

METAMODERNISM AND THE FUTURE OF THEORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH  
JASON ĀNANDA JOSEPHSON STORM

**SUMMARY.** This interview with Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm was conducted in Vilnius in June 2025 during the 10th Biennial Conference of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism (ESSWE10). He is a Professor of Religion and the Chair of Science & Technology Studies at Williams College, and the author of *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (2012), *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (2017), *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory* (2021), and *The Genealogy of Genealogy: Nietzsche, Foucault, and the Coils of Critical History* (forthcoming 2026), all published by the University of Chicago Press. This conversation centers on the articulation of metamodernism as a response to the limits of postmodernism and the wider sense of theoretical fatigue in the human and social sciences. Topics addressed include conceptual and contextual grounding of metamodernism, its critical engagement with key postmodern problems, and reflections on its future development. What follows is an edited transcript, revised for clarity and readability while preserving the voice and structure of the original exchange.

**KEYWORDS:** metamodernism, postmodernism, critical theory, philosophy of science, human and social sciences.

## METAMODERNISM: CONCEPT, CONTEXT, CRITIQUE

**Augustas:** Let us begin with the term itself: metamodernism. You articulate metamodernism as a philosophical stance that moves beyond both modernist essentialism and postmodernist skepticism. What's the history behind metamodernism?

**Jason:** I came to the term *metamodernism* quite late in the process of writing the book. This wasn't a project that started with an idea I knew would be called metamodernism. Instead, what I was trying to do was to work through – and beyond – a

set of philosophical impasses I had encountered first in graduate school and later as a scholar.

These issues stemmed largely from what we might call *postmodern philosophy*. Initially, I found theoretical movements, such as deconstruction or post-structuralism, and specific figures like Deleuze, Derrida, and Foucault, incredibly inspiring. In fact, I was quite a postmodernist fanboy. I would go out of my way – almost like on a pilgrimage – whenever a famous thinker associated with one of those philosophical movements was giving a talk.

But over time, I found it increasingly limited in certain ways. I got the sense that postmodernism was delivering diminishing returns. My aim wasn't to reject or overturn it, but to ask: *What comes next? What's the next movement of thought?* How can we continue thinking productively about concepts like language, knowledge, and power?

I was looking for something else, but I didn't find a ready-made movement that addressed the concerns I was grappling with in my work. If one had existed, I probably would have jumped on it. Instead, I kept reading various responses to postmodernism. Some came from analytic philosophers who laughed about it, though their critiques sometimes contained valuable insights. Others included recent approaches like new materialism, speculative realism, and other so-called descendant movements of postmodernism. But none of them were really doing the kind of intellectual work I was looking for.

So, I began writing the book as a way to work through postmodernism on its own terms – to figure out what could be recouped and what might need to be left behind. The idea of metamodernism emerged only after I finished the first draft.

When I started pitching the manuscript – sharing it with colleagues and sending it to the press – people kept asking me: *What is this? What movement are you part of?* At the time, I didn't have an answer. However, reflecting on those questions reminded me of something I'd read by Nigerian art historian Moyo Okediji, who used the term “metamodern” in his work. To quote directly: “[The] metamodern [is an] extension of and challenge to modernism and post-modernism.”<sup>1</sup> And then I realized: *This is exactly what I've been trying to do in the book.* That's when I began to connect my work more consciously to the emerging discourse around metamodernism.

When I looked around, I found others using the term in ways that are not incompatible with my own project. These were people taking the limitations of postmodernism seriously – not dismissing it, but not retreating to a reactionary

<sup>1</sup> Harris, Michael, and Moyo Okediji. *Transatlantic Dialogue: Contemporary Art in and out of Africa*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999, 49.

revival of “modernity” or the Enlightenment either. Instead, they were trying to think through and beyond postmodernism, identifying shifts in philosophy, art, politics, or elsewhere.

In that sense, I came to metamodernism toward the end of writing the book, but I’ve since been delighted to discover others – my fellow *metamodernistas* – doing fascinating and often allied work. That said, I don’t claim to speak for metamodernism as a whole. I didn’t begin by analyzing a movement called metamodernism; I began by trying to move through and beyond what we might call postmodernism in philosophy.

**Augustas:** Talking about postmodern philosophy, the original title of your book was initially going to be *Absolute Disruption: Theory after Postmodernism*. Although you moved away from that title, what does it reveal about the intentions of metamodernism itself? Particularly, what is it that metamodernism seeks to disrupt so radically?

**Jason:** The original idea of *Absolute Disruption* came from a line in Hegel, though there’s also a parallel phrase in the work of the Japanese philosopher Tanabe Hajime (田邊元). Interestingly, Tanabe was reading Hegel closely, so the connection isn’t accidental. Both use a phrase that could be translated as “absolute disruption.”<sup>2</sup> What struck me about this phrase – particularly in Hegel – was the idea of the *negation of the negation*.

To give some context: during the period when I was figuring out how to move beyond postmodernism, I was also deeply engaged with the Frankfurt School and critical theory, where the shadow of Hegelian dialectics looms large. A friend and I decided to work through Hegel’s *Science of Logic* together, reading both the original German and two English translations. It’s a notoriously abstract and challenging text, but slowly working through it helped me crystallize something.

The negation of the negation perfectly captured what I was trying to do with postmodernism itself: to negate its core negativities. After all, much of what we call postmodernism is already a kind of negation of prior categories – *post*-modernism, *de*-construction, *anti*-essentialism. Just as postmodernism defines itself by negating modernism, I wanted to think about how metamodernism recaptures Hegel’s idea of the negation of the negation. The title “*Absolute Disruption*” became a catchy way to express that.

<sup>2</sup> Tanabe Hajime, *Zangedō to shite no setsugaku*: “Once autonomous reason has failed...philosophy falls into a crisis from which there is no escape: the absolute disruption of being torn to pieces by antinomies and cast into the pit of contradictions.” Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “[Spirit] obtains its truth only when, in its absolute disruption, it finds itself.”

But ultimately, I realized it was misleading. In Hegel, absolute disruption is synonymous with the negation of the negation. Yet the phrase left people with the impression that my project was about completely leveling the field – that nothing could emerge from it. What I actually meant was closer to what Hegel describes: an initial skeptical negation, from which one then tries to move forward.

As the project developed, I think it gradually became less Hegelian. I still find Hegel's dialectic a powerful tool for thinking, though I wouldn't necessarily call myself a Hegelian. In the end, *Absolute Disruption* was a phrase that originally evoked that Hegelian layer for me, but it turned out to be a bit misleading as a book title. So, I set it aside – though I've kept it as the name of my blog.<sup>3</sup>

**Augustas:** For clarification, it is also important to note that the term metamodernism has circulated in academia for some time, primarily through the work of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker. Since they were among the first to popularize the term, many readers might assume your metamodernism belongs to the same tradition. In their account, the prefix “meta-” refers primarily to Plato's *metaxy* – a movement between opposite poles, hence the emphasis on oscillation. In your version, what role does the prefix “meta-” play, and how does that reflect a different philosophical orientation?

**Jason:** I'll return to Moyo Okediji, who used the term metamodernism even before Vermeulen and van den Akker. And I want to be clear: I'm not criticizing their work. They were important in drawing attention to cultural and aesthetic movements since the advent of postmodernism.

That said, I use the prefix *meta-* in a different sense – what I take to be the etymological sense that Moyo was also drawing on. *Meta-* here means “beyond” or “past”, but unlike *post-*, it also carries a second-order and reflexive quality. When I talk about metamodernism, I'm emphasizing the *meta*, not the *modern*. I'm thinking of it as a second-order, self-referential relationship to modernism and postmodernism. For instance, it's not only a matter of *what* counts as modern but also *how* the term “modern” has been used. That's where the second-order reflexivity of *meta-* comes into play. I diverge from the oscillationist account of metamodernism as it is difficult to falsify. I prefer to think about *meta-* in dialectical rather than oscillationist terms.

But for people who are allergic to jargon, I sometimes describe my project as “no-bullshit philosophy.” I'm drawing here on Harry Frankfurt's<sup>4</sup> well-known concept: the bullshitter isn't lying but is indifferent to truth. And a lot of trendy aca-

<sup>3</sup> Internet access <https://absolute-disruption.com/>.

<sup>4</sup> Frankfurt, Harry G. *On Bullshit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

demic work, in my view, is a kind of bullshitting – claims that sound impressive but aren't invested in whether they're true, accurate, or valuable, except insofar as they help a scholar's career. For example, a scholar will come up with a neologism – say, *ontotheogenesis* (which I don't think is anyone's term) – and toss it out because it sounds cool and then use it as a core component of an argument. But if you press too hard on them, they often collapse.

