that the particular implies the general. To understand that something is a plant or an animal is to understand that it is an example of things that are alive. Similarly, the particular self-understanding by which a given activity is distinguished implies an answer to the general question: What are the characteristics common to the diverse, particular self-understandings of all human activities, actual and possible? In other words, each activity understands itself, at least implicitly, to exemplify the character that all other human activities, each in its own way, also exemplify. We might express this point by saying that every human activity is constituted, at least implicitly, by a general hermeneutical understanding, that is, an understanding of self-understanding as such. To be sure, one may ask whether there are or, if there are, whether it is possible to identify characteristics common to all particular self-understandings. But this question answers itself, since self-understanding and, therefore, understanding in some measure of others and some larger reality are precisely such characteristics.

To choose a particular self-understanding is, I have said, to choose with understanding a particular purpose; to understand oneself is to choose with understanding how one will make a difference to the larger reality of which self and others are parts. Given that every particular self-understanding implies an understanding of human activity in general, we may also say that

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every human activity chooses, at least implicitly, an understanding of human purpose as such, the common character or characteristics of all particular purposes. In other words, every human activity is constituted, at least implicitly, by an understanding of the purpose by which the human adventure is identified, and I will call this understanding an activity's "comprehensive self-understanding." We may also make this point by saying that every activity chooses an understanding of the *material* character of human activity as such, in distinction from its *formal* character, which I have defined as the choice with understanding of some or other particular purpose.

Since the material character of human activity as such is implied by any given activity, the valid comprehensive self-understanding is understood implicitly by all human activity. Still, any given human activity may so choose its particular purpose that it is also constituted, at least implicitly, by an invalid comprehensive self-understanding. If, for instance, the purpose of the human adventure is, with John Dewey, the pursuit of the democratic ideal,¹² an individual's activity might so understand itself as to pursue the wealth or pleasure of that individual at the expense of democratic association, so that the activity's implied comprehensive self-understanding includes not only the valid but also an invalid understanding of human purpose as such. In other words, one's comprehensive self-understanding may be duplicitous, so that one's activity is pragmatically self-contradictory.¹³

It now follows that the valid comprehensive self-understanding is the comprehensive moral norm. Every human activity ought to be constituted without duplicity by this self-understanding, or, again, the particular purpose by which any given activity is identified ought to exemplify without duplicity the comprehensive purpose. The valid comprehensive self-understanding is a norm precisely because it is valid; that is, the choice of an understanding is rationally bound by the norm of validity. This same self-understanding is a practical norm because it is a norm for human purpose; and it is a moral norm because it is categorical, that is, its prescription cannot be defeated by any choice that a human might make.¹⁴ In order to express the moral

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character of the valid comprehensive self-understanding, I will say that it identifies human authenticity as such.

But if every human activity is constituted by an understanding of human authenticity as such, this includes an understanding of reality as such. I previously argued that any self-understanding is also an understanding at least in some measure of some larger reality in which self and others are distinguished or of which self and others are parts. It then follows that an understanding of self-understanding as such is an understanding of the larger reality in which self and all *conceivable* others, all others that might be understood, are distinguished, and this is an understanding of reality as such. In other words, the valid comprehensive self-understanding includes a valid metaphysical understanding. The character of human authenticity as such is a relation of human activity to reality as such. ¹⁵

We may now reformulate the task of philosophy. As critical reflection on the most general understandings of human activity, philosophy is a form of critical reflection identified by the question: What is the valid comprehensive self-understanding, or what is human authenticity as such? I will call this the comprehensive question. Answers to it constitute the most general understandings of human activity, in the sense that human activity is the object of understanding. Just because human activity as such asks and answers the question, at least implicitly, answers to the question include the most general understandings of human activity, in the sense that human activity is the subject of understanding. So identified, then, philosophy includes both a hermeneutical, or moral, and a metaphysical aspect, where the former asks about the characteristics of self-understanding as such, and the latter asks about the characteristics of reality as such—and, because self-understanding is inclusive, the hermeneutical or moral question is the inclusive philosophical question. In sum, critical reflection on the material character of human activity as such is the inclusive philosophical task. Accordingly, philosophy, inclusively understood, may be called pragmatic; that is, its task is critically to understand the comprehensive purpose.

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2. Religion

In order to achieve a philosophical definition of religion and, subsequently, to clarify the task of comparative philosophy of religion, I have sought, first, to develop an understanding of human activity as such. This course has been taken because religious activity will be philosophically defined if we show that human activity as such is self-differentiating, in the sense that it implies certain forms or aspects of itself, and that one such differentiation is properly called "religious." Still, it may be doubted whether a definition of religious activity is the same as a definition of religion. In the first instance, at least, "religion" generally refers to a specific form of culture rather than to a specific form of activity. Before asking about specific forms of human activity, then, we require some attention to the relation between activity and culture.

Considerable discussion in more recent philosophy has focused on the relation between understanding and language. If distinctively human activity is constituted by understanding, many have argued, then activity cannot be human without participation in language, because understanding cannot be or become explicit without being linguistically mediated. Even without seeking precision regarding this claim, we have good reason to affirm one of the principal conclusions to which, for many, it leads: Because language is always a particular cultural creation, human activity is mediated in part by a particular culture.

