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Naerebout, F.G.; Beerden, K.

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Introduction: An Inquiry into the Origin, Development and Meaning of Human Life

A Personal Account of the Scholarship of Henk Versnel

Frits G. Naerebout and Kim Beerden

Let us prefer a history of inconsistency
to the myth of coherence.

VERSNEL 1990a, 95

...

Mais, même si on met entre parenthèses la question de la vérité, il nous semble surtout que le postulat de la cohérence donne lieu à des lectures plus intéressantes et plus riches.

DUFLO 2013, 38

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The title of this introductory chapter is just a slight variant of the subtitle of Henk Versnel's first published book, his doctoral thesis of 1970.¹ Our intention is to show how underneath all his learning, his thorough knowledge of the literature and close reading of the sources on a wide range of subjects, there is to be found a continuous effort aimed at understanding what makes humans tick. We argue that his main subject was never some abstraction ('ancient religion'), but always the actual life of past individuals and their lived experience, especially as expressed in ritualized behaviour. Consequently, we see his varied publications not as a mixed bag filled with all kinds of interesting items (although they are that too), but as a coherent whole that is larger than the sum of its parts and derives additional interest from its very coherence.

Versnel would not necessarily agree to such a big, overarching characterization of his work. As we will repeatedly see in what follows, he would rather stress the unpremeditated, fortuitous nature of his studies, as opposed to our

¹ Versnel 1970. Its subtitle: *An inquiry into the origin, development and meaning of the Roman triumph*.

‘myth of coherence.’ This is impossible to contradict, and his own account of his career clearly illustrates how it depended upon chance events at every turn. But his inside view – we might call it the emic perspective – is only one way of looking at it. We are looking from the outside – the etic perspective – at a corpus of work, which from our point of view is connected by a number of common threads. In part this is something that is in the eye of the beholder, in part something that neither Versnel, nor most others could see at the time, but which is very real nevertheless: general tendencies in scholarship make their influence felt even when they remain, at least at first, largely unrecognized. We will try to strike a balance between both perspectives.

As the subtitle of this chapter makes clear, what results is a truly personal account – in the sense of being rather more subjective than is usual for academic publications, even those of the more celebratory *Festschrift* kind. This subjectivity is obviously part and parcel of Versnel’s own narrative, but it is also colouring our attempt to make sense of his scholarly career. We cannot claim to deliver a dispassionate analysis, both of us being too close to the object of our enquiry.² Hopefully, this will not so much invalidate our analysis, as add some extra layers to the story that is being told here.

1 A Bare Bones Biography

Hendrik Simon Versnel was born in Rotterdam on October 10, 1936. He went to school in Rotterdam, graduating from the Gymnasium Erasmianum in 1956. He studied Classics at Leiden University, obtaining the ‘kandidaats’ (BA) in 1959, and the ‘doctoraal’ (MA) in 1962. In the same year, he married Marijke E. Hoogvliet, his beloved wife of now more than sixty years, and mother of his two daughters. From 1962 to 1970, he taught Greek and Latin at the Libanon Lyceum in Rotterdam, and in 1970–1971 at his old secondary school, the Erasmian Gymnasium. In 1967 he was also employed by Leiden University in the untranslatable position of ‘wetenschappelijk ambtenaar 1ste klasse in tijdelijke dienst’ (a temporary research job). In 1968 NZWO (the Dutch Research Council) gave a subsidy to Professor J.H. Waszink for research into the Roman triumph – a project to be carried out by Versnel who had already been working on that subject for some time. In 1970 he defended his dissertation.

2 Over a period of almost half a century Versnel was Naerebout’s teacher, mentor, PhD supervisor, chair and colleague. He was on Beerden’s PhD committee, and she has organized a number of seminars at which Versnel was an invited speaker. For both, he was and is a continuous source of inspiration, and they are honoured to call him a close friend. After Versnel’s retirement, Naerebout kept the study of ancient religion alive as an integral part of the curriculum at the History Department of Leiden University, and now Beerden has taken up the torch.

In the following year, he started to work full-time at Leiden University in the History Department, in a permanent post as assistant professor. In 1978 he was promoted to *lector*. When the lectorate was abolished in 1980, he became a full professor, and he worked in this capacity until his retirement in 2000. From 1994 he was the *ordinarius*, and chair of the Ancient History section.

Versnel was a welcome guest at other institutions, both national and certainly international: he was visiting professor at Leuven University; at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, Section Sciences Religieuses, in Paris; at the University of South Africa, Pretoria; at New York University (twice); at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton; and at the University of California at Berkeley. His other appearances abroad and at home, as guest lecturer, on PhD committees, and so on, are too numerous to mention.