What I wanted to do was the opposite: *to make arguments that could stand on their own*. Even if I'm wrong about, say, my interpretation of Derrida, I want these claims to depend minimally on jargon. I try to use technical terms only when necessary, and when I do, I try to clarify what these terms mean. Ultimately, I want you to be able to tell me when I'm wrong. As a result, with the metamodernism project, I'm trying to make serious claims about epistemology, philosophy of language, social ontology, realism, and the relationship between values – claims that could be useful across disciplines, regardless of what *-ism* gets slapped onto them.

On that note, when the book was translated into Spanish, the publisher asked if I wanted to change the title. I did. In Spanish, it became *The Future of Theory: A Metamodernist Manifesto*.<sup>5</sup> I think that captures the spirit a bit better, because I've always been slightly uncomfortable about the term metamodernism. Anytime an “-ism” is attached, it naturally raises an eyebrow. Nevertheless, I do think metamodernism has value as a kind of rallying point – for those of us trying to think through and beyond postmodernism, trying to do “no-bullshit philosophy,” trying to do theory differently. Metamodernism gives us a shared point of reference.

**Augustas:** Your work draws on a wide range of intellectual traditions – from Western philosophy to Japanese and Buddhist thought. How have these influences shaped your metamodernist framework?

**Jason:** I come from a background where my early theoretical foundations were in postcolonial theory. One of the key ideas I internalized from that engagement was a commitment not to be confined by any Eurocentric horizon of philosophical or intellectual tradition.

This is reflected in my first book, *The Invention of Religion in Japan*.<sup>6</sup> I also have formal training in both Japanese and Chinese philosophy, as well as a background in Buddhist thought. In academic teaching, I offer courses on topics like virtue ethics in East Asia and other areas of Asian philosophy. Beyond that, I've read – and continue to read – African, Indigenous, and Native American philosophical

<sup>5</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *El futuro de la teoría: Un manifiesto metamodernista*. Mutatis Mutandis Editorial, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *The Invention of Religion in Japan*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

traditions, along with several other, more eclectic sources. Altogether, these engagements have broadened the intellectual resources I can draw on and deepened the kinds of philosophical arguments I'm able to make, which I bring together in the *Metamodernism* book.

For me, there are two essential things. On the one hand, I have a long-standing engagement with Asian philosophical traditions that goes all the way back to my childhood, and I find them incredibly useful to think about. On the other hand, I'm committed to what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls a "cosmopolitan ecology of knowledges"<sup>7</sup> – the idea that many concepts have been artificially precluded or excluded from the canon of philosophy, political theory, science, or knowledge because Eurocentric presuppositions created blind spots.

This doesn't mean we abandon evaluating truth claims. There's a problematic version of this where someone might say, "Indigenous person X argued it; therefore, it must be true." Neither Santos nor I would make that claim. The point, rather, is that many perspectives have been historically excluded, especially within Western philosophy – and they deserve to be reconsidered and engaged with on the strength of their own arguments.

I would encourage anyone studying or interested in philosophy and theory to take some of these non-European traditions and thinkers seriously – *on their own terms* – and to examine them philosophically, not as a source for some kind of exoticism. This means reading them, engaging with them, questioning them, and perhaps arguing with them. I believe this is incredibly important.

**Augustas:** In the book, you write that metamodernism is for people who are sick of "Theory." I quote: "People who are tired of gratuitous namedropping, anti-authoritarian arguments from authority; shallow insights masked in obscurantism; self-loathing humans claiming to represent the agency of microbes; Americanization masquerading as diversification; and theory that is merely jargon overlaid on predetermined political judgments."<sup>8</sup> What do you think went wrong with "Theory" and why has it become a source of exhaustion rather than insight?

**Jason:** When we talk about "Theory," the term has two meanings – at least in English – and it's easy to conflate them.

On the one hand, there's *theory* with a lowercase "t" which refers to a general explanatory framework, like a scientific theory – for example, the theory of evolution, grounded in evidence and justification. On the other hand, there's "Theory"

<sup>7</sup> Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 7.

with a capital “T” (not always capitalized, but conceptually distinct). In the academy, “Theory” usually refers to what philosophy looks like outside philosophy departments.

Historically, in the Anglophone academy, philosophy – especially analytic philosophy – became highly specialized and technical. It narrowed its focus to the point where it stopped producing insights that felt useful to scholars in other fields. I don’t mean to dismiss analytic philosophy as a whole – there’s a lot of excellent work there – but as it moved deeper into technical jargon, especially under the influence of logical positivism and related movements, it became less accessible to non-philosophers.

Meanwhile, scholars in other disciplines continued to face philosophical problems: *What do words mean? How do we evaluate truth claims? How does epistemology function? How should ethics be applied to emergent problems?* And so on. As a result, they needed somewhere to go for, at least provisional, answers to these questions. As analytical philosophy became less accessible, “Theory” emerged as a key term for those kinds of philosophical resources. In this respect, “Theory” in the humanities became a kind of philosophy-for-non-philosophers, much in the way “genealogy” can be thought of as a history-for-non-historians<sup>9</sup>.

In the American context, the embrace of “Theory” has often led to a turn towards continental philosophers as intellectual authorities. The problem is that over time, “Theory” became canonized. It became less a repository of theoretical resources and more a pantheon. Ironically, thinkers who themselves critiqued rigid canons – figures like Foucault or Derrida – were themselves transformed into almost scriptural authorities. Instead of engaging with actual philosophical problems – for example, the nature of meaning – people would cite Derrida on meaning, as though the citation itself were the argument. However, the argument about meaning should stand on its own, not on appeals to the authority of Derrida.

As “Theory” solidified into its own subfield, scholars increasingly identified not with the problems they were trying to solve but as “Deleuzians,” “Derrideans,” or “Foucauldians.” Often their main professional activity became defending those thinkers – fighting over the “correct” interpretation, warding off criticism – rather than using their ideas to generate new insights.

For me, this isn’t the right attitude toward philosophy. It can be important to figure out what a particular philosopher meant, to explore the implications of their ideas, or to locate their work among their contemporaries. It’s also fine to draw inspiration from a thinker, to cite them, and to return to their work for inspiration

<sup>9</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *The Genealogy of Genealogy: Nietzsche, Foucault, and the Coils of Critical History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming 2026.

or new insights. Take Derrida as an example. His work is by turns brilliant, baffling, frustrating, and rewarding – rich enough to reward repeated engagement. But the ultimate value of philosophical work lies in the arguments, not in assembling quotes from authoritative texts.

In short, “Theory” has in many ways become just as sedimented, canonized – almost scriptural – as the very thing it historically sought to critique. That’s why it feels exhausting. But to be clear, not everything that is sedimented is bad. I’ve sometimes been accused of trying to throw out the baby with the bathwater, but that’s not my goal. If there are aspects of Derrida – or any thinker – that still feel like a living spark for you, by all means pursue them. Just make sure to communicate those ideas in a way that’s intelligible to non-specialists and to justify why they matter. *Cite Derrida, but also explain him.*

**Augustas:** To what extent do you think the exhaustion with “Theory” is also a response to how academic institutions themselves have changed – through bureaucratization, metric-based evaluations, the precarious job economy, and publishing pressures?

**Jason:** There’s definitely a strong connection between the way academic institutions operate and the forms of knowledge that develop within them. Academia as a profession shapes the intellectual work produced, just as the legal system shapes how lawyers think about and practice law, depending on what a successful career path demands. Max Weber saw this clearly in *Science as a Vocation* and *Politics as a Vocation*. Broadly speaking, this is a question of the *sociology of knowledge*, and it’s not unique to academia – it happens in every profession.

One of the significant shifts in recent decades has been toward metrics. The emphasis on measurable outputs – publications, citations, rankings – encourages scholars to publish frequently rather than to develop ideas at their own pace. That pressure is compounded by academic precarity, especially the adjunctification of the labor force, which leaves many academics in unstable positions, constantly worried about their livelihoods.

So academia becomes a matter of bean-counting, promoting boilerplate and rote work. I don’t blame individuals for following these strategies – you need to keep food on the table. But the combination of precarity and metrics-driven assessment has created a system in which churning out publications is rewarded more than producing thoughtful, high-quality scholarship. And once scholarship gets mass-produced, the quality decreases – just as with any other form of mass production. That’s not to say there isn’t great work being done; there certainly is. But the sheer flood of publications makes it harder to keep track of what’s valuable.

This dynamic has reinforced both “Theory” and the backlash against it. On one hand, “Theory” became a shorthand: drop a term like “new materialism” or title your paper with a trendy word like “anthropogenic” and you increase your publication chances. On the other hand, empirical disciplines often reacted against this, wanting to avoid getting caught in the weeds of how to, say, interpret Derrida “correctly.” I understand that reaction. But even empiricists need philosophical reflection – just as those working in “Theory” need to recover what made it appealing in the first place.

