

Dorothea Erbele-Küster

The Importance of Culture in Cognition: A Response to Annelie Rothe-Wulf Informed by Philology and Intercultural Hermeneutics

Abstract: “The importance of culture in cognition” captures the shared argument in a nutshell. Intercultural hermeneutics may provide a general frame of reference for dealing with differences and similarities. This case study from Tonga, a state that comprises approximately 170 islands in the Pacific Ocean, is interesting for Hebrew Bible scholarship on another level as in the past two decades a new “sea of readings” has established biblical criticism from an Islander perspective. This response highlights three main insights from the cross-fertilization of cultural anthropology, cognitive psychology, and Old Testament anthropological studies that relate to considerations of embodiment, the questioning of our search of universal categories, and the dualistic concepts that mirror anthropocentric Western views.

„The importance of culture in cognition“ bringt das gemeinsame Argument auf den Punkt. Die interkulturelle Hermeneutik kann einen allgemeinen Bezugsrahmen für den Umgang mit Unterschieden und Gemeinsamkeiten bieten. Die Fallstudie aus Tonga, das etwa 170 Inseln im Pazifischen Ozean umfasst, ist für die Erforschung der Hebräischen Bibel auf einer anderen Ebene interessant, da in den letzten zwei Jahrzehnten ein neues “Meer von Lesarten” entstanden ist, das die Bibelkritik aus der Sicht der Inselbewohner betrachtet. Meine Antwort hebt vor allem drei Erkenntnisse hervor, die sich aus einer gegenseitigen Befruchtung von Kulturanthropologie, kognitiver Psychologie und alttestamentlichen anthropologischen Studien ergeben: die Berücksichtigung der Verkörperung, die Infragestellung unserer Suche nach universellen Kategorien und die dualistischen Konzepte, die anthropozentrische westliche Ansichten widerspiegeln.

“The importance of culture in cognition” – this part of the title by Annelie Rothe-Wulf captures her argument in a nutshell. She argues convincingly for considering the cultural impacts in cognition as she combines her insights from two different fields: cognitive psychology and cultural anthropology. Or to put it differently, she is able to counter the search for universal categories in cognitive psychology by her fieldwork. Cultural anthropology serves as a kentledge, a stabilizing weight, which helps cognitive psychological investigations not to float

away. It is her twofold expertise and her careful integration of both approaches which is stimulating. We have this stress on cultural anthropology in common. In what follows I try to navigate through the insights of the informed article as an outsider, as somebody trained in philology, particularly concerning the study of the Hebrew Bible and indebted to cultural anthropology and intercultural hermeneutics.

I would like to respond to the paper in two different ways.¹ The contribution by Annelie Rothe-Wulf tries on a methodological level mainly to adjust the relation between cultural and universal categories. This shall be my starting point. In a second step I shall highlight insights from my field and what I have learnt from the paper, especially the combination of cultural anthropology and cognitive psychology. From the very outset she is skeptical whether cognitive psychology may give insights to the study of ancient cultures. And indeed, alongside with her I would underline that the suggestion that “cognition is universal and, thus, independent of culture and language” is disputable, as her fieldwork shows us. Still, the very fact of recognizing the impact of culture may be helpful. Intercultural hermeneutics may provide a general frame of reference to deal with differences and similarities. The case study from Tonga, comprising approximately 170 islands in the Pacific Ocean, is interesting on another level for Hebrew Bible scholarship as in the past two decades a new “sea of readings” has been established biblical criticism from an Islander perspective.²

Finally, a presupposition of my argument is that our worldview is shaped by language.³ I would like to underline this by adding that for example French does not have an equivalent to “mind”. Or to put it from within the French-speaking perspective: “L’anglais dispose de trois mots *mind*, *soul*, *spirit* pour dire ‘esprit’ ou ‘âme’, là où le français n’en a que deux.”⁴ The loosely connected group of Old Testament scholars on the “Plattform für Alttestamentliche Anthropologie der Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft für Theologie” who have come together for many than a decade are deeply rooted in the German-speaking discourse. The organizers Andreas Wagner und Jürgen van Oorschot of this conference provided us

1 The first draft of the response has been based on the oral presentation given at the conference.

2 Jione Havea (ed.), *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific* (Semeia Studies 90), Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018. Since 2009 there has been a session group on “Islands, Islanders, and Bible” (renamed in 2012 as “Islands, Islanders, and scriptures”) at the annual meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL), the largest society in the field of biblical scholarship.