I take this conclusion to be convincing, because it follows from the fact that human understanding is fragmentary. Given this fact, as we have seen, the measure and respects in which explicit understanding is possible for a given activity depend on the measure and respects in which the individual's prior learning is nonconsciously remembered or implicitly understood. Learning, we may now add, depends on relation to other human individuals, and, therefore, the possibilities for explicit understanding in any given activity depend on the individual's participation in human association. Understanding is always intersubjective, dependent on communication. But, now, communication between or among human individuals is also frag-

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mentary, and, for this reason, occurs in terms of the particular concepts and symbols with which individuals express themselves to others. Thus, we may say that conscious thought depends on an individual's participation in a particular cultural lifeworld, including especially its language.

As I have already mentioned, explicit understanding also depends on the choice of a self-understanding and, therefore, may be or include a new understanding. Insofar as explicit understanding is new, however, it is culturally creative, that is, new as an addition or possible addition to the cultural lifeworld in which it participates. New conscious thoughts occur in terms of new concepts and symbols that allow those understandings to be communicated to others who also participate in that particular culture. In other words, explicit understandings generally are not only created by but also creative of a particular culture. Thus, it remains that explicit understandings and, insofar, human activity are mediated by a particular culture, and we may identify the relation between human activity and culture in the following general way: Culture consists in the concepts and symbols in terms of which human activities explicitly understand themselves and other things and the larger reality of which both are parts.

On the assumption that "religion" generally refers to a specific form of culture, then, activity is specifically religious when it understands explicitly in terms of the concepts and symbols of a particular religion. But if this brief discussion identifies for present purposes the relation between activity and culture, it leaves the question of whether religious activity and, therefore, religion can be philosophically defined. Accordingly, we must now proceed in asking whether human activity as such is self-differentiating and, if so, whether one of its specific forms or aspects can be defended as an appropriate identification of activity that understands itself in the terms of some or other religion.

That the philosophical definition of human activity is self-differentiating has, in fact, already been confirmed by the preceding discussion. Because the understanding constituting any given activity is fragmentary, it implies the distinction between explicit and implicit understandings. Still, this distinction is ana-

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lytic, in the sense that there is no human activity that does not include both. In other words, this distinction refers to aspects of any human activity and never to a difference between some human activities and others. In contrast, religious activity seems to be a kind of activity in the sense that some human activities may be religious and some may not. I will reserve the term *specific form of human activity* to mean a kind of activity in this sense; that is, the distinction between one specific form and any other is nonanalytic. The question remains, then, whether the philosophical definition of human activity implies any distinctions among its specific forms.

But, now, it is the analytic distinction between explicit and implicit understandings that may be used to explain how specific forms of human activity might be differentiated. Because explicit understanding is always fragmentary, such forms may be distinguished in terms of the differences between their explicit understandings. On the assumption that understandings may be represented as the answers to questions, different forms of human activity may be distinguished in terms of the questions that they explicitly ask and answer or address. Thus, for instance, one might distinguish political activity from all other forms of activity in terms of the question of the state, so that politics asks and answers explicitly the question of what the state should do.¹⁶ Similarly, then, other specific forms of human activity may be distinguished in terms of the questions that are explicitly addressed.

Still, this possibility does not yet confirm that any such forms of activity are implied by the general definition of human activity, that is, does not show that self-understanding as such is self-differentiating in the sense pertinent to a philosophical definition of religion. It may be objected, for instance, that the identification of political activity I have suggested is not implied by human activity as such, because the kind of association to which we refer with the term *state* is not universal to human existence but is, rather, historically emergent and, therefore, specific to certain historical conditions. More generally, the objection is that any and all questions with which specific forms of human activity are distinguished will include concepts and sym-

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bols, the referents of which are historically specific, so that activity in which those questions are explicitly asked and answered is not implied by human activity as such.

But this objection, I judge, cannot be sustained even with respect to political activity. If the term *state* is historically specific, we may substitute for it the general term *governing association*, that is, an association whose distinctive purpose is to order or unify all associations and activities of a particular group of individuals. Although I will not pursue the matter here, I believe that all of the central concepts defining a governing association (namely, 'association,' 'particular group of individuals,' and 'purposeful ordering of associations and activities') are implied in the concept of human activity as the choice with understanding of a purpose. If so, then activity in which a particular group of individuals explicitly decides on an answer to the question of its own governing association may be considered a self-differentiation of human activity as such.

Whatever merit the objection does or does not have with respect to political activity, however, the previous discussion has identified at least one specific form of human activity that is implied by human activity as such, namely, the activity of philosophy. The general definition of human activity as the choice of a particular self-understanding and, thereby, a comprehensive self-understanding implies the question: What is the valid comprehensive self-understanding? Accordingly, the specific form of activity that occurs insofar as this question is explicitly asked and answered in a critical manner is implied by the general definition of human activity, and the distinction between philosophy and all other activities is a self-differentiation of that general definition.