Earlier generations were drawn to “Theory” precisely because it disrupted routine patterns of thinking. Hannah Arendt argued that the task of philosophy is to challenge preconceived conceptual categories. That same spirit of critical thinking is part of what made so-called French Theory attractive in the U.S., as scholars recognized that French thinkers approached problems in ways quite different from those of their American counterparts. When Derrida first arrived in the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as my former colleague Mark C. Taylor has told me, it felt like a breath of fresh air. I understand this sentiment, but Derrida is no longer “fresh air” for our generation, which means we need to find new sources of inspiration.

Of course, that doesn’t solve the institutional problem. Systematic changes are needed within academia. In my role as an administrator and department chair, I’ve tried to push back against adjunctification. I’ve also worked on bringing philosophy to the public through outreach and education to avoid the “Ivory Tower” mindset. On evaluation committees, I’ve advocated prioritizing quality over quantity. For example, when scholars come up for tenure, I’ve argued that a single truly significant work can matter far more than a long list of minor publications.

What I am getting is this: change can’t just happen at the level of ideas – it also must take place at the level of praxis. One of the reasons “Theory” has become so frustrating is that it has devolved into jargon and buzzwords. If metamodernism gains enough traction, we’ll need to ensure it doesn’t become a fossilized canon itself. For now, though, I think we’re in a moment where something like metamodernism is genuinely needed, and people are finding it valuable as a way to break out of predetermined habits of thought.

**Augustas:** How does this dynamic between academia and its intellectual output relate to your metamodernist approach? Can metamodernism offer a politics of knowledge that addresses not only the content of theory but also the conditions under which it is produced?

**Jason:** I think we’ve already been trying to do precisely that. For instance, my colleague Brendan Graham Dempsey and I started a journal called *Metamodern*

*Theory & Praxis*<sup>10</sup> that aims to shift academic publishing culture in meaningful ways. We don't perform credential checks and welcome submissions from people without PhDs. All work is evaluated on its own merits. The journal has one peer-reviewed section, but it also features a non-peer-reviewed section that includes art and political practice. The idea is to create space to encourage a “no-bullshit” philosophy and way of thinking.

Beyond that, others in the metamodernist movement and I are trying to change the broader academic culture itself, focusing on virtues and values we see as essential – like *compassion* and *humility*. I'll put it bluntly – *a lot of folks in academia can be arrogant assholes*. People often become overly judgmental and intolerant of others. In response, together with colleagues like Brendan Graham Dempsey and Pierce Salguero, I've been working to promote a healthier academic culture – one where disagreement is encouraged but approached compassionately, where we can challenge each other's ideas without sabotaging one another's careers. To be clear, metamodern thought isn't about creating a new orthodoxy where everyone thinks the same way. It's about fostering a space where a spectrum of ideas can coexist and where disagreement is both productive and respectful.

This vision aligns, in many ways, with what scholars like Vermeulen and van den Akker have been developing in metamodern cultural theory – an emphasis on a kind of *new authenticity*. That's an area where I see actual agreement. They've identified a distinctive affective energy in the artworks they describe as metamodern – what they call a “structure of feeling”. Regardless of whether we agree or disagree on what qualifies as metamodern art, I think they've captured something important. In that sense, I see clear alliances: with their work, with the broader metamodern discourse, and with what's happening in the art world and other cultural spaces.

And I should stress, for those encountering metamodernism for the first time, *this isn't about denying suffering*. It's about finding ways to work through it and come out the other side. We're certainly not advocating for a kind of “cruel optimism”<sup>11</sup> where we pretend everything is fine or ignore that certain versions of the good life are held to as ideals even as they have become unachievable for many, nor are we trying to silence dissent or ignore the stakes of genuine struggles. Instead, the goal is to cultivate a healthier, emotionally sensitive, and – even at times – joyful academic community. Ideally, metamodernism can help generate real change in academia and, hopefully, contribute outward to broader social and political transformation as well.

<sup>10</sup> *Metamodern Theory and Praxis*. Williams College, Science & Technology Studies. Internet access <https://sts.williams.edu/metamodern/>.

<sup>11</sup> Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

**Augustas:** You write that in the last fifty years, human sciences have passed through a rapid succession of different “turns” – the linguistic, cultural, historical, cognitive, postmodern, affective, material, sensory, speculative, even a so-called “turn turn.”<sup>12</sup> Considering this proliferation, what makes metamodernism different and prevents it from becoming, say, “metamodern turn”?

**Jason:** I’ve always found the metaphor of a “turn” both playful and a bit troubling. Many so-called “turns” are really just intellectual *trends*, and they’re often quite unaware of the movements that preceded them – which is why we’ve had multiple “historical turns.” Or in religious studies, for example, we’ve had several “turns to the body,” as though we keep forgetting that we have bodies and need to be constantly reminded of them. Often, these “turns” are historically insensitive, overlooking earlier work, and they tend to describe intellectual fads rather than sustained engagements with prior ideas. Each new “turn” feels like it’s turning away from what preceded it.

For metamodernism, I prefer the metaphor of *waves* – as in the multiple waves of feminism – because to me it suggests continuity and perhaps even evolution rather than abrupt reversals. Of course, part of this is just clashing metaphors rather than actualities. What I want metamodernism to do differently is resist becoming just another intellectual fad. That means taking its antecedents seriously and proceeding with a kind of collective humility. I don’t want to over-determine where the movement goes. Instead, I want to draw broadly on the resources and ideas already out there, without collapsing into jargon for jargon’s sake.

Now, I get that scholars often need shorthand for intellectual positions – and that’s fine. You don’t have to reinvent semiotics just to make an argument about, say, Disney’s appropriation of Indigenous identities. Shorthands are useful, but ideally, there’s real substance behind them. My hope for metamodernism is to remain substantial and open – flexible enough to allow for variations, developments, and new branches to emerge.

Just as in open-source software, you can “fork” – and I don’t see that as a problem. In fact, I think we should welcome it. For example, in *Metamodern Theory & Praxis*, we published an article titled *The Black Metamodernist’s Manifesto* by a Jamaican British activist<sup>13</sup>. He is “forking off” – taking elements from existing metamodern thought while also creating his own version. I love it. I can easily imagine more branches emerging, and sometimes those branches may draw from each other and cross-fertilize.

<sup>12</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Marvel, Germane. Black Meta Mode: The Black Metamodernist’s Manifesto. *Metamodern Theory & Praxis*, 2024, vol. 1, no. 1.

For me, what matters is that by calling something “metamodern,” we’re still in conversation with one another – even if we agree to disagree on certain points. I’ve argued in the past that proximate others are often the source of the most aggressive forms of contention, but I hope those of us in metamodern circles can practice compassionate disagreement. That may mean agreeing to disagree or, at the very least, avoiding mudslinging, name-calling, or aggressive attacks. I don’t want to set rigid criteria for membership. I’d rather see metamodernism remain open, plural, and evolving rather than trying to enforce some kind of orthodoxy.

#### FIXING THEORY: METAMODERN RESPONSES TO POSTMODERN PROBLEMS

**Augustas:** In the book, you frame metamodernism as a response to five core problematics associated with postmodernism. I’d like to walk through each of these in turn to better understand how your proposed categories emerge. Let’s start with the first: the postmodern problem of antirealism and your metamodernist response of metarealism. You argue that the usual polemic between realists and antirealists conceals a deeper shared structure – that “real” is a contrastive and modal term. Can you explain what you mean by metarealism and how it reframes debates around realism in the human sciences?

**Jason:** I should start by stepping back for a moment to help readers understand how I’m using the term postmodernism. I don’t mean it as a generic cultural *Zeitgeist*. I’m referring to a specific academic paradigm – one that emerged through the *anthologizing* of various thinkers, many of whom didn’t necessarily consider themselves postmodern but were grouped together and taught under that category. Importantly, I think postmodernism raised genuine philosophical issues that should not be dismissed but taken seriously.

One of these issues revolves around the putative fight between what came to be called *realism* and *antirealism*. In some circles of the academy, “postmodern antirealist” even became a label used to identify specific camps. In political theory, for example, one might hear: “Oh, those people are postmodern antirealists.” But when I tried to understand my own stance toward this divide, I realized that many realists and antirealists were simply talking past each other.