3 See Meir Malul, *Knowledge, Control and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview*, Tel Aviv: Archaeological Centre, 2002, 67–69 (esp. remarks on cognitive anthropology).

4 Etienne Balibar, Ame, Esprit, in: Cassin, Barbara (ed.), *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Paris: Seuil, 2004, 65–83, 67.

with a new inspiring venue, Monte Verita, and a new way of approaching things in a new language game (english) in an interdisciplinary setting.

Why Are We so Fond of Universal Categories?

The general observation that “questions of cultural diversity or variability in cognition are barely considered in usual cognitive research programs or even regarded as inadequate for the study of human behavior” is an important one and holds true for other disciplines likewise.

The abstract I have received before the conference ended on an optimistic note even for a scholar dealing with ancient scriptures and contexts who has no recourse to empirical studies. It stated: “Research that is conducted in diverse cultural settings and that identifies cognitive mechanisms as universally present in humans provides insight into the cognitive capabilities that might have already evolved in early modern humans.” Whereas the paper starts on a skeptical note: Even though “cognitive psychology is predominantly interested in universal patterns of human perception” it might not offer insights for ancient cultures, for my field of Old Testament Studies.

Cognitive psychologists tend to schematize and tell us that our cognitive organ is constructed according to a universal scheme and functions identically. This remark and the method Rothe-Wulf has followed – a cultural and ethnological approach, and the data she has collected in her fieldwork – stress the cultural specificity.

This brings me to my first general question: How do both observations relate to each other? Do they have to be conflicting? Do they vary depending on the group one addresses? Does the approach have a message for both, to universal cognitive psychologist and to cultural anthropologists? It seems to me that the answer to the latter is yes, as the paper is informed by both disciplines. These questions could be summed up in a single one: What is the interest of universal categories? In intercultural hermeneutics the aim is to illuminate differences and similarities alike. This goes along with providing a space for encounter.

Cross-Fertilizations: Connecting Perspectives from Cultural Anthropology, Cognitive Psychology and Old Testament Anthropological Studies

The vocal cords of the speaker perform the sound. They have undergone a specific training and cultural practices.

Die allgemeine Fähigkeit zur Sprache ist angeboren.[...] Die allgemeine Sprachfähigkeit hat nicht zur Herausbildung einer einheitlichen Sprache, sondern zur Entwicklung einer Vielzahl von Sprachen geführt. Zwar ist die Fähigkeit überhaupt Wörter, syntaktische Konstruktionen und Sätze bilden zu können, im menschlichen Körper angelegt und vererbbar, doch erklärt sie nicht die Vielfalt der Wörter oder grammatikalischen Regeln der einzelnen Sprachen. Der Erwerb einer Sprache muss rechtzeitig erfolgen, sonst verkümmert die Anlage dazu für immer. [...] Sprache wurzelt in einer unmittelbaren Bewegung des menschlichen Körpers, in der Artikulation der Stimmwerkzeuge.⁵

Language and the process of forming thought is rooted in the body in this very basic sense. This is reflected likewise in expressions used in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew word *hgh* used for uttering is an onomatopoeic verb reflecting the sound of moaning turtledoves (Isaiah 38:14) or a lion groaning over its prey (Isaiah 31:4; 59:11). This action is linked to different organs such as the tongue, the mouth, the heart and sometimes just to the unspecific inner. The creative and receptive mind is conceived as an audible moaning process as Psalm 1:2 expresses: to study the Torah is to groan and murmur. Or as Proverbs 24:2 puts it: The heart/ the mind (*lev*) of bad people is preoccupied with destruction. This is what the lips utter. The movement in the mind is translated into the movement of the lips. In a similar vein this is expressed in Psalm 49:4 “My mouth is about to speak wisdom; my heart’s thoughts (groaning) will give understanding”. Conceiving thoughts goes along with formulating them aloud. The Hebrew mind engages or encompasses different bodily regions and sensory perceptions. What we call “mind” seems to take place according to the conceptions of the Hebrew Bible in the heart, in the mouth and on the tongue. These insights from recent scholarship serve in an exemplary way to indicate how we could connect perspectives from cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology and philology in Hebrew Bible studies.

