FROM ONTOLOGY TO SEMANTICS: A COMMENTARY ON JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER'S *AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS*

DA ONTOLOGIA À SEMÂNTICA: UM COMENTÁRIO SOBRE *AFRO-BRAZILIAN RELIGIONS* DE JOSÉ EDUARDO PORCHER

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INTRODUCTION

José Eduardo Porcher (2025, p. 1) begins with Kevin Schilbrack's claim (2014) that philosophy of religion (PoR) is narrow, intellectualist, and insular. To be less narrow, PoR should take account of a broader range of religions, most notably, beyond Christianity. To be less intellectualist, it should take account of both a broader range of religious phenomena, beyond beliefs, and a broader range of sources, beyond texts. To be less insular, it should take greater account of PoR's relations to other areas of philosophy and to other disciplines. Porcher models all three dimensions of extension by using "Afro-Brazilian traditions as examples to highlight the limited reach of the philosophy of religion" (2025, p. 62). This leads him to focus on myth/narrative and practices/embodiment, to draw on ethnographic fieldwork, to engage with the study of religion and anthropology. The book is very successful in making a case for the desirability of this polyvalent expansion of PoR, because it goes beyond making a recommendation to modeling a process. It does the work and shows its value.

We focus here on one aspect of the book, which places PoR in dialogue with other areas of philosophy. Porcher discusses ontological issues in the book's fourth section, "Objects, Ontology, and Personhood." Porcher's analysis can be pushed further by transposing the discussion to the register of semantic theory. We argue that the holistic, interpretationist position developed by Donald Davidson helps us make better sense of what we find in Afro-Brazilian religions.[1]

1 There is no agreed-upon label for Davidson's position. Mölder (2022) calls it "interpretivism," but this emphasizes Davidson's theory of mind, not his semantics, and that term is already used for a sociological metatheory. Schilbrack (2014) introduced "interpretationism," which we use in our joint work.

THE ONTOLOGICAL HYBRIDIZATION OF OBJECTS, ORIXÁS, AND PERSONS

For Porcher, the unusual status of ritual objects in Afro-Brazilian religions serves as a test case for PoR:

> Upon first encountering the universe of Candomblé, we are quickly drawn to its diverse array of objects, be they necklaces, musical instruments, clay artifacts, straw, or porcelain vessels. Each element intimates a relationship to a particular *orixá*, woven into a complex system organizing the cosmos. … Working out the cognitive and ontological implications of sacred objects in Candomblé is an essential task for anyone looking to locate the meaning of the materialized ritual practices of this tradition. (2025, p. 34)

The making of these ritual objects involves "refining and actualizing preexisting potentialities":

> Making, in Candomblé, should be thought of less as creation and more as a process of composition and individuation of a series of forces that already exist excessively in the world. … After leaving the workshop, the *orixá* tool proceeds to a *terreiro*, where it undergoes a transformational process alongside other elements, culminating in the creation of the seat or settlement that constitutes the material manifestation of the deity. Once fashioned, it integrates with the individual, extending their energetic and bodily connection to the complex relationship between the initiate and their *orixá*. (2025, p. 39).

These are unusual objects—challenging to make sense of philosophically—because "they not only stand for, but somehow mesh with persons and deities" (2025, p. 33). Porcher frames the "ontological dynamics" of this situation as a sort of "ontological hybridization between objects, [ritual participants'] bodies, and *orixás*" (2025, pp. 33, 34, see 43). In the process of making, new entities—agentic ones at that—are thought to be brought into being, ones forged but distinct from preexisting elements that span multiple ontological categories.