Realists often accused antirealists of denying the existence of things altogether. Bruno Latour identified this as the “table thumping” argument<sup>14</sup> – literally banging on a table and saying, “Ha! How can you be an antirealist if there’s a table right here?” Of course, that isn’t what antirealists were arguing. But at the same

<sup>14</sup> Latour, Bruno. The Force and the Reason of Experiment. In *Experimental Inquiries*, ed. H. E. Le Grand. Australasian Studies in History and Philosophy of Science 8. Dordrecht: Springer, 1990, 49–59.

time, antirealists often caricatured realists as naive, assuming they believed the world appeared to us exactly as it was perceived. Looking across multiple disciplines – especially in the philosophy of science, which is a major interest of mine – I began to see that the confusion stemmed from how differently the term “real” was being used.

This is where *metarealism* comes in. By metarealism, I mean the recognition that “real” is a *contrastive* category. For example, if I say, “That was a real Elvis,” I could mean the real Elvis Presley, or a real photograph of Elvis, or someone who really captures Elvis’s style, or a real dream of Elvis, or a real fictional story about Elvis. In other words, whenever we say something is “real,” there’s often an implicit contrast we don’t explicitly spell out. Understanding “real” as a contrastive category explains why realists and antirealists talk past each other – *they are using different contrast terms*.

Another related point is that in the philosophy of science, “real” is often contrasted with *mind-dependence*. There, the alternative to “real” isn’t “non-real” but “socially constructed” or “mind dependent.” Ironically, when this discourse was imported into the human sciences, “real” came to mean whatever is independent of humans. But once applied to fields like sociology, this logic would imply that everything sociology studies is somehow unreal – a clearly absurd conclusion. So I began to explore how things can depend on minds in different ways in that chapter.

There’s another issue around “real” that I wanted to address. People often equate “real” with “existence”. Here, I make a more fundamental break. Since Parmenides, philosophy has had a strong tendency to treat being as one or existence as a single, unqualified unity. However, actually, there’s a difference between existential and predicative uses of being. For example, saying, “A tree is” is not the same as saying, “The tree is green.” These are two different meanings of being. Parmenides insisted that *being is one*, but I push back against this idea. I’m not the first to do so. In fact, a philosophical approach called “ontological grounding” already recognizes that there are different ways things can ground existence or being.

So when I talk about *modes of existence* or *modes of the real*, I’m not naively confusing predication. Rather, I’m trying to articulate something more, that nuanced *things* can exist in fundamentally different ways. To say, “This cup exists” is to say that it is physically instantiated. To say, “There is a number between five and seven” is to affirm the existence of the number six without physical instantiation.

To underscore, I’m making two related points with the term “metarealism.” First, “real” is a contrastive category, which explains why realists and antirealists often talk past each other. Second, ontology often requires recognizing multiple modes of existence or different ontological groundings, rather than collapsing everything into a single undifferentiated notion of being.

**Augustas:** In today’s landscape, claims about realism are often weaponized – whether in climate change denial, anti-science rhetoric, nationalist appeals to the “real” nation, or the rejection of various identities as “not real.” These are strategic deployments of realism or antirealism used to either legitimize or delegitimize certain realities. How might metarealism help us critically engage with these contested realities, resisting both rigid essentialism and post-truth relativism?

**Jason:** I want to suggest that metarealism forces us to stipulate a contrast class whenever someone asserts that something is “real.” For example, if a polemical thinker says, “Caitlyn Jenner is not a real woman,” my immediate response is: *What do you mean by “real”? What is your contrast class?* If by “real” they simply mean “cisgender,” then they’re just restating the point in different words. *That’s not an argument; it’s an equivocation.*

The same goes for statements like “This is the real America.” I want to know: *What’s the implicit contrast here? What’s the alternative?* If we don’t press for that contrast, the phrase stands as if it were self-evident, when in fact it carries hidden ideological baggage. Once you ask what “real America” is contrasted against, the assumptions – racism, for instance – start bubbling to the surface.

In fact, metarealism is extremely useful with charged concepts like race. In political and academic discourses, we often hear, “Race is real” versus “Race is socially constructed.” But that framing is misleading. Saying “race is real” often gets interpreted as a biological claim, which is inaccurate, while saying “race is socially constructed” can be misread as denying lived experiences of racism. Metarealism helps us to clarify our terms: race may not be a meaningful biological category, but the social realities and consequences of racialization are undeniably real.

The same principle applies to claims that aren’t overtly negative. If someone says, “That’s not real science,” they’re making a normative claim. Although there’s nothing inherently wrong with that, I want to know: *What’s their contrast class for “not real science”? What exactly are we arguing about?* Similarly, if someone says, “The coronavirus isn’t a real virus,” my response is: *What do you mean by “not real”? What’s your contrast?* Getting people to spell out their assumptions often reveals inconsistencies or misunderstandings – and that’s where productive dialogue, or even a shift in perspective, can happen.

In this way, metarealism does two things. First, it strips away some of the ideological weight carried by claims like “this is the real X.” Second, it helps depolarize conversations by forcing us to specify what’s actually being stated. For these reasons, I see metarealism as valuable on multiple levels – political, conversational, and philosophical. It pushes us to specify our arguments, to clarify what we mean

by “real,” and in doing so, it helps us to better understand the assumptions shaping our disagreements.

**Augustas:** Metarealism lays the groundwork for addressing the next postmodern problem: the disciplinary autocritique. You note that many fields in the human sciences are facing a legitimacy crisis, as their objects of study have been deconstructed to the core. You have experienced this yourself as a religious studies scholar. However, rather than rejecting deconstruction, metamodernism embraces and radicalizes it, turning it into what you call a “deconstructive dojo.” Can you show what this methodological embrace of deconstruction looks like in practice?

**Jason:** I’d point readers to my first book – *The Invention of Religion in Japan* – for a deeper dive into this issue. Ironically, what I argued there – following certain trends in religious studies – was about the history of how the very category of “religion” was constructed. That category is often presented as historically universal and unchanging. In fact, there’s a long history of treating religion as fundamental to human nature, or at least universal across cultures. The assumption has been that every culture and every person – aside from perhaps the occasional atheist – must have “a religion.”

But what I demonstrated was that the category of “religion” can be *historicized*. It emerged at a particular moment, largely after the Protestant Reformation, with a specific set of intellectual contours. Its definition has changed multiple times under the influence of vested interests. It spread globally through colonialism and missionary activity. It has an artificial center, one that fits Protestant Christianity far better than it does other traditions. It has always been normative *to call something “a religion” or not*, and this has carried significant implications for how it’s treated.

This is not a fallacy of naive historicism, in which one presumes that a category couldn’t exist before a term existed, but rather at its best versions of this argument either cast doubt on the presumptive validity of the original category by demonstrating its coherence, or show how classification transforms the things classified (for instance as I showed in my first book the process of sorting various Japanese cultural traditions into say, “religion,” “science,” “superstition” radically transformed things on the ground.) In this respect, I was building on a raft of pre-existing scholarship on power and classification, even as I shifted the attention to Japan. All that is to say, scholars in religious studies have now spent a very long time becoming increasingly critical of the category “religion.”

Religion is just one example. As I explored in the book, many disciplines have gone through similar processes. Anthropologists have challenged the category of “culture.” Sociologists have attacked the notion of “society.” English departments

have questioned the idea of “literature.” Over and over, the foundational categories of fields have been destabilized.

What I began to notice was that these critiques followed a *consistent set of strategies* – often without referencing each other – to disintegrate their core categories. The attack on “culture” was remarkably like the attack on “society,” even when the thinkers behind them weren’t in dialogue. And there’s an irony here: scholars in one field would reject their category while freely using another that had already been discredited elsewhere. For example, in religious studies, many rejected the category of “religion” only to rely on the concept of “culture,” which had already been rejected in other fields.

So, the first thing I wanted to offer readers was what I playfully call a *deconstructive dojo*. I’m not suggesting we resist deconstruction. On the contrary, I think we should embrace and use it, because the fact that so many disciplinary categories collapse in similar ways tells us something fundamental about them. The very deconstruction that seemed to undermine our scholarly analysis can, paradoxically, reveal something important about humans and other social creatures – about how we construct categories and organize our world.

We should often begin by deconstructing our object of study. Here, I’m using “deconstruction” in a broad, non-technical sense, not exclusively in reference to Derrida. If I’m writing about truth, for example, it’s important to trace the history of the concept, how its meanings have shifted, and the hierarchies embedded in it. But my argument is that this should be the first step, not the last. The problem is not that scholars began deconstructing their categories; it’s that the process ended up in a legitimation crisis. Deconstruction became the final horizon: all we could do was keep deconstructing ourselves and stop there. That’s why I emphasize starting in the deconstructive dojo – but not staying there.

**Augustas:** By granting deconstructive critique and pushing it to its limits, metamodernism does not leave us with the rubble left by disciplinary objects. Instead, you construct a new model for inquiry, which reveals the fundamental nature of categories themselves as well as various mechanisms that produce and maintain them. This becomes the basis for a metamodernist social ontology, centered on what you call the “process social ontology of social kinds”. Could you explain how this approach works?