Since 1997 he has been a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW). He was honoured with a *Festschrift* in 2002,³ and in 2005 was made a *doctor honoris causa* at the University of Heidelberg. In 2021 he received the Orde van de Nederlandse Leeuw, a high Dutch royal order awarded for exceptional scholarly or scientific merit.

In addition to his many publications to be discussed in ample detail below, Versnel has been a long-time editor of the series Religions in the Graeco-Roman World (previously Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain) and Studies in Greek and Roman Religion, both published by Brill, Leiden,⁴ of the journal *Mnemosyne* and its Supplementa, and of the journal *Lampas*. Readers with an interest in henotheism and the like but who have no particular affinity with questions of Versnel's scholarly career may start on page 63.⁵

2 Henk Versnel as a Product and a Representative of His Day and Age

Anyone who is even a little at home in the history of ancient religion, will think of Versnel as someone who has contributed many insights to that field, from archaic Greece to early Christianity. And rightly so: the present volume, exclusively dedicated to his work, amply attests to the fact that his writings had a considerable impact. Probably the only insider inclined to play down his importance and influence is Versnel himself. He is relentlessly self-deprecating,

3 Horstmanshoff et al. (edd.) 2002.

4 The three (EPRO 1961–1992, vols. 1–124, continued as RGRW from 1992, vols. 125–, and SGRR 1980–1994, vols. 1–7) are now amalgamated in RGRW online. Versnel was editor of SGRR and RGRW for a combined total of over 30 years.

5 Cf. Versnel 1990a, 1.

and considers himself to be a minor player, while others – he will readily provide you with a list of names – operate, to his mind, in another, higher league. He has come back to this so often, over so long a period, that one cannot but conclude that this is no affectation or false modesty on his part. When asked for an interview in 1990 he reacted: “An interview, why? You are talking to an unimportant historian who works in an unimportant field of research.”⁶ Please note his assessment of the limited significance not only of his own work, but also of his chosen field of studies. Students of ancient religion are not going to save the world.⁷ Also note that uselessness does not imply meaninglessness.

Apart from just being modest, Versnel complains of “not being able to think very well” and of a bad memory.⁸ He speaks facetiously, but with more than a touch of seriousness, about his defective memory in a postcard he sent to his colleagues in 1988: “I am now at the same spot [in Greece] where 18 years ago, immediately after I got my job at the Leiden Ancient History Department, I wrote to my colleagues Den Boer, Pleket and Wes that I had a good grasp, at least chronologically speaking, of the Battles of Mutina and of Perusina. At present I have to admit that so many years after, I dare not speak with any confidence about their date, or the parties concerned and their motivation.”⁹ Versnel would probably call this a realistic assessment of his abilities – it is all relative, of course.

Sometimes his self-mockery takes on a more grim form, when he speaks about his “fear to be unmasked”, a fear deepest down that he is a fraud, compared to all these intellectual giants on whose shoulders he stands (which makes him dizzy, he says).¹⁰ On the other hand, he is prouder of his achievements than he cares to admit – to be self-deprecating does not necessarily mean that you are not pleased when you receive praise. Maybe he even expects some praise or at least acknowledgement. Though there is a decidedly anarchistic streak in Versnel’s character, this does not mean that he is insensitive to at least some social conventions. Should we speak of an inconsistency here? It might be an example of the winking process described by Versnel himself as

6 Versnel 1990c, 48.

7 Cf. Versnel’s 1995 remarks on a *gymnasium* (grammar school) education as quoted by Ruyters 2022: “The *gymnasium* is an educational reserve where people need not be ashamed of pursuing useless ways of imparting meaning”, but after you have forgotten all you have been taught there, it leaves you with “an exceptional appreciation of culture.” Cf. Versnel 1994b, an insightful, humorous and moving exploration of a/his *gymnasium* education.

8 Versnel 1990c, 48.

9 Private collection.

10 As always, Versnel singles out Vernant and Burkert, “two giants ... the great innovators of the second half of the twentieth century ... creators of radically new and influential blueprints *bonnes à penser* [denkontwerpen].” (personal letter, 2015).

a common human attribute: now he looks with the left eye and it is nothing much what he has been doing, now with his right eye and it is quite something. We think that *we* can safely state that Versnel's *oeuvre* has been of quite exceptional importance and will remain so for the foreseeable future, whatever his own opinion.