One might doubt this conclusion on the ground that *critical* reflection is not a kind of activity implied by human activity as such. But this doubt can be removed through the recognition that every choice of a self-understanding claims to be valid and, therefore, implies an assessment in relation to a norm of validity. When this assessment is explicit, the reflection is critical. In other words, I understand critical reflection to be a secondary form of human activity in the sense that it seeks explicitly to

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assess or validate understandings or claims and, therefore, presupposes a primary form of activity in which understandings are asserted or claims are made, explicitly or implicitly. A specific form of activity, then, may be identified not only in terms of the distinguishing question that is explicitly addressed but also in terms of the manner in which this is done. The general distinction in manner important to the present discussion is between critical and precritical or, as I will also say, decisive reflection. Decisive reflection is, then, the primary form of human activity. This is simply to repeat that all understanding is pragmatic. A self-understanding is the choice with understanding of some purpose, so that human activity is constituted inclusively by claims that it makes, explicitly or implicitly. In the nature of the case, all implicit understanding is precritical or decisive and, therefore, all critical reflection is explicit. But this leaves the possibility that human activity may explicitly ask and answer questions in a decisive manner.¹⁷

Because the activity of philosophy is *critical* reflection that addresses the comprehensive question, the distinction between critical and decisive reflection implies another self-differentiation of human activity as such that addresses that same question. I now wish to suggest that this latter form of activity is appropriately called "religious." On this account, activity is religious insofar as it asks and answers explicitly and *decisively* the question of human authenticity as such. If we assume that the term *religion* refers to a form of culture rather than a form of activity, then we may now define religion as the primary form of culture in terms of which the comprehensive question is explicitly asked and answered.¹⁸

If religious activity addresses explicitly and decisively the same question that philosophy addresses critically, then it may seem that philosophy as such is philosophy of religion, that is, critical reflection on the understandings or claims that identify religious activity. But this conclusion ignores the fact that *every* human activity makes a claim, at least implicitly, in answer to the comprehensive question; human activity as such is constituted by a comprehensive self-understanding. In contrast, religious activity is a specific form of activity in which this question

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is addressed *explicitly*. Thus, the activities on which philosophy as such critically reflects are not simply those that are religious but, rather, all human activity.

Just because all human activities are not religious, the claim that religion may be philosophically defined does not imply that all human individuals or all societies are religious—however pervasive religion may be in human history. If a specific form of activity is philosophically defined, in other words, then the *possibility* of this kind of activity is implied by the character of human activity as such; this possibility can be identified without reference to any specific historical conditions or circumstances. Still, the recognition that every human activity is implicitly constituted by asking and answering the comprehensive question allows one to clarify the specific function of religion as a form of culture. Since one's implicit self-understanding may be duplicitous, the specific function of religion is so to represent in concepts and symbols the valid comprehensive self-understanding that religious adherents choose it in all of their activities, that is, choose particular purposes without duplicity. In other words, religious activity addresses the comprehensive question explicitly and decisively in order to cultivate in the lives of religious adherents authentic self-understanding as such.

As does philosophy, then, religion includes both hermeneutical, or moral, and metaphysical aspects, and the hermeneutical, or moral, aspect is inclusive. Hence, the religious question may also be called the most general moral question. ¹⁹ In order to emphasize that it includes the question of reality as such, however, the comprehensive question may also be formulated: What makes human activity as such authentic? On the one hand, the character of reality as such makes human activity as such authentic, at least in the sense that the larger reality permits human authenticity. On the other hand, human activity makes itself authentic, because self-understandings are chosen.

Granting that the form of culture that I have called "religion" is a form the differentiation of which is philosophical or is implied by human activity as such, one must still give some reason why this is appropriately understood as the referent of "religion." I take the most apparent reason to be that each of the

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so-called axial or post-axial religions more or less obviously illustrates the definition. I have in mind especially Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. To be sure, each of these traditions is internally complex, so that, in each case, it is an open question whether we should speak of one religion or more than one that claim the same name. If the latter, however, I expect that the inner complexity of any such tradition results in two or more traditions or cultural systems, each of which consists in concepts and symbols in terms of which the comprehensive question is explicitly and decisively asked and answered.

Moreover, I judge that the comprehensive question allows one to distinguish the specifically religious character of these traditions or cultural systems from others generally considered nonreligious, for instance, political cultures. This is not to deny that one or more of the traditions in question may include terms in which questions other than the comprehensive one are explicitly asked and answered. On my account, as I have mentioned, a distinction between specific forms of human activity is nonanalytic in the sense that it *may* distinguish between particular human activities. Hence, religions and the activities and associations distinguished thereby may in a given society be more or less culturally and socially differentiated. As a matter of fact, religions are rather highly differentiated in most modern societies and have been more or less diffuse in some premodern situations. In the latter, then, cultural formations and activities properly called "religious" are also properly called, say, "political"—although they are religious and political in differing aspects.

The appeal to so-called axial or post-axial religions as apparent illustrations may elicit the objection that the definition I have offered excludes so-called pre-axial or archaic religions. I am not competent to discuss this objection in an informed way, but I suspect that it is not finally as telling as it may initially seem to be. If the point is that a pre-axial religion is particularistic in the sense that its understanding of human authenticity is limited to a particular collectivity, then it might be argued that such particularism includes a belief about other collectivities—either that authenticity is not possible in other collectivities or

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that authenticity in other collectivities is of an entirely different order. Beliefs such as these are, perhaps, among those that adherents of axial religions are especially concerned to reject, and this suggests that pre-axial religions in their own way ask and answer the comprehensive question. Be that as it may, however, a philosophically differentiated form of culture that the axial religions more or less obviously exemplify and that allows one to identify the specifically religious character of these traditions commends itself as an appropriate definition in terms of which to clarify the comparative philosophy of religion.