**Jason:** One of the assumptions that sustained the deconstruction of disciplinary objects was the belief that each discipline’s categories were uniquely messy. In religious studies, for example, it became almost a cliché to say that the religion department was the one department where nobody believed in the category of “religion.” In my area, we separate religious studies from theology, and while I can’t speak for

theology, those of us in the humanistic study of religion largely rejected “religion” as a stable category. That was indeed our main thing.

However, religious studies weren’t alone in this. Ironically, English departments didn’t believe in “literature,” sociologists – in “society,” anthropologists – in “culture,” and so on. What I came to realize is that this wasn’t unique to any one discipline. When you universalize this insight, you see that *all* social kinds can be deconstructed. Once you dissolve any given category, it becomes clear that nearly all categories can be broken down in similar ways. What does that tell us?

First, it suggests that these categories lack stable, universal essences. They are better understood as unfolding processes. And I don’t mean “process” as a vague metaphor for flux. I mean it literally. Take “religion” – it’s a social kind that has unfolded over time, taking on different properties in different periods and different geographical contexts. Treating “religion” as a process doesn’t mean that nothing meaningful can be said about it. Quite the opposite: we can trace its history, analyze the conditions that shaped it, and study the specific ways it has functioned. For instance, we can track the etymology of “religion”, determine what it meant in one period, and how the meaning was translated into another.

Second, key insight here – social categories are constantly changing, *but they’re not infinitely changing*. The term “religion” has meant different things, but it hasn’t meant an infinite number of things. So, when critics call religion an “empty signifier,” that misses the point. It isn’t empty; it’s historically variable. This, in turn, raises the real question: *What has constrained the meaning of the term?*

This is where my concept of *social kinds* comes in – temporary moments of stability within a broader unfoldment of a set of processes that determine the social world. Most scholarships already assume change and difference as given. For example, critiques of “culture” often highlight how its meaning varies across societies and historical moments. What I argue with process social ontology is that if change is the default, then the more interesting question is: *Why is there any stability at all?*

Much of the existing theory gets this backwards. Too often, scholars waste their time and energy explaining why things change – when change, both empirically and philosophically, is the norm. We have abundant evidence of this. Linguists show that language is constantly changing. Anthropologists reveal that “tradition” is historically fluid. Sociologists demonstrate that social formations, groups, and institutions are constantly in motion. The real challenge is explaining stability.

That’s what my process of social ontology of social kinds is doing – flipping the explanatory mechanisms on their head. Instead of asking why things change, we should ask how clusters of powers and properties emerge and hold – even if temporarily. This is where meaningful empirical work can be done. It builds directly on

the deconstructive dojo – accepting critiques but then following their implications into constructive analysis. That’s the harder work, but also the necessary one.

**Augustas:** To make a full sense of metamodernist social ontology, we also need a new account of meaning. In other words, understanding process social ontology and social kinds requires a theory of interpretation, communication, and agency. This naturally leads to the next metamodernist move – hylosemiotics. You describe this as a way to intensify the postmodernist linguistic turn while also including animals and other sentient beings within the sphere of semiotics. What is hylosemiotics, and how does it change our understanding of the world around us?

**Jason:** One of the things I’ve been interested in is how often we position ourselves against “negative others.” Part of my project has been to push back against that by de-anthropomorphizing the humanistic disciplines. That may sound contradictory, and in some ways, it is, but that’s the point. If we take even basic human biology seriously, humans are social animals – and we’re not the only ones.

That’s why when I talk about social kinds in the book, I don’t restrict the term to humans. Drawing on animal behavior studies and philosophy of biology, I include non-human social kinds as well – wolf packs, for example. We can ask: what mechanisms stabilize a wolf pack? What causes them to vary? In doing so, I’m refusing the “social versus natural” split that sets humans apart from – and above – other creatures.

This leads directly to *hylosemiotics* and the question of meaning. If human language evolved, it must have emerged from some *communicative substrate*. That doesn’t mean there’s nothing distinctive about human language – there is – but I’m cautious about pushing “de-anthropomorphizing” too far. Critiques of anthropocentrism are important, but they sometimes swing to the opposite extreme, anthropomorphizing the non-human world in absurd ways. What we need instead is balance – to see humans as one animal species among many, sharing certain communicative features with non-human forms of communication while also differing in key ways.

I was first inspired towards what would become this account of meaning while hiking in Japan. I was on my way to a particular Shinto shrine – one that, intriguingly, enshrines a deified version of Thomas Edison. (That shrine has its own fascinating history, and I’m currently writing about it – so I hope the ethnographic work will eventually find its way into print.) Along the trail, I encountered a snow monkey. Listening to its calls, I was struck not only by how it was communicating with others of its kind, but also by how I might interpret those sounds as signs. That moment set me thinking about how human communication might have evolved. In a way, it nudged me to bring together two things often kept apart: the evolution of perception and the evolution of language.

Later, in conversation with my brother, Seth Josephson, who works in animal studies, I was introduced to the work of Jakob Johann von Uexküll, a Baltic-German biologist. Uexküll argued that animals never encounter the world in a raw, unmediated way, as if humans were the only ones uniquely “imprisoned” in language. Rather, animals experience the world through semantically meaningful signs. A tick, for example, perceives the warmth of a body or chemicals in sweat as cues that signal a potential host – prompting it to drop onto a passing deer... or onto my pants, if I happen to be nearby. The trick is to interpret its environment semiotically, rather than encountering it as “pure reality.”

From this, I drew two key insights – both emerged from conversations with my brother, so he deserves a lot of credit. First, hylosemiotics rethinks a distinction the academy often takes for granted, i.e., the distinction between the study of perception and the study of meaning. In everyday English, we already use “mean” in both senses: “The grey clouds mean rain” uses “mean” in a way that relates to “The word ‘labas’ means ‘hi’ in Lithuanian.” Humans experience the world as meaningful to us, and this applies both when we consume signs and when we produce them. By refusing to completely separate perception and meaning – while also not collapsing them – we can better understand how language evolved and recognize that meaning is located in the world itself.

Second, in contrast to some accounts of “natural information,” which treat information as mind-independent correlations, hylosemiotics distinguishes between sender meaning and receiver meaning. The receiver’s meaning can exceed the sender’s meaning. I can interpret what you say in a way you never intended to express. For instance, in an audio interview, you might hear my American accent even if I didn’t intend to “communicate” it. Or you might infer I’ve been drinking from my tone of voice (for the record, I haven’t.) Meaning is produced not just in expression but in interpretation, which means we must separate meaning production from meaning consumption.

All of this is why hylosemiotics became the longest chapter in the book. I wanted to work through the core questions of meaning – bringing together philosophy of language, semiotics, and animal studies. There’s strong evolutionary evidence for this approach: our ancestors could perceive the world long before they had completed voluntary control over the range of vocal sounds they could produce. That sequence matters for understanding how meaning itself emerges.

The short version is this: hylosemiotics gave me a way to address questions about meaning by rethinking perception, communication, and language – in human and non-human animals – while also setting itself apart from the dominant traditions.

**Augustas:** For clarification, in hylosemiotics, you emphasize that signs must be materialized before they can be perceived or interpreted. How does this focus on materiality change the way we think about meaning, and what does it reveal about our place among other interpreting beings?

**Jason:** The “hylo” in hylosemiotics comes from the Greek word *hylē*. It means “matter” – and in some contexts “forest” – so hylosemiotics literally means “materialized semiotics”. The basic point is simple: before any sign can be interpreted, it must be materialized. If I speak a word, your eardrums must vibrate for you to hear it; without that material vibration, there is no perception of the sign. Likewise, if you’re reading this interview, you’re engaging with words that have been materialized as pixels on a screen.

That’s why I spend time in the chapter both drawing from and differentiating my work from certain strands of materialism. It’s not just “everything is matter” or “matter has agency” – it’s about recognizing that sign-relations are externalized into the world. This allows us to reject the broad Saussurean bifurcation between meaning and world without collapsing either into the other. Meaning must be materialized in order to be perceived – but that doesn’t mean perception gives us direct and complete access to another’s intentions, nor to some imagined “raw matter” itself.

Take the table in front of me: I don’t see the table directly. I see light bouncing off the table, filtered through my perceptual apparatus, and rendered significant by the linguistic and conceptual categories I already hold. In a way, I grant what Heidegger might call a “hermeneutics of being,” but that doesn’t mean we’re trapped in interpretation, cut off from the outside world. Every creature interprets the world through the world itself.