There is an ambiguity here between ontology as philosophical theory and as ethnographic finding—between scholars' analytic framings and practitioners' lived ontologies of Afro-Brazilian religions. If we adopt an analytical frame that posits that these ritual objects *exist as real agents*—perhaps because "*axé* exists in surplus within a 'virtual' realm, actualized through ritual practice: each entity crystallizes or coalesces as a result of *axé*'s modulating flow" (2025, p. 38)—then talk of ontological hybridization leans toward presupposing a representational epistemology. In representational terms, these material objects are both part of and stand for those newly forged beings. One knows their meaning in ritual when one knows what they represent in the ritual. In other words, what they mean and what they represent are inexorably twinned. That view has potentially problematic ethnographic implications: if truth and meaning are tethered to representational word-world correspondences, then the non-empirical status of *orixás*, spirits, *axé*, and other "things" renders their referents unverifiable and whatever mental states they may have as agents inaccessible: we can neither confirm nor falsify claims about them, including claims about their role in ritual.

Such discourses—ethical, aesthetic, religious, etc.—are usually seen as forcing either (1) a logical-positivist dismissal of the language as meaningless, because devoid of reference, or (2) a reductionist retranslation in which insiders are mistaken about their own referents, because their language actually points to empirical phenomena like social relations, brain states, emotional dispositions, collective effervescence, or psychosomatic processes.

If, on the other hand, we focus on what practitioners say and do, as ethnographic material, then the view that objects are agents constitutes evidence to be interpreted. This is Porcher's position, though that could be clearer. When he suggests that ritual objects "stand for... persons and deities" (2025, p. 33), he underlines the stance of practitioners, not an imposed set of epistemological representational assumptions.

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Representational assumptions, although are usually (and frustratingly) taken for granted, are not forced in the interpretation of Afro-Brazilian discourse and practices. There are other views. Most notably, Davidson's ideas have been having significant impact on the study of religion for that past three decades (e.g., Penner, 1994, 1995; Godlove, 1989, 2014; Frankenberry and Penner, 1999; Frankenberry, 2002, 2014; Schilbrack, 2002, 2013; Engler and Gardiner, 2010a, 2010b; Jensen, 2011; Levy, 2012, 2022; Gardiner, 2016; Gardiner and Engler, 2018, 2022). Porcher's discussion of Afro-Brazilian religions resonates with this work, if we shift from ontology and epistemology to semantics. This involves rejecting a representational view of meaning in favor of an interpretational view of meaning.

For Davidson, the meaning of "meaning" is not a function of relations between words and their referents but a placeholder for the contingent results of acts of interpretation. Meaning is what we grasp when our process of interpreting others reaches what we judge to be sufficient pragmatic success. Truth-conditions serve as tools for tracking what speakers hold true, rather than as metaphysical commitments about what makes statements true. Meanings reside not in individual words but in an open-ended network of semantic connections (holism). We interpret by triangulating our own knowledge as interpreters, the speech and actions of our interlocutors, and shared background contexts. Though Davidson's earlier work emphasized a shared natural world, his later discussions began to incorporate shared cultural backgrounds, an insight that extends naturally to ritual systems (Engler and Gardiner, 2025).

Semantic content emerges from successful communicative interaction, not from pre-existing representations or conventions. Understanding another consists in constructing a passing theory that renders their intentional behavior maximally explicable. Crucially, this applies equally to linguistic utterances and to actions: both are intentional activities for which we postulate contextualized beliefs, desires, and intentions in order to make sense of them. Texts and rituals thus stand on the same footing. In Afro-Brazilian religions, for example a text-centric analysis and a representational semantics would struggle to capture how a medium's trance embodies an entity's agency. By contrast, a Davidsonian approach begins with observable behaviors—vocalizations,

movements, manipulation of artifacts —and builds passing theories that attribute propositional attitudes to participants and, where warranted, to the spirits themselves. Ontology follows semantics: we posit spirits as intentional agents only insofar as this best explains the patterned, purposeful actions we interpret. The result is a more inclusive, less scripturally biased analysis that respects the full communicative repertoire of a given religious tradition.

From a Davidsonian perspective, we cannot simply assert that Afro-Brazilian ritual objects are agents. Rather, we can investigate the conditions under which certain beliefs, myths, and rituals formalize a certain sort of intentional stance toward these objects. This leads, as Porcher discusses, to an empirical finding that participants' stance toward objects is closely related to an altered intentional stance toward their own agency. Understanding the agency of ritual objects in Afro-Brazilian religions is a matter of interpreting participants as they talk about and act in relation to those objects.