It is important to note that this understanding of religion, whether or not it seems in some sense exclusive, is more inclusive than use of the term sometimes intends. Thus, for instance, at least some forms of nationalism or humanism might be understood as cultural systems in terms of which the question of human authenticity is explicitly and decisively addressed. In contrast, "religion" is often reserved, both in academic discussion and in that of the wider public, to mean traditions or cultural systems from which such nationalism and humanism are thought to be distinguished as examples of secularism. On this usage, in other words, religion is defined in terms not only of the comprehensive question but also of a certain kind of answer to that question, such that secularistic answers are another kind. Alternatively stated, my account may be called a "functional definition"; that is, religion is identified as a philosophically differentiated function of cultures. In contrast, common usage implies a substantive definition; that is, religion is identified as a specific kind of performance of the function in question. ²⁰

Generally speaking, I judge, those who attempt to distinguish religion from secularism intend a definition of the former something like the following: Religion is the form of culture in terms of which the comprehensive question is explicitly and decisively asked and answered and in which human authenticity is derived from the relation to reality as such. Whether reality as such is understood as Yahweh, Allah, "emptiness," or in some other way, its character grounds the distinction between human authenticity and inauthenticity and, in that sense, authorizes authentic human activity. In contrast, then, secularism

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is the form of culture in terms of which the comprehensive question is explicitly and decisively asked and answered and in which the distinction between authentic and inauthentic human activity is not authorized by reality as such, so that reality as such is understood to be indifferent or hostile to, even if it also permits, human authenticity.

So far as I can see, the putative distinction between religion and secularism as substantively different kinds or classes of answers to the comprehensive question, each with more than one member, is not a coherent distinction. Because the valid answer to this question is implied by any self-understanding at all, invalid answers are always self-contradictory. In other words, every invalid claim of the form "the authentic character of human activity as such is X" is self-refuting because human activity as such implies the valid comprehensive self-understanding. But there can be no coherent distinction in terms of content among incoherent claims, and, therefore, invalid answers to the comprehensive question cannot be coherently distinguished into classes. This is not to say that the question of whether reality as such does or does not authorize human authenticity cannot be coherently answered. On the contrary, human authenticity either is or is not authorized by reality as such, and the valid answer to the comprehensive question asserts, without contradiction, the alternative that is valid. But all other answers are self-contradictory, and, therefore, assert both alternatives, at least implicitly. The same must be the case with any other characteristic, the affirmation or denial of which is said to distinguish religion and secularism in the sense here in question.

Hence, the only pertinent distinction among different answers to the comprehensive question is between the valid answer and all others. In other words, the putative distinction between religion and secularism has no significance for human activity. What matters is the distinction between human authenticity and inauthenticity as such. For this reason, the philosophical definition of religion must resist any more narrow understanding and identify religion in terms of the comprehensive question itself.

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3. Comparative Philosophy of Religion

We are now in a position to pursue directly an understanding of comparative philosophy of religion, which, as I stipulated at the outset, is identified by the question: What are the most general similarities and differences among religions? In order to clarify more fully the task that is thereby distinguished, it will be useful to make explicit the sense in which the philosophical enterprise as such is necessarily comparative of human activities. Because its inclusive task is critical reflection on the comprehensive character of human activity, philosophy seeks critically to understand the most general similarities and differences of all human activities. Alternatively stated, philosophy seeks critically to understand the character of authentic self-understanding as such, and, since every human activity is a particular exemplification of just that self-understanding, the object of philosophy's inquiry must be a variable in terms of which all human activities may be compared. It might be asked how the variable of human authenticity as such can compare all human activities, since the self-understandings by which activities are constituted may be inauthentic. But this question has already been addressed, because I have argued that an inauthentic self-understanding is duplicitous. It implies the understanding of human authenticity as such that it also denies. Accordingly, the authentic self-understanding as such is a moral ideal and compares all self-understandings, not only authentic but also inauthentic ones, in the manner that a moral ideal compares better and worse.

In the respects that human activity as such implies specific forms of activity, philosophy also is self-differentiating. On the assumption that political activity may be philosophically defined, for instance, one may speak of political philosophy. Since philosophy as such is comparative, the same is the case with such self-differentiations. Political philosophy, for instance, critically asks and answers the question: What are the most general similarities and differences among activities insofar as they are political? It now follows that philosophy of religion is also nec-

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essarily comparative; its distinguishing question may be formulated: What are the most general similarities and differences among religions? In this sense, at least, "comparative philosophy of religion" is redundant.

But if all forms of philosophy are comparative in the sense that has been explained, there is also a distinctive sense in which philosophy of religion compares religions. We may approach a clarification of this claim by underscoring that philosophy compares activities because it assesses them. Since critical reflection is a secondary form of activity that seeks to validate claims that are made, any form of philosophy is concerned to assess understandings constitutive of human activities. To say this is simply to repeat that the question philosophy as such critically asks and answers is the comprehensive question of human authenticity as such. But philosophy of religion is the one form of philosophy that *fully* assesses the explicit understandings identifying its subject activities. The explicit understandings by virtue of which human activities are political at least includes understandings of some more or less particular aspects of human or nonhuman reality, and the same is true of the subject activities of any specific form of philosophy other than philosophy of religion. In other words, these activities explicitly ask and answer questions about empirical conditions or characteristics in distinction from the character of human activity or reality as such.

Political philosophy, for instance, seeks critically to understand the most general ideal in terms of which all activities may be compared insofar as they are political and, in that respect, assesses political activities. But this is not a full assessment of the explicit understandings of any political activity. Since those understandings attend to some particular governing association, a full assessment of them requires a specification of the ideal to the empirical conditions or characteristics in question, and this specification is not a philosophical task. Political philosophy, then, seeks to assess its subject activities only insofar as they include an understanding of the most general political ideal, and this understanding may be only implicit in any given political activity.