This is where Heidegger’s anthropocentrism becomes most visible. He thinks it’s only humans who engage in this interpretive relation. Interestingly, he had read Uexküll but broke with him on this point – and I think that’s where he went wrong. We’re not uniquely “imprisoned” in interpretation; we, the ticks, and countless other creatures are all trying to figure out the world together.

One example I give my students illustrates this point: you only know what you look like by looking in a mirror or seeing your reflection on a surface. We come to know ourselves through the mediation of the material world. There’s no such thing as unmediated access – *the world is always meeting itself through these materialized forms*.

**Augustas:** Another problem you identify with postmodernism is its broad climate of skepticism, a kind of doubt that often collapses into cynicism or paralysis. As you point out, this skepticism has many forms, just to mention a few, and I quote: “Essentialism is a kind of violence. Science is illegitimate or suspected. <...> Knowledge is just an expression of power. <...> No truth claims can be grounded. There

are no facts, only interpretations. Every perspective is equally legitimate. <...> All binaries are violent hierarchies. <...> Philosophy is phallogocentric or logocentric. Logic is merely the codification of heteronormative, white, male thinking. <...> Knowledge is impossible.”<sup>15</sup> In response, you propose Zeteticism as a metamodernist alternative: an epistemological stance grounded in openness, humility, and abductive reasoning. Could you explain what zetetic knowledge is and how it offers a way forward beyond both dogmatism and skepticism?

**Jason:** When I think about the broad climate of skepticism that defined the academic world I grew up in, two things struck me. First, many so-called “skeptical” claims were delivered with such confidence that they stopped being doubts at all – they became assertions. Second, when I went back to the OG of skepticism, Sextus Empiricus, I found a surprisingly pre-modern answer to a postmodern problem.

In the most important surviving work of classical Greek and Roman skepticism, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Sextus Empiricus distinguishes three kinds of philosophers. The first are dogmatists – think Aristotle – who believe they’ve discovered the truth. The second are negative dogmatists, or “academic skeptics,” referring to the turn toward skepticism in Plato’s Academy after Aristotle. They’re just as certain that knowledge is impossible as the first group is that truth is possible. In response, Sextus describes a third group – the true skeptics – who suspend judgment even on the claim that “knowledge is impossible.” Basically, the first group says, “I know,” the second says, “I know that I don’t know,” while the third doubts even that second position. We can never be truly certain whether we know or not. For Sextus, the true skeptic is neither a dogmatic universalist nor a dogmatic skeptic, but someone who doubts their capacity to know that they know.

I briefly thought about using “true skepticism” to describe my own stance. However, it risks confusing people, so I borrowed another word from Sextus’ vocabulary: “zetetic,” meaning “questing” or “seeking” knowledge. Zeteticism has three philosophical implications.

First, *Zeteticism describes a meta-epistemic stance*. When someone claims to know something with complete confidence – “I know X for sure!” – we usually call them a dogmatist. But here’s a twist: many people who call themselves skeptics are just as confident in their denials as dogmatists are in their assertions. If someone says they’re a “climate skeptic” but has already decided there’s no climate change, that’s not skepticism; that’s dogmatism. Similarly, in analytic philosophy circles, many epistemologists are self-described “fallibilists.” This is a good starting place, but in practice, it often defaults to the assumption that those philosophers are basically

<sup>15</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 213.

right about most things, while recognizing they can't ever definitively prove it. This is much better than dogmatism and closer to my own position, but it has its own issues, especially overconfidence.

The zetetic position I'm proposing is closer to what Sextus meant by a true skeptic – someone who suspends judgement whenever possible but still recognizes the possibility of humble knowledge. The zetetic denies both first-order and second-order knowledge claims: not only that we can know things with certainty, but also that we can know what we do or don't know. Put differently, this leads to a counterintuitive claim: we usually think we know when we know something, but, as zetetics, we must always deny our capacity to know for certain even that much. A zetetic might say, "I know there's a tree outside the window", but I could be wrong. Basically, when we zetetics say 'we know X,' we don't mean to have some final or infallible knowledge of X. We just mean we've got good enough, context-specific reasons to think that 'X is the case' for now.

Second, *Zeteticism responds to the arsenal of skepticism*. The way to diffuse poisonous forms of skepticism isn't to deny them, but to grant them as legitimate doubts. Descartes worried we might be deceived by a *malin génie* – an evil spirit or demon – and I respond: yes, that's possible... but it's also possible I'm not being deceived. In fact, doubts can even be turned against each other: perhaps an evil demon is tricking you into thinking you're a brain in a vat. In this way, *Zeteticism* allows us to take what's useful in postmodern skepticism while avoiding its shortcomings. It transforms negative dogmatism into genuine doubt. If you tell me "Knowledge is power," I'll agree that power relations shape and sometimes distort knowledge, and we should be careful at the ligatures of power and knowledge – but we should treat it as a properly skeptical doubt, not as an absolute conclusion.

Third, *Zeteticism offers a concrete way to produce humble knowledge*. The aim isn't to abandon the project of knowledge but to approach it with humility. In the academy, we constantly need to adjudicate knowledge claims. If someone writes a history of Jerusalem (I see that on the bookshelf over there), we want to know whether the claims are accurate and supported by evidence. It often makes sense to focus careful scrutiny on those particular claims that seem to coincide with the author's motivated interests. It also often makes sense to identify the power operations at stake in knowledge production and focus our critical attention accordingly, but the dogmatic skepticism – the kind that says, "It's all just power; you can't know anything about Jerusalem" – undermines that very project. If that's the case, why read or write the book? Why be at the academy at all? And usually, the same people who insist, "You can't know anything, knowledge is just a mask for power," turn around and make truth claims themselves. That's just a game of intellectual hide-the-ball.

We need to hold on to humility in our knowledge. People tend to slip into overconfidence – imagining the isolated knower reasoning from *cogito ergo sum* all the way to the existence of the universe, as Descartes thought he did by way of God. One of Descartes’ key mistakes, in my view, was equating knowledge with certainty: “I only know what I cannot doubt.” However, in fact, we can doubt anything. The real question isn’t whether doubt is possible, but how we produce better or worse forms of knowledge. Here, I draw on the pragmatist tradition, especially Charles Sanders Peirce’s notion of abduction – inference to the best explanation – as a way to figure out how we might improve our knowledge, both as scholars and as people in the world. We want to figure things out, but always with humility about our conclusions.

Zeteticism also better describes how scientific knowledge advances. One common mistake in science communication is to present specific claims as if they were absolute truths or incontrovertible facts. When those claims shift – as science inevitably self-corrects – people naturally become skeptical. Early in the pandemic, for instance, the dominant advice was that the virus spread mainly through surface transmission: wipe down your counters and you’ll be fine. Later, we learned that airborne spread was the primary mode. Skeptics then accused scientists of lying. That’s exactly what I mean by Zeteticism: a return to provisional and humble truth claims, always subject to revision.

**Augustas:** Zetetic knowledge is characterized by openness to revision and an ongoing search rather than fixed certainty. In that light, how would you respond to concerns that such an approach might lead to epistemic fatigue or a sense of futility – if knowledge is always subject to revision, what motivates the continuous drive for research?

**Jason:** I see two things here.

First, as scholars, we must recognize that our work is always trapped within the horizon of time. What we produce are social kinds – unfolding processes. Metamodernism itself is a social kind that refers to social kinds. My theory of social kinds is a social kind that refers to social kinds. That means it will evolve and change. No academic book is the final statement, nor should it be. In fact, I think it’s a relief to recognize that we don’t have to deliver the last word.

Maybe this fits my own psychology. I tend to edit a lot. I just finished a book manuscript, and I was literally making changes basically up until I got on the airplane before sending it off for final copyediting. I always want to make it a little bit better. But eventually, I must let it go. And the way I make peace with that is by telling myself: *this is a snapshot of my thinking at a particular time. The conversation will move on and evolve.*

That doesn't mean there's no contribution to knowledge. Quite the opposite: if we recognize that we're working with social kinds, then progress is still possible – even if it's never final. Take the history of Jerusalem: no single book will ever be the last word in it. But that doesn't mean writing such a book is futile. Over time, we really do come to know more, even if every attempt is partial, provisional, and open to new discoveries.

Second, Zeteticism as an epistemic stance acknowledges something the original skeptics – not just Sextus Empiricus, but others as well – already saw: the higher the stakes, the more skeptical we should be. That's the crucial point. The seriousness and rigor of our evaluation of the truth claims should be proportionate to what's at stake.

For example, if you ask me whether it's raining outside, I might just say, "Probably" – not much hangs on it. But if you say, "If you're wrong, I'll shoot you in the foot," then I'll get very serious. I'll look out the window, stick my hand out, maybe even step outside – use every independent channel of verification. That makes sense, given the high stakes. In this way, Zeteticism emphasizes that our standards of knowledge should be sensitive to pragmatic consequences.