No one is born an influential scholar. First you must have something to say, next you must be able to say it. For most people, writing is a laborious process. Publications are the fruit of working like a dog. For Versnel it was no different. Indeed, he stresses that writing for him always was a painful process, and even more so when writing in a foreign language.¹¹ As he toiled away at his papers and books, he slowly built a reputation and a career. Slowly: he finished his PhD eight years after he got his MA. During that period he published just two papers. It was only in 1972 that his publishing really took off: there were two to four items per year – chiefly in Dutch. It was in the 1980s and especially 1990s that the trickle of publications turned into something like a flood (he was counted amongst the most productive historians in the Netherlands).¹²

His early work of the seventies was already quite mature. We have to realize that by that time he was nearing the age of 40, and had done rather more reading and thinking than the average beginning scholar nowadays.¹³ Indeed, his career is one that cannot be conceived of today. Nowadays, people usually have published widely even before they get their PhD, preferably in English – in the Netherlands, the use of the native Dutch language is in many cases actively discouraged.¹⁴ Whether from this pressure cooker will come scholarship that

11 In an interview (De Vos and Versnel 1998) Versnel speaks of his scholarship as a burdensome task to which he devotes himself “with a near-Calvinistic ethos” and from which he derives no joy or pleasure; it is drudgery plodding along, endless tinkering, in one word: “misery.” De Vos notes that in spite of this jeremiad, Versnel displays a catchy enthusiasm for his research subjects.

12 Van Delft 1994: Versnel in seventh position (over the period 1988–1992).

13 The large number of references in his reviews (e.g. Versnel 1972, 369) is astonishing – keeping in mind that we speak of a period many years before the Internet (late 1980s) and Internet services, esp. *www* (1991–), and bibliographical databases. Disarming (or exasperating): “Solely to show my interest I mention a few studies which may have escaped the author” (Versnel 1974b, 330).

14 Kossmann 1995, expected Dutch to survive as a language for historical scholarship, but warned of the pressure exerted by “research managers.” By now, we can conclude that Dutch indeed survives, but barely so, and that the ‘research managers’ have prevailed. An eloquent commentary: Draaisma 2005. A Taalunie Report (Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren 2016) set out a strategy to reverse this development – as yet without any apparent success (Taalunie 2021, 372, shows that if anything, the position of Dutch at Dutch universities has continued to deteriorate). One of several grounds for their argument was that the use of one's native language in higher education and scholarship will stimulate analytical thinking, formulating a train of thought, debating skills and so on,

can stand comparison with products of the slow cooking practised by Versnel and his contemporaries, remains to be seen. Maybe yes – but still at some price.

We will for now take the calibre of Versnel's writings for granted and consider them in a different light: having used the word *oeuvre*, with its connotation of a more or less coherent body of work, we must substantiate our assertions.¹⁵ Of course, there are certain recurrent themes to be distinguished, which will be addressed below, but can we also grasp something that characterizes his scholarly output as a whole? As we have already seen, Versnel himself rejects the very idea: according to him, his writings are a haphazard collection of studies that came about in a haphazard way. There is no reason to doubt this: as to such issues of contingency, let us note that Versnel might have been lost to the study of ancient religion, and to *Altertumswissenschaft* altogether, if his mother had not served spinach as a vegetable dish on the very day that he, as a student of biology, had had to practise dissection upon a frog. He decided to switch to Classics. Not every change of direction is predictable.

Neither is every choice unpredictable. We see his main body of work as a long, concerted attempt to understand human life.¹⁶ The ultimate motivation of Versnel's work seems to lie in the wish to understand what human existence is all about. This not so much concerns explaining why we exist, let alone the meaning of everything, but investigating the human attempts to make (some) sense of things, and how this influences the ways in which humans act (or do not act). What drives humans? Why are they cruel and why altruistic? Why are they lying, and why honest? Why all of this at the same time? Such an endeavour, of course, might be regarded as the motivation behind most scholarship and science (and art). But we want to maintain that with Versnel the *condition humaine* is of special and central importance.¹⁷

not only in one's mother tongue but in every language (ibid. 22). This seems very applicable to Versnel's career.