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In contrast, human activity is specifically religious precisely insofar as it explicitly and decisively asks and answers the question of human authenticity as such. This means that philosophical reflection on religion is reflection on explicit answers to the very question that distinguishes philosophy itself. Religions are themselves explicit claims about the terms in which all religions should be compared and assessed. Hence, the comparison that identifies philosophy of religion can only be a full assessment of the explicit understandings identifying its subject activities. In other words, the question What are the *most general* similarities and differences among religions? is equivalent to the question What are *the* similarities and differences among religions? Because the similarities and differences among religions are similarities and differences with respect to the most general terms for comparing and assessing religions, philosophy of religion is the one specific form of philosophy in which an answer to its identifying question is a full comparison of the understandings identifying its subject activities.

We might also formulate this point by saying that philosophy of religion requires philosophical theology. With the latter term, I mean nothing other than the attempt to reflect on all human activity and culture so as critically to ask and answer the comprehensive question. Of course, to define "philosophical theology" in this way is simply to make it another name for the inclusive philosophical task; philosophy itself *is* philosophical theology. Since every self-differentiation of philosophy (for instance, political philosophy) requires philosophy itself, we may also say that any specific form of philosophy requires philosophical theology. Still, there may be a rhetorical reason to emphasize this point with respect to philosophy of religion. Given that philosophical theology is generally understood to include a critical assessment of religious claims, to say that philosophy of religion requires philosophical theology expresses the distinctive character of the former, namely, its full assessment and, therefore, full comparison of the understandings identifying its subject activities.

Again, we may say that philosophy of religion is the one form of philosophy identified by explicit discussion with the

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activities on which it reflects. Other specific forms of philosophy may be only implicit discussions with their respective subject activities, because those forms seek to assess general similarities and differences that may be only implicit in the understandings of those activities. But religious understandings are candidate answers to the philosophical theological question, so that philosophy of religion is an explicit discussion with its subject activities. In the case of "comparative philosophy of religion," one might say, the redundancy is a useful one because it emphasizes the full comparison and assessment that identifies this form of philosophy.²¹

But if comparative philosophy of religion is the one form of philosophy identified by explicit discussion with its subject activities, then it may also be defined as a discussion among religious activities that has become critical reflection. A discussion among religious activities may be called "interreligious dialogue," and I understand this to be an activity in which adherents of two or more religions each seek to understand the other or others in the terms of her or his own religion. Precisely because religious activity asks and answers the comprehensive question not only explicitly but also decisively, each of the participants in an interreligious dialogue seeks so to understand the terms in which others ask and answer that question that the similarities and differences are understood and, therefore, assessed in her or his own religious terms. As a form of human activity, in other words, interreligious dialogue is also identified by the question: What are the similarities and differences among religions? Accordingly, this form of activity is distinguished from comparative philosophy of religion solely in the fact that the former asks and answers the question precritically.²²

What this understanding denies, then, is the claim sometimes advanced that philosophy of religion is reflection of a different order than the reflection identifying religious activity. Of course, I have already said that the two are indeed different in the sense that philosophy is a secondary or critical form of activity. But the claim I mean to deny is that the two differ because religious activities explicitly ask and answer a different question than does philosophy. On this account, for instance,

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religious understandings are said to be culturally and historically specific or, alternatively, subrational or transrational convictions in some sense that does not permit of philosophical validation. Accordingly, religions are not candidate answers to the philosophical question, and comparative philosophy of religion at best reports general similarities and differences in a manner that is not an assessment of religious claims. To the contrary, I conclude that comparative philosophy of religion may be identified as interreligious dialogue that has become critical reflection.

So to define comparative philosophy of religion suggests that it is not the only form of critical reflection on religion. One may also distinguish a form of reflection identified by asking critically about the validity of a particular religion, and this form is generally called "theology" or, at least an aspect of theology.²³ In distinction from comparative philosophy of religion, then, theology is necessarily qualified by the name of some or other particular religion, for instance, Christian theology or Islamic theology. But just because it is critical reflection on the claims of a particular religion, theology is similar to comparative philosophy of religion in that both require philosophical theology.

We might say that theology is identified by explicit discussion with the activities identified in terms of a particular religion, and this discussion is important to the religious activities in question precisely because they claim to represent the valid answer to the comprehensive question. In other words, religious adherents have reason to seek the validation of their understandings, and, accordingly, the results of theological reflection sometimes assume a religious character, that is, become a part of the cultural system in terms of which religious adherents decisively ask and answer the comprehensive question. Since comparative philosophy of religion is also a validation of the understandings identifying its subject activities, it follows that this critical activity is also important to the adherents of the religions that it compares. Given this importance, there is all the more reason to say that comparative philosophy of religion may be identified as interreligious dialogue that has become critical reflection.

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On the assumption that we have properly identified the task of comparative philosophy of religion, we may also clarify the relation between this task and historical or empirical study of religion. Given that religions are cultural systems, the concepts and symbols in terms of which the comprehensive question is religiously asked and answered are always some or other historically specific creation. Moreover, the identifying function of religious activity is to cultivate authentic understandings of the comprehensive purpose. Given this function, it is characteristic of religions that the terms they provide assume different rhetorical forms than do the terms proper to philosophical reflection. Religions at least frequently include highly symbolic forms of expression in distinction from the literal terms without which philosophy cannot critically reflect on the comprehensive question.