For example, Porcher presents a fascinating account of the complex task faced by an artisan who accepts a commission to produce a specific ritual object:

> The process of crafting a tool is influenced by the *orixá*'s desires regarding the material object, ensuring it will serve as a suitable seat or settlement for the deity. ... Rather than a conventional project, the [client's] drawing represented Zé Diabo's [the artist's] interaction with Dona Dalva's [the client's] Exu, allowing him to perceive the *orixá*'s forms and proportions through a dynamic dialogue. This communication accounted for the desires of the *orixá* as well as the characteristics and potential transformations of the iron itself. (2025, p. 36–37).

The commission for crafting this ritual object involves multiple intentional agents with overlapping and intersecting purposes. It is not simply "to make an iron tool for Exu" (as if Exu were an absent patron). Rather, the commission emerges through the communicative encounter between craftsman (Zé Diabo), the spiritual entity (Exu), the client (Dona Dalva), and the material (iron itself, with its potential for transformation). The craftsman succeeds when his interpretation converges with what makes the object function effectively in subsequent ritual use: that is the pragmatic test of interpretive success. Teasing out distinct ontological aspects of this complex transaction seems unnecessarily complex and speculative. An interpretive approach traces semantic associations where they lead, with no ontological commitments required.

Another example underlines how the ritual context of initiation forges new semantic associations, which allow for an altered interpretive stance toward the *orixá*, a set of ritual objects, and the initiate themself:

> Initiates who witness the systematic association of various objects and substances with the manipulation of their head and body ... are inclined to perceive these objects as their 'external organs'... The fact that stones or pieces of iron do not offer the same opportunities for action to those who are not acquainted with (or do not abide by) their meanings in

> Afro-Brazilian religious rituals suggests a distinction between an object's sensorimotor availability ... and those learned through shared expectations, constraining their use.... (2025, p. 43)

Engler emailed Porcher to ask for clarity on this passage, and he responded as follows: "The initiates are not merely witnessing others being treated similarly; they are learning the meaning of gestures and attitudes by observing and participating in the same patterns of response." This is consistent with the anthropological work of Tanya Luhrmann and Arnauld Halloy, who explore learned convergence of interpretations as a feature of medium-term ritual experience (Luhrmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted, 2010; Halloy, 2015).

More to the point, Porcher's view is implicitly Davidsonian. An interpretationist stance not only provides a philosophical perspective from which to analyze Candomblé's *bori* ritual, it very usefully describes the experience of initiates, as they change their interpretational stance regarding (i) the *orixá*, (ii) the composite object that is ritually identified with that entity, and (iii) their own agency and identity. This semantic shift occurs not through explicit instruction but through the iterative construction of passing theories, as they adjust their interpretion of ritual actions as coherent expressions of shared propositional attitudes. Meaning accrues through the contingent, pragmatic success of interpreting ritual behavior, not as grounded in doctrinal anchors or prior conventions.

Further support for the value of an interpretationist perspective comes from the fact that it avoids the tension noted above between scholars' analytic framings and practitioners' lived ontologies of Afro-Brazilian religions—keeping in mind that Davidsonian semantic theory itself must be assessed not as succeeding or failing to correspond to actual methods used by human beings to interpret each other (true or false), but as pragmatically successful in specific contexts. If meaning is seen in interpretationist term, then there can be no radical distinction between types or locations of meaning.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we agree with Porcher, and we suggest the value of framing his arguments more consistently in terms of interpretationist semantic theory. We read Porcher as an ally of the group of scholars who study religions from a Davidsonian perspective. Our explicit argument here is that his analysis is consistent with that perspective at selected points. If space allowed, we would support our view that we find no points at which his analyses stand in significant tension with an interpretationist perspective. More broadly, we respectfully suggest that PoR would do well to work more with semantic theory. Our goal here, like Porcher's, is to argue for the value of expanding PoR. An interpretationist perspective has the potential to help make it less narrow, intellectualist, and insular.

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