- 15 Of course, it is not our intent to hammer square pegs into round holes. Versnel had to find his voice, and in his bibliography there are some anomalies (from the etic perspective) or miscellaneous publications (from the emic one). Most importantly, his publications on the Lapis Satricanus, together with a number of other studies of aspects of early Roman religious history – although here, too, several of Versnel's central interests are already emerging.
- 16 See the motto taken from a novel by J.J. Voskuil which opens Versnel 2005: "Wat bewoog mensen in godsnaam om de korte tijd dat ze op aarde waren op deze wijze door te brengen" ("What for god's sake made people spend their short earthly lives in this fashion").
- 17 Pre-supposing there is something to be learned about human existence. Eagleton 2008, 41: "if existence really were unintelligible, it would be impossible to pass moral judgements on it, such as the judgement that it is empty of significance." We think you could turn this on its head, and argue that moral judgements (for Versnel's, see immediately below) are an important tool to render (human) existence intelligible (even if bereft of significance).

We could quote many passages from his books and articles, but often one would have to read between the lines as well. And it is in ephemera such as interviews and journalistic contributions that more of Versnel's personal attitudes shine through.¹⁸ Here just one, but profoundly revealing quote. In a 1992 interview in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, Versnel says: "It would be better never to have been born ... Because of their great and gruesome consciousness human beings are the only animals who know that things are coming to a bad end. For themselves and for the world as a whole." In that same interview he is asked what makes him happy. "That I have no grandson, that God does not exist, that the Berlin Wall has come down, that I have never killed anybody." And what keeps him from being happy? "That I have no grandson, that God does not exist, that the Berlin Wall has come down, that I have never killed anybody."¹⁹ The interview is light-hearted, but with a distinct tragic lining. There is an inherent sadness about the human condition, which no one can escape, and Versnel is painfully aware of it. This empathic sadness, sometimes developing into full-blown *Weltschmerz*, we think explains a lot about his work. We will come back to Versnel's humanism, his concern for the "perennial puzzles of the human heart",²⁰ as we examine the manifold influences on his work.

When we look at Versnel's Dutch-language articles it is immediately obvious that almost every subject that came to occupy him, was first discussed in the pages of the journal *Lampas*.²¹ These were also topics that featured in his lectures during his thirty years at Leiden University. It all culminated in his three Inconsistency volumes,²² where more than half of the subjects Versnel has been working on at any stage in his career is brought together. Looking at this dedication to a relatively small number of research subjects across several decades, it does not seem far-fetched to see Versnel's output as the result of a long-running project of ever-increasing refinement.²³ One should not understand 'project' as a conscious blueprint or master-plan – the existence of

18 See Naerebout 2001 for a detailed account and some additional ruminations about the *Mensch* Versnel.

19 Frisch and Versnel 1992.

20 Howe 2006, 54.

21 Naerebout 2017, on the twelve articles that Versnel contributed to *Lampas*.

22 Versnel 1990a, 1993, 2011a. Counting his *Coping with the gods* (Versnel 2011a) as the third volume in the Inconsistency series even though it was never 'labelled' as such – Versnel himself agrees and indeed considers *Coping* as the pre-eminent volume of the triad (personal message).

23 'Refine' may also be understood as 'complexify': one of Versnel's favourite quotes is from J.Z. Smith: "The historian's task is to complicate, not to clarify" (Smith 1978, 129). Cf. Bonnet 2012: "l'ambitieux programme de complexification et de clarification conjointes." Versnel 2005, 293: "evolving or *dissolving* into a more sophisticated discussion." (our italics). Versnel 2002, 57–58: "Fortunately, things are less simple ... and in being less

which Versnel so vehemently denies. “I was playing around with things, without a specific long-term goal ... something caught my eye, and made me wonder.”²⁴ It is this that he himself considers his main catalyst: continuous wonderment, a voyage of discovery, leading to ever new, unsuspected vistas.²⁵ Wonderment and *Weltschmerz* combined make a very powerful catalyst indeed.²⁶ The resulting vistas are of course ‘unsuspected’ from the emic perspective only. But let us stay with that perspective for a moment, and let us quote Versnel at some length about his motives: “As people became aware of my interest in ancient religion, I was asked, or volunteered, to do overviews about prayer, Hellenistic religion, Roman religion. My work on early Rome led to my being asked to work on Satricum. I haven’t got the faintest idea why I got involved with the subject of women in the ancient world. There is nothing to connect all these things. And there’s not a word about inconsistencies.”²⁷

From our etic perspective, we beg to differ. Why do things catch one’s eye? Why pursue a topic, and in a particular fashion? On the one hand there are (changing) individual preferences, unexpected incidents and spontaneous acts, which accounts for a certain amount of randomness. But we do not think this would result in a scholarly production that is arbitrary and directionless, because on the other hand there are the current tendencies in scholarship and in society at large – let us call it the *Zeitgeist* for short. This concept is not unproblematic, but in the very generalized sense in which we use it here, we

simple become a lot more interesting. ... Fortunately again, we are still not at the end of the complications.”