For both of these reasons, then, comparative philosophy of religion is dependent on the results of historical study of religion. Essential to the critical task of comparing and thereby assessing religious understandings is the task of understanding what these understandings are, that is, understanding the meaning of the claims represented in diverse religions. Given that religions are particular cultural creations and, moreover, that their rhetorical form is at least often highly symbolic, comparative philosophy of religion is dependent on answers to particular hermeneutical questions that only critical historical reflection on religions can provide.

But if comparative philosophy of religion is dependent on historical study of religion, it also follows that the latter is dependent on philosophical theology. Because all human understanding implies some answer to the comprehensive question, this is also the case with particular hermeneutical inquiries; every such inquiry is informed by some or other understanding of human activity or self-understanding as such. When the understandings that historical study seeks to understand are themselves attentive to empirical matters (for instance, in political history), it is not necessarily the case that hermeneutics must explicitly attend to its own understanding of human activity as

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such. In the case of the historical study of religion, however, the understandings that one seeks to understand are themselves answers to the comprehensive question. Accordingly, the terms in which historical study of religion seeks to make explicit the meaning of religious understandings are themselves the terms of some or other answer to the comprehensive question. When the subject activities are religious, then, the validity of particular hermeneutical inquiries depends on a valid understanding of human authenticity as such that is explicit, and, in that sense, the historical study of religion is also dependent on philosophical theology. Since comparative philosophy of religion requires philosophical theology, historians and philosophers who study religion have good reason to seek each other's company. Moreover, since comparative philosophy of religion may be identified as interreligious dialogue that has become critical reflection, both historians and philosophers of religion have good reason to keep company with theologians.

Notes

1. Karl-Otto Apel, "The Problem of Philosophical Fundamental-Grounding in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatic of Language," *Man and World* 8 (1975):239–75.
2. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 168.
3. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3–4.
4. In the discussion that follows, I am immensely indebted to the work of Schubert M. Ogden. Above all, the definition of religion for which I will argue is his definition, with only a verbal change. But this means that the understanding of human activity that I attempt to develop, including especially the distinctions between explicit and implicit understandings and between religion and critical reflection upon it, is simply an attempt to appropriate his formulations and arguments within the context of the present purpose. See Schubert M. Ogden, *The Point of Christology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row,

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1982), especially chap. 2; *On Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), chaps. 1, 4, 6; *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1992), especially chap. 1.

5. I recognize that the terms *human activity* and *self-understanding* may be used such that one has broader application than the other. Some might insist, for instance, that human activity but not self-understanding occurs when a human individual is asleep or unconscious. Others may attribute self-understanding to the activity of creatures or existents that we do not call human, for instance, certain nonhuman animals. My stipulation identifies the occurrence of self-understanding with human activity in order to simplify the presentation of the present argument. I judge that no substantial conclusions would be altered by stipulating any other plausible extensions for the two terms.

I also recognize that some formulations of theism assert that the divine reality is constituted by a self-understanding. My identification of self-understanding with human activity is meant neither to deny theism nor to call God human. Neither is intended, because I am convinced by the argument of Schubert M. Ogden that psychic terms, including the term *self-understanding*, properly apply to God, if God is, only as symbols and, therefore, not literally. See Schubert M. Ogden, "The Experience of God: Critical Reflections on Hartshorne's Theory of Analogy," in *Existence and Actuality: Conversations with Charles Hartshorne*, ed. John B. Cobb, Jr., and Franklin I. Gamwell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 16–37.

6. To understand something positive about X (for instance, that X is human) and to say that Y is absolutely different is to identify Y as merely not-X (for instance, not human). But not-X is insofar solely negative, that is, not the identification of another thing.

7. It is sometimes argued that the notion of self-determination is paradoxical or self-contradictory, because the self that determines must be different than the self that is determined, and yet the two must be one. But the apparent paradox disappears, I believe, if one understands the self that is determined as an activity that might have been (in the sense of real, not merely logical, possibility) different than it is. When Robert Frost, facing two roads that diverged, chose the one less traveled by, he did not simply walk down the less traveled road; on the contrary, his activity was walking down the less traveled road when it might have been walking down the well-worn path. The inclusion of the rejected alternative as something that was rejected is what made the activity the distinct thing that it was, as Frost's poem clearly expresses, and this inclusion of the alternative or alternatives that are not chosen makes the self that is determined and the self that determines the same self.

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It is also sometimes argued that the notion of self-understanding or self-reflection is paradoxical or self-contradictory, because the self that reflects must be different than the self on which it reflects, and yet the two must be one. But the same notion of something related to itself is, I believe, involved in the concept of determination by others. If X is determined by others, then X is internally related to them; and if X is internally related to others, then X is both its *relations* to others and a *term* constituted by those relations. One might speak of X in the latter sense as a relation to its relations. More precisely, perhaps, X as the term constituted is the manner in which X is related to others. Hence, we may say that understanding is the distinctively human manner of being internally related to others. But then understanding one's own relations to others becomes self-understanding in that the manner of relating to others is self-determined. Understanding is a relation of X to its relations to others because it is also a choice to be X rather than X' or X'', all of which are consistent with being internally related to the others in question. To choose what one is or becomes with understanding is self-understanding.

8. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1961), 194.