The investigation of the semantic field serves as the basis for understanding cognitive processes. We live by conceptual frameworks: the basic cognitive con-

5 Christoph Wulf, *Anthropologie. Geschichte – Kultur – Philosophie*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag 2004, 153f.

structions by which we organize our perception of reality. Linguistic analysis has to take into consideration the specific cultural notion, for example, of emotions or the body concepts in the Hebrew Bible. Often this was done under the category of metaphorical language. Recent studies investigated the sensory perceptions in the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Linguistic and philological analysis took into consideration the specific cultural notion of the senses in the Hebrew Bible, as well as its presupposition that sensory experiences transmit embodied knowledge since the sensory organs play a major role in acquiring insight. “The Cognitive Foundation of Biblical Metaphors” of sensory perceptions is the subtitle of Nicole Tilford’s recent study “Sensing world, sensing wisdom”⁷. She looks for the cultural specificity of cognition. One example she, along with others, underlines is that cognition is conceived as eating and tasting. Hence the Hebrew notion of the senses is embodied. Therefore, the modern binary notions of body and reason/mind or sensation and cognition are blurred. The sense of tasting links bodily and cognitive functions. Perception for the sake of knowledge is hence embodied.⁸ These studies on emotions and senses move beyond dualistic categories and simplifications. This brings me to a general question which runs through the discussions on the conference: Do these culturally specific linguistic metaphors (as some call them) reflect differences 1) in perception, 2) in cognition or 3) are they just different ways of expressing? Can we draw from linguistic expressions insights into the mind? I would guess that the thick description of the ethnological data allows further conclusions for the cognitive concepts.

Questioning our (Dualistic) Categories

Methodological questions have to be raised concerning the categories we apply in our research: What happens once one starts identifying clusters, as in the case of the 95 items that the Tongans had to pile?⁹ And what happens when cultural anthropologists ask others to cluster? What happens in our clustering? Rothe-

⁶ Cf. Annette Schellenberg / Thomas Krüger (eds.), *Sounding Sensory Profiles in Ancient Near East*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019.

⁷ Nicole L. Tilford, *Sensing World, Sensing Wisdom: The Cognitive Foundation of Biblical Metaphors*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2017; cf. Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 545, New York: T&T Clark, 2012.

⁸ Cf. Dorothea Erbele-Küster, *Senses Lost in Paradise? On the Interrelatedness of Sensory and Ethical Perceptions in Genesis 2–3 and Beyond*, in: *Sounding Sensory Profiles in Ancient Near East*, 145–160.

⁹ In the presentation graphics with examples of the items and their clusterings were shown.

Wulf identifies five clusters: (I) inanimate objects and physical concepts, (II) plants and biological concepts, (III) animals living on the land, (IV) ocean-related entities and concepts, (V) concepts related to humans and social relations and (VI) supernatural beliefs and agents. The cluster IV “ocean-related entities and concepts” seems to me of special interest for highlighting the specific cultural concept of the Tongans. In order to illuminate this cluster, I would like to add some remarks from a Tongan perspective. Jiona Havea, the leading scholar in biblical criticism from an Islander perspective distinguishes saltwater and freshwater – both springing from the underworld.