And finally, one of the things I want to push back against is a certain Cartesianism. I don't mean to be overly dismissive of Descartes – he's just my fall guy here – but the image he promoted of the isolated, individual reasoner as the ideal philosopher is deeply misleading. In contrast, Zeteticism reminds us that *knowledge is produced in communities*. One of the jobs of zetetics is to check each other: you can correct me when I'm wrong, and I can correct you when you're wrong. Ideally, we then converge; other times, we may agree to disagree. We affirm each other when we think the other is right. A healthy epistemic community is not zero-sum; its members reinforce one another, both affirmatively and critically, in the pursuit of knowledge, guided by compassion and humility. Together, we refine and improve our humble knowledge – never pretending that either of us has the ultimate epistemic authority.

**Augustas:** The final postmodern problem you address is ethical nihilism – the sense that beneath all the critical force of postmodern theory has produced negative ethics, where guilt, anger, melancholy, and condemnation are the main affective modes. In response, you propose Revolutionary Happiness as a metamodernist ethics: a form of critical virtue ethics grounded in compassion, multispecies flourishing, and a revaluation of values. What does Revolutionary Happiness mean, and how does it reorient the ethical and political ambitions of the human sciences?

**Jason:** It starts from the recognition of contradiction in postmodernism – one that many observers have found baffling. On the one hand, a number of postmodern

figures, especially their most influential interpreters, argued that there are no values, or else pushed strong forms of value relativism. On the other hand, those same people were calling out racism, sexism, colonialism, and so on as problematic. That looks like a contradiction: how can you be both a postmodernist and an anti-racist at the same time?

I want to suggest that it's not actually a contradiction once you recognize that critique itself is a value. The mistake was to assume that a critique of values was somehow value-neutral, when in fact it was a value-laden stance. Of course, it often took the form of scornful moralizing, where any attempt to articulate a positive project was torn down in the name of critique. I want to emphasize – just as I did in the discussion of the deconstructive dojo – that the first move is good. It is essential to call out racism, sexism, and other forms of suffering and victimization. That critical gesture is crucial. But again, the mistake is to stop there.

So in that chapter of the book, I tried to do two things. First, I revisited the place of values in academic study. Originally articulated by thinkers like Max Weber, it was often taken to mean that academic scholarship should be free of values. But even Weber knew that value neutrality was itself a value, and that there are better or worse ways to pursue such work. Recognizing the values that motivate our scholarship need not compromise them, as long as we are clear – as far as we can be – to distinguish our evidentiary claims and our value claims.

There was a genuine fear that motivated the call towards value neutrality, and it was a reasonable one: the fear of over-politicization of academic work. Weber was thinking of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Germany, but we can see this risk everywhere. Even if you are a scholar-activist, you don't want your scholarship distorted by your activism, or your activism distorted by your scholarship. That undermines both.

But values are not something we should be afraid of. On the contrary, we should bring them to the surface. When we explicitly state our values, we can debate, argue, and refine them. Too often, values persist underground because people assume they're private, beyond reason or discussion. I argue that it isn't necessarily the case. Value claims and fact claims are often interwoven, and both can be scrutinized without destroying either.

This doesn't mean I want to produce homogeneity of values – quite the opposite. A plurality of values can be a strength, if there are enough epistemic and communal values to keep disagreement from collapsing into violence – so agonism doesn't turn into antagonism. You and I don't need to agree on our values, and in fact, the world would be a weird place if we did. My aim is to keep the space open for contestation while still affirming that values as such matter.

Building on this, in the last substantive chapter of the book, I articulate what I call *Revolutionary Happiness*. This is in some ways the least innovative part of

the book, because it combines two pre-existing traditions that are rarely brought together: critical theory and virtue ethics.

The problem with much critical theory is that it often lacks a positive project. I always ask: what would it mean to turn critical theory inside out? What would a good society look like? At the same time, I turn toward virtue ethics. And here I take a further step, which not everyone following metamodernism has to take. If I ask others to put their values on the table, I have to do the same. For me, the most important value is *compassion*. That is true of me as a scholar, an educator, a father, and a human being. It connects directly to why I am doing this work in the first place: to help alleviate suffering and make the world a better place.

Compassion solves a narrow but important problem in virtue ethics: is virtue primarily about the individual or about the community? I think the answer lies in recognizing that my flourishing depends on the flourishing of other people, other animals, and other species. For instance, my ability to function as a philosopher and historian won't matter if climate change destroys ecosystems. There's a basic but often forgotten truth: my relative happiness is inseparable from the well-being of those around me. Insofar as I aim to be virtuous, I should strive to be compassionate. Compassion connects the individual project of flourishing to the collective.

And that, in turn, brings me to the central question of virtue ethics: *what does it take to live a life worth having lived?* As Solon is said to have said, "Call no man happy until he is dead." What I take that to mean is not that happiness comes only in death, but that true Happiness is a retrospective, future-past, lifelong project. It is not the fleeting euphoria of a moment, but the eudaimonia of a life that, at the end of the day, you can look back on and say: I have lived a life worth living. That requires mental reflection – looking in the mental mirror, projecting our lives forward, and then looking back. And not just for ourselves, but for those in our communities. If we can imagine their flourishing alongside our own, that gives us grounding for shared ethical values that help us all live better.

Of course, we must commit to value pluralism. What it means for me to live a life worth having lived may not be the same as what it means for you. Jason's life worth having lived may not look like Augustas'. Each of us has different modes of flourishing. One mistake in certain readings of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the assumption that only the life of a philosopher counts as a life well-lived. But many people find that flourishing in gardening, for example, and there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, it's wonderful.

This is why, in my pedagogy, I try to help students ask themselves: *What does it mean for you to live a life worth having lived?* The earlier you ask, the better. But too often, especially at the kind of college where I teach – where students must be successful to enroll, but that usually means they've been fulfilling others' expectations

of others – they’ve never been asked that. So, when I ask, “Why are you studying economics?” they often answer, “To make money.” But then I press: Why do you want money? For what end? Is it just infinite accumulation, or something else? If they pursue this questioning far enough, most eventually admit they want to live a life worth having lived. Then comes the hard work: figuring out what that means specifically for them. It might be their family, their church, their country, stability, video games – it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to pre-judge what that is; I just want them to think about it.

So, for me, the essence of Revolutionary Happiness is twofold. First, it emphasizes enabling individuals and groups to flourish in ways consistent with living a life worth having lived. Second, it recognizes that when communities make it impossible for certain people to thrive, they must be able to make demands on those communities.

For instance, if you are in an institution, culture, or country that makes it impossible for some group or individual to live a meaningful life, then Revolutionary Happiness demands action. Take the United States: it has one of the largest prison populations in the world, disproportionately filled with Black people. In that context, Revolutionary Happiness calls us to commit ourselves as compassionate actors, working to improve the conditions of our society.

However, not every community is in crisis. If you find yourself in a society or community that is functioning relatively well, then maybe it doesn’t require revolution; *it may only require evolution*. I don’t want to over-determine the scale at which people care. Some think locally and act locally; others think globally and act locally, and both matters. For some, the pressing issue is climate change. For others, it’s something closer to home, like making sure the guy on the corner has enough to eat. Both are legitimate forms of compassion.

This also means recognizing that people belong to multiple overlapping communities. For instance, within an academic community, if you’re content with its culture, perhaps it will be evolutionary, not revolutionary. But if that community is dysfunctional – full of clashing egos and competitive rivalries – then compassion may call you to help reshape its culture. Sometimes the revolutionary act is simply changing the atmosphere of the very communities you inhabit.

In the end, this is just me putting my cards on the table. These are the values and commitments that motivate my scholarship. But again, I’m not trying to assert this as a metamodern orthodoxy. If someone finds even a single piece useful in their own work, I’d be glad for them to take it. I’ve aspired to think systematically about these issues because I think they are all connected, but I’m also a zetetic, which means I’m committed to being wrong about some things. Take what’s useful and carry it forward in whatever direction you need.

## FUTURE OF METAMODERNISM AND METAMODERN FUTURE

**Augustas:** Reading your book, I was struck by its tone: it is rigorous without being dogmatic, philosophically serious without sounding severe, politically and ethically engaged without moralizing. Stylistically, it is light, sometimes funny, even playful, full of personal reflection. Is this tone incidental or integral to metamodernist thinking? And what kind of intellectual *ethos* do you hope metamodernist scholars should embrace in their academic work?