9. If this is so, then one might formulate the so-called pragmatic theory of meaning in something like the following manner: If a putative understanding cannot sensibly be a part of one's choice of purpose—that is, if one cannot sensibly say how this understanding constitutes one's choice—then it is not a sensible understanding at all. For instance, the claim that all things are completely determined by things other than themselves cannot sensibly be a part of one's choice of purpose and, therefore, is not a sensible understanding. I also believe, to illustrate the point again, that "nothing exists" is not a sensible understanding, because one cannot sensibly say how this understanding constitutes one's choice.

10. Indeed, if all implicit understandings were previously learned, then *that* claim would be implied by all explicit understandings, and each of us would have to learn the truth of that claim before we could have any conscious thoughts at all.

11. To say that an explicit misunderstanding of oneself *may be* is not to say that it always or in all respects *is* self-deception. One's implicit self-understanding may not express duplicity or, as I will also say, may be authentic, and its explicit misrepresentation may be the result of ignorance or mistake. Consciously, one simply formulates incorrectly what one implicitly knows about oneself. For instance, one may implicitly believe that one ought so to act as to pursue in some specified way the well-being of others and may in fact so act. But one may also explicitly misrepresent this as simply what one wants to

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do or enjoys doing rather than what one ought to do—because, say, one has learned to associate morality with some rigid or oppressive moralism that one rightly rejects. Thus, one's implicit purpose is more fully characterized as follows: to pursue in the specified way the well-being of others and to formulate this purpose explicitly as best one can. This is not to deny the importance of an explicit mistake in self-understanding, since one may subsequently believe it implicitly, such that implicit self-understanding becomes an expression of duplicity. For instance, one may subsequently choose not to pursue the well-being of others because, in some situation, one does not enjoy it.

12. See John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 186.

13. I understand a pragmatic self-contradiction to be an understanding or claim that denies what is implied in every act of making the claim, that is, the valid comprehensive self-understanding. If, as the text will argue in a moment, philosophy is the critical attempt to make explicit the valid comprehensive self-understanding, a claim is shown to be a valid philosophical claim by showing that its denial is pragmatically self-contradictory.

A valid philosophical claim may be stated as a hermeneutical claim, a claim of the form "self-understanding is X," or as an existential claim, a claim of the form "something that is X exists." If a valid philosophical claim is stated as a hermeneutical claim, then its denial is not only pragmatically but also logically self-contradictory, that is, the propositional content of the denial implies what it denies. This follows because the comprehensive character of self-understanding is denied. One might object that "self-understanding exists" is pragmatically self-contradictory but not logically self-contradictory. But this claim is not of the form "self-understanding is X," which may be reformulated "if it exists, self-understanding is X." In other words, "self-understanding exists" is an existential claim that, if stated hermeneutically, is expressed "if it exists, self-understanding exists"—and, in this formulation, its denial, "if it exists, self-understanding does not exist," is logically self-contradictory. It now follows that every valid philosophical claim may be stated as an existential claim, a claim of the form "something that is X exists," and, given this form, its denial is pragmatically but not necessarily logically self-contradictory. Hence, philosophy is, in the broad sense, metaphysics.

In the sense that the denial of a valid philosophical claim is pragmatically self-contradictory, I hold that the philosophical task is transcendental. In saying this, I have been educated by and agree with Karl-Otto Apel (see Apel, "Philosophical Fundamental-Grounding"). In distinction from Apel, however, I also hold that one must distinguish within the class of valid transcendental claims those that are valid metaphysical claims in the strict sense, that is, valid claims about reality or existence as such. These are hermeneutical claims that,

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when stated as existential claims, cannot be denied without logical self-contradiction. In other words, a claim of the form "something that is X exists" is a valid metaphysical claim in the strict sense if its denial is not only pragmatically but also logically self-contradictory. I have attempted a more extended clarification in *The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), chaps. 4, 6. Although, as I have noted, one may use the term "metaphysical" in both a broad and a strict sense, my use of it in the text will be limited to the strict sense.

14. On my reading, the insight that self-understanding as such is categorically prescriptive for human activity is Kant's abiding contribution to moral thought, so that the imperative "act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals* [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1949], 38) means "act only on that understanding of yourself that is a consistent exemplification of self-understanding as such."

15. In saying that the valid comprehensive self-understanding includes a valid metaphysical understanding, I depart from Kant. But this departure was implied in the claim that one's choice of a self-understanding is nothing other than the choice of one's purpose. On my reading, it was precisely because Kant denied metaphysical knowledge (in the strict sense of "metaphysics"; see n. 13) that he insisted on a purely formal moral law, that is, a categorical imperative that is independent of any purpose. For Kant, in other words, the "end in itself" (*ibid.*, 45) can be "conceived only negatively, as that which we must never act against" (*ibid.*, 54), namely, the rational freedom of every person. To the best of my reasoning, however, this putative independence from any purpose or any material character means that human authenticity as such "can be conceived only negatively," and what can be conceived only negatively is nothing. I have discussed this point more extensively in *The Divine Good*, especially chap. 2.

The same point is at issue if one says that the valid comprehensive self-understanding is an understanding of reality only *insofar as it can be understood*. For those who add it, this qualification is important because they seek to distinguish, as Kant did, between reality as understandable or conceivable and reality as it is. It is precisely this distinction that expresses Kant's denial of metaphysical knowledge and, therefore, his affirmation of a purely formal law. But I hold, with Whitehead and against Kant, that "the unknowable is unknown" (Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corrected edition, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne [New York: The Free Press, 1978], 4). To claim that something inconceivable is possible is to claim that one can conceive of the inconceivable. I have discussed this point in *The Divine Good*, chap. 4.