“The sea is our border, our link, our warehouse (as expressed in the Tuvaluan *fale-o-ika*, ‘household of fish’), our livelihood, our home, our destiny (*mate’anga*, ‘to-die-for’) and our burial ground. In other words, for saltwater Islanders, the sea is our past, present and future.”¹⁰

The element water characterizes even the way of doing Islanders’ criticism as “fluid. Watery. Oceanic. Sea-nic. Islandic.”¹¹ The sea (*moana*) serves hence as a vast overarching concept which structures language, mind and the way of living. Therefore, I would like to question the structuring along the dimension of non-living vs. living and the dimension of non-human vs. human as the Tongans obviously pile in the “cluster of ocean-related entities” all of them.

Listening to the examples from the Tongans that Rothe-Wulf shared with us I realize once again our anthropocentric stance in analyzing the material in the Hebrew Bible. So-called earth readings and the Islander readings make us aware of our anthropocentric views.¹² This may be a pitfall in scholarship focusing on anthropology and likewise result from a general Western eclipse of non-human perspectives. In the Hebrew Bible we may find so-called supernatural concepts and beliefs in non-living things. God is addressed in a Psalm prayer as a rock (Psalm 18:1). In describing the deity categories of animate and inanimate become intermingled in a phrase like: “you have forgotten the rock who has begotten you” (Deuteronomy 32:18). God is conceived as a rock and women giving birth.

The concluding remarks on the Tongan conceptions read that “the domain clusters were neither clearly distinct from another nor were they invariant to the

¹⁰ Jiona Havea, *Islander Criticism: Waters, Ways, Worries*, in: Jiona Havea (ed.), *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific* (Semeia Studies 90), Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018, 1–20, 9.

¹¹ Havea, *Islander Criticism*, 2.

¹² Cf. Ellen Davis, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; Musa Dube, ‘And God saw it was Very Good’: An Earth-friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1, *Black Theology* 13/2009, 230–246.

cultural context". Overviewing the material provided, I am asking myself why is Rothe-Wulf so hesitant in stressing the role of the contextual, and the importance of language and culture in it. Intercultural hermeneutics provides us with a framework for an encounter of different cultural contexts. It pushes us to listen to so-called native, insider, Islander perspectives. Let me turn the image used in the introduction upside down where I stated that cultural anthropology may serve as a stabilizing weight. Cultural anthropology with an intercultural and postcolonial twist and informed by an Islander perspective serves as a float which helps cognitive psychological investigations not to be drowned.

Annelie Rothe-Wulf moved between contextual and universal anthropological categories. I would like to thank her for this and for providing insights into different cultural systems of perceptions. Indeed, her approach "might even inspire scholars working with historical texts or documents".

Bibliography

- Avrahami, Yael, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS 545, New York: T&T Clark, 2012.
- Balibar, Etienne, Ame, Esprit, in: Cassin, Barabara (ed.), *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, Paris: Seuil, 2004, 65–83.
- Davis, Ellen, *Scripture, Culture and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Dube, Musa, 'And God saw it was Very Good': An Earth-friendly Theatrical Reading of Genesis 1, *Black Theology* 13/2009, 230–246.
- Erbele-Küster, Dorothea, Senses Lost in Paradise? On the Interrelatedness of Sensory and Ethical Perceptions in Genesis 2–3 and Beyond, in: Annette Schellenberg/Thomas Krüger (eds.), *Sounding Sensory Profiles in Ancient Near East*, 145–160.
- Havea, Jione, Islander Criticism: Waters, Ways, Worries, in: Jione Havea (ed.), *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific* (Semeia Studies 90), Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018, 1–20.
- Havea, Jione (ed.), *Sea of Readings: The Bible in the South Pacific* (Semeia Studies 90), Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2018.
- Malul, Meir, *Knowledge, Control and Sex: Studies in Biblical Thought, Culture and Worldview*, Tel Aviv: Archaeological Centre, 2002.
- Schellenberg, Annette / Krüger, Thomas (eds.), *Sounding Sensory Profiles in Ancient Near East*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019.
- Tilford, Nicole L., *Sensing World, Sensing Wisdom: The Cognitive Foundation of Biblical Metaphors*, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2017.
- Wulf, Christoph, *Anthropologie. Geschichte – Kultur – Philosophie*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag 2004.