**Jason:** In my own case – and I don't want to over-determine anyone else's approach – what I've found useful is situating myself in a particular location as a thinker. I'm just a dude living in one part of the world, and my experiences inevitably shape my philosophical project. That doesn't mean the project is reducible to me or my biography; collapsing into egotism, over-atomization, or relativism would be exactly the kinds of mistakes I critique in the book. But I also see no reason to hide or disguise my position. For me, part of doing philosophy is being reflexive enough to locate myself in the work without turning it into a tautological monologue about my life.

It's a balancing act. On the one hand, I strive for philosophical rigor – arguments that stand on their own regardless of who I am. On the other hand, I acknowledge my own life and experiences along the way. I make this explicit early in the book: there is no God's-eye view, no pure vantage from above. What we have instead is a collective view: you and I looking at the same thing from different perspectives, and, together as an epistemic community, cobbling an understanding together. That's how I see myself – situated, embodied, and transparent about my position.

The other piece is tonal. As you noticed, I like to shift between what you might call “high-altitude” scholarship and plain language, as part of a self-consciously no-bullshit philosophy. For this book, I even asked my students to read drafts and mark up anything that seemed like jargon. My instruction was simple: if I hadn't explained a term, underline it and write “jargon” in the margin. Their feedback kept me grounded, and I hope to make the work more transparent and ultimately more accessible.

Of course, the manuscript was far too long, and I had to cut heavily for publication. Not everything survived the edit. But I also take that as part of the process of producing humble knowledge.

**Augustas:** Ultimately, the project of metamodernism seeks to evoke a paradigm shift in the human sciences. Imagine a future where metamodernism is indeed a dominant framework. What would such a world look like?

**Jason:** Scholars are notoriously bad at predicting the future. I've personally gotten political predictions wrong – take the last U.S. presidential election, for example.

So, I won't pretend I can foresee precisely what a metamodern future would look like. What I can do is say what I'd like to see.

In a metamodern future, one shift I imagine is a kind of de-pathologizing of academia. One of the problems with postmodernism is that people in the humanities often struggle to justify what they do. If the purpose of the English department is just criticizing literature, then why would anyone want to teach it – or study it? A friend of mine in the English department once joked that his main job was taking students who loved a piece of literature and showing them how terrible the book or its author was, leaving them feeling crushed.

In a metamodern version of the academy, critique wouldn't disappear. You could still analyze *Moby-Dick* and identify its problems or the author's biases. But then you'd move beyond critique toward a mode of flourishing that contributes positively to the values of the humanities. That orientation could restore a sense of purpose in the humanities and break down the walls between the Ivory Tower and the rest of the world.

This is also why I argue for taking philosophy to the streets. I think the metamodern ethos could help reshape global political discourse as well. Postmodern skepticism, for all its merits, proved dangerously portable. *Fox News*, for instance, quickly learned how to weaponize skepticism to undermine trust in knowledge itself. Questioning authority is healthy, but when skepticism becomes a tool of manipulation, it's dangerous. A zetetic orientation toward knowledge – grounded in humility and compassion – could help restore the credibility of scholarship and foster more constructive disagreement in pluralistic societies.

I also imagine metamodernism branching into multiple forks – Metamodernism A, Metamodernism B, Metamodernism C – each taking different directions. I'd be happy for the movement to fork if we also learn to disagree compassionately with one another.

Another future dimension is hylosemiotics and its invitation to multispecies flourishing. A metamodern future requires us to rethink our relationship with the environment. Many of us in the academy are deeply worried about anthropogenic climate change, but we often lack adequate philosophical tools to grapple with it. Hylosemiotics, I hope, is one small step in that direction. I was encouraged, for instance, when someone working in animal communication reviewed it positively.

I would also expect metamodernism to help break down disciplinary silos. Of course, specialization is necessary – training in a discipline is often pragmatically necessary to get a job, and many disciplines have practical methods or ways of thinking that require significant effort to master – but rigid adherence to disciplines can also create tunnel vision. I've seen fields go through “turns” that are irrespective of “turns” in other fields. Sometimes, even the same “turn” meant opposite things

in different disciplines. For example, the ontological turn in political theory was basically the opposite of the ontological turn in anthropology. The result? Scholars at the same conference presenting on the same “turn” but talking past each other.

That’s partly because many disciplines were articulated in the 19th century around arbitrary distinctions. In the U.S., for example, sociology was associated with the study of “civilized” peoples, whereas anthropology was linked to “primitive” peoples. That distinction doesn’t make sense, yet in some respects it continues to shape how fields are separated. So, a metamodern future would need to rethink and revise many of these artificial disciplinary boundaries.

And of course, there’s room for speculation. I’d love to see science-fiction writers, playwrights, or filmmakers take these ideas and imagine what a metamodern world might look like. I don’t believe in utopia as a final state or “end of history” – my process social ontology rejects that. But I believe in *eutopia*: good societies, better societies, futures worth striving for. I’d be thrilled if others riffed on metamodernism in speculative or creative directions, and I’d be happy to collaborate with anyone who wants to explore that terrain.

**Augustas:** In the final lines of your book, you describe the metamodernist project as, and I quote: “scattering of seeds”<sup>16</sup> – a beginning rather than a conclusion. If metamodernism is to flourish as a paradigm for the human sciences, what kind of work is needed next?

**Jason:** One of the most important things is to get metamodernism out of the academy and into the streets. And I mean that pedagogically, too. People are shaped by formative experiences – sometimes in college, but often much earlier in life. That’s why I think metamodernism can’t remain a purely academic project. I once wrote a short essay titled *Metamodernism as the Pedagogy of Revolution*<sup>17</sup>, riffing on Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I’m not the person who can fully do that work, but I would love to see schoolteachers, popular writers, novelists, and artists take up metamodern ideas. The academic uptake has been wonderful, but there’s much more to do.

For readers of this interview, there’s still a lot of philosophical terrain to explore: ideas to refine, arguments to resolve, and applications to develop. But there’s also plenty of work beyond the academy. I’ve already heard from people outside academia catching up to me – a labor organizer in Chicago found some of these ideas

<sup>16</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. *Metamodernism: The Future of Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, 285.

<sup>17</sup> Storm, Jason Ananda Josephson. “Metamodernism as the Pedagogy of Revolution: Response to Special Review Symposium.” *Religion & Theology*, 2024, vol. 31, no. 1–2, 129–136.

useful, a Turkish artist drawing inspiration from the book. Those are beginnings – branching points, mutations – and that’s what I mean by scattering seeds.

Of course, academic work matters too. There’s a real need to develop the framework further and apply it across different fields. I’ve already seen promising examples: one dissertation on hip-hop uses the theory of social kinds to analyze how hip-hop communities police themselves, and the genre evolves as a social kind. That’s exactly the cross-application I hoped to see.

But most urgently, the work lies outside the academy. And I’ll admit – that’s been the hardest for me personally. I live in a small college town in the woods of western Massachusetts, and that gives me much less time to interact with non-academics – the “streets” are mostly empty. That’s why being here, traveling, speaking, and most importantly – listening – has been such a gift. Because listening is part of it, too. One of the dangers of academia is that scholars stop listening. The thinkers I admire most are those who kept listening, kept changing, kept growing throughout their careers. For me, this speaking tour has also been a listening tour, hearing some great things from you and others in Vilnius.

Augustas Pinkevičius  
Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Lietuva

METAMODERNIZMAS IR TEORIJOS ATEITIS: INTERVIU SU JASONU ĀNANDA JOSEPHSONU STORMU

**SANTRAUKA.** Šis interviu su Jasonu Ānanda Josephsonu Stormu buvo atliktas Vilniuje 2025 metų birželio mėnesį, kai vyko 10-oji Europos Vakarų ezoterizmo studijų draugijos (ESSWE10) konferencija. Pašnekovas yra Williamso koledžo religijotyros profesorius, Mokslo ir technologijų katedros vadovas, knygų „The Invention of Religion in Japan“ (2012), „The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences“ (2017), „Metamodernism: The Future of Theory“ (2021) ir „The Genealogy of Genealogy: Nietzsche, Foucault, and the Coils of Critical History“ (numatoma 2026), išleistų Čikagos universiteto leidykloje, autorius. Pokalbyje nagrinėjamas metamodernizmas kaip atsakas į postmodernizmo ribas ir platesnį teorinio nuovargio jausmą, kuris yra apėmęs humanitarinius ir socialinius mokslus. Aptariamoms temoms aprėpia ne tik metamodernizmo konceptualų ir kontekstinį pagrindą, bet ir kritinį santykį su esminėmis postmodernizmo problemomis bei perspektyvas ateičiai. Publikuojamas redaguotas interviu tekstas išlaiko autentišką pokalbio toną ir struktūrą.

**RAKTAŽODŽIAI:** metamodernizmas, postmodernizmas, kritinė teorija, mokslo filosofija, humanitariniai ir socialiniai mokslai.