16. I recognize that this may be considered a narrow definition of *political*, since the term is often defined in terms of the larger cultural and social struc-

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ture. But this distinction between narrow and broad meanings of *political* is not germane to the present discussion.

17. To be sure, the distinction between critical and decisive reflection is a relative one, because an activity seeking to validate claims that are made or implied in other activities may itself involve other claims that are simply asserted. For instance, given human activities may be constituted by understandings about empirical regularities in the nonhuman world. If the critical reflection on such claims is called "natural science," this activity may itself include explicit or implicit claims about reality as such that are not themselves the object of critical reflection and would become so only in the activity of philosophy. Moreover, any critical activity itself implies the claim that this critical activity is important or worthwhile. But the relative character of a distinction does not gainsay that distinction, as the example just given also illustrates, because it serves to distinguish between scientific and nonscientific understandings of empirical regularities, as well as between science and philosophy.

It is worth noting that there is one question on which human activity cannot reflect critically without at the same time reflecting decisively—namely, the comprehensive question. Since every human activity asks and answers this question decisively, philosophical activities cannot avoid doing so. This is, I judge, at least one way to understand the claim that philosophical activity is "self-referential" (see, for instance, Apel, "Fundamental Grounding"). It does not follow, however, that philosophy is always "ideological" or "rationalizing" in a sense that prevents it from being critical. For the activity of thinking philosophically may be, at least so far as the character of the thinking is concerned, authentic.

18. Cf. Ogden: "'Religion' . . . [is] the primary form of culture in terms of which we human beings explicitly ask and answer the existential question of the meaning of being for us" (Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion?*, 5). Ogden means by "the existential question" what I mean by "the comprehensive question."

19. Although this formulation is logically proper, one might recommend against it if certain rhetorical considerations assume prominence. One might hold that explicitly moral claims are expressed in a different "voice" or have a different "illocutionary load" than is the case with explicitly existential claims, notwithstanding that a given moral claim and a given existential claim are, all implications taken into account, identical in propositional content. For instance, one might hold that "human activity as such ought fully to pursue the divine telos" and "human activity as such is the object of God's redemption,"

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even if the two imply each other, differ in illocutionary load. Since the former prescribes and the latter describes, one might argue, the religious affections that each seeks to evoke are in the first instance different—loyalty or commitment in the one case, trust or gratitude in the other. I will not attempt to pursue this matter here, since my principal intent is to clarify the logic of the comparative philosophy of religion.

In calling the question that religious activity explicitly asks and answers the most general moral question, I should underscore that this is the question of human authenticity as such and, therefore, a transcendental question. On another use of the term, *moral* is limited to questions about more or less particular purposes or actions in which one's understanding of human authenticity as such is expressed. I do not deny but, rather, insist that every human activity asks and answers not only the most general moral question but also another moral question to which the more limited use of the term *moral* refers.

20. Cf. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1967), 175–77.

21. It should be noted that comparison in philosophy of religion includes an assessment of religions with respect to the function of religion. Given that religious activities ask and answer the comprehensive question explicitly and *decisively*, the function of religion is to cultivate in the lives of religious adherents authentic understandings of human activity as such. One might say that religious representations claim to be not only adequate to the content of authentic human activity as such but also religiously fitting. That a religion is fitting is, one should note, in some respects a matter particular to historical time and place. One might hold, for instance, that both Buddhism and Judaism represent the valid answer to the comprehensive question, each in its own set of concepts and symbols, and also properly conclude that one or the other is not fitting in some specified historical circumstances. Because it makes reference to specific historical circumstances, this conclusion cannot be validated by philosophy alone. But the function of religion generally is implied by the character of human activity as such, and, therefore, there must be general characteristics of a fitting religion. Since any religion claims to exemplify these general characteristics, philosophy of religion includes critical reflection on these claims and, insofar, on such matters as sacred texts, myth, ritual, and religious associational patterns. Here, too, philosophy of religion is distinguished from other forms of philosophy by explicit discussion with its subject activities, precisely because a religion includes the claim that its answer to the comprehensive question is fitting to the function of religion.

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In addition to whatever other inadequacies it includes, the present essay suffers from the fact that it is not an explicit discussion with any religion. Since I have said that a clarification of philosophy of religion is itself a task within philosophy of religion, the claim that this form of philosophy is comparative in the special sense that I have identified implies that the conclusions of this essay are properly subject to explicit discussion with the material claims of diverse religions. The absence of this discussion is one reason why I have titled this essay "A Foreword to Comparative Philosophy of Religion."

22. I do not mean to say that either interreligious dialogue or comparative philosophy of religion occurs only when individuals are actually having a discussion with each other. I speak of "discussion" or "dialogue" in a general sense, so that they mean any attempt explicitly to understand the understandings of other individuals, even if those other individuals are not currently present. Actual discussion or dialogue is, we may say, the mutual public expression of the dialogue that each individual may pursue privately. Interreligious dialogue, then, means any attempt by a religious adherent explicitly to understand the similarities and differences between or among religions in her or his own religious terms. Accordingly, I do not mean to confine either interreligious dialogue or comparative philosophy of religion to religions that currently have adherents.

23. This last qualifying phrase intends to acknowledge that *theology* is often used to mean not only reflection that seeks to validate the answer identifying a particular religion. On this broader meaning, theology as a form of critical reflection also includes the relevant hermeneutical question—What is the answer identifying a particular religion?—and, perhaps, relevant practical questions—How should this answer be expressed in particular purposes?

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