24 This and subsequent quotes from personal mail/conversation 2021–2022.

25 All of this explains Versnel’s exasperation when in a public debate an opponent accused him of a lack of wonderment: Kuitert and Versnel 1993, 56, 107, and cf. 102.

26 As in this oft-quoted passage from T.H. White: “The best thing for being sad ... is to learn something. That’s the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then – to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the only thing for you. ... Look at what a lot of things there are to learn.” (White 1959; many reprints and new editions).

27 Personal message. The subjects Versnel chooses to mention are precisely the more miscellaneous ones. Things could be framed differently. And though inconsistency may not be present as a word, it is there on a conceptual level from an early stage (and see below 00000 and n. 00000). Interestingly, Versnel writes about Karl Meuli’s collected papers: “Though quite divergent at first sight, yet these four headings [under which Meuli’s papers are grouped in the first volume] show a marked coherence” (Versnel 1978a, 234). This because papers from the one section illuminate papers from the other; which is of course a valid – and widely applicable – argument.

think it has Versnel's blessing.²⁸ Of course one is not a passive victim of this *Zeitgeist*, it does not dictate what to research and how. Nevertheless, most of us go with the flow, wittingly and unwittingly.²⁹ Versnel knows about the Second Feminist Wave, but he chooses to maintain that he did not feel compelled to write about women in the ancient world because of that, but because of some private reason now forgotten. We, however, choose to foreground precisely the Second Feminist Wave, because that made it quite hard to avoid the subject – not just for Versnel but for many of his colleagues.³⁰ Behind the immediate cause of the individual case, there is the mainspring of the *Zeitgeist*.

Versnel did not arrive at his specific interests out of the blue – this he will not deny, even if he rejects the idea that there is a clearly discernible pattern in those interests, or in how they arose. Several influences on his work are visible. His teachers, and later his PhD supervisors, were J.H. Waszink and Benedikt Hartmann. The first was a pupil of Dölger, Tertullian specialist, and co-founder of *Vigiliae Christianae* and the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, much interested in Roman religion. Versnel greatly admired him. The second was a marvellous philologist and scholar of comparative religion. When Versnel joined the Ancient History Department at Leiden, this was led by Wim den Boer. Den Boer had been a student of the *graecus* B.A. van Groningen and of Johan Huizinga, but also of the historian of religion William Brede Kristensen. Den Boer had written a PhD on Clemens of Alexandria, liked *big* questions, had an interest in historiography and the philosophy of history, in Greek religion and early Christianity, and was ahead of his time in looking at ancient sources from an anthropological perspective – as can be seen from his *Laconian Studies*. He lectured on topics such as women in Greek society and the ruler cult – both the subjects and Den Boer's extensive lecture notes, containing the relevant

28 Versnel 1975a, 83: Versnel considers what one would like to know about scholars and their publications: the character and qualities of every individual; the *Zeitgeist* that colours their perceptions and can be traced in their writings, and the essential and lasting stimuli emanating from their work. Exactly these three perspectives are addressed in this introduction and the third of course is the *raison d'être* of this whole volume. Versnel also speaks of initiation as an interpretative model that "was in the air" (1990b, 46).

29 Interestingly, Emma Aston in her review of the at first sight iconoclastic *Coping with the gods* concludes from recent developments in the field that "Versnel's volume is in some senses swimming with the tide rather than against it" (Aston 2013, 161).

30 In 1979 Marjan Schwegman was appointed at Leiden's History Department as an assistant professor for *Vrouwengeschiedenis*, 'women's history'. She deplored that convincing colleagues to address gender issues was something of an uphill struggle. In the field of Ancient History, however, writing 'women's history' might be called a tradition, now put on a new footing (Pomeroy 1976 was an important milestone). Schwegman must have found that Den Boer, Pleket and Versnel did not need much convincing at all. Trains bound for the same destination move along different tracks at different speeds.

sources and ample bibliographies, seem to point ahead to some of Versnel's research and teaching. At Leiden, however, the next generation always seemed rather reluctant to acknowledge Den Boer as an important influence: the sons rebelling against the father.³¹ We, looking from a more dispassionate distance, think we can see a clear line running from Den Boer to the present, his influence shaping at least part of the research and teaching at the Ancient History Department to this day.

As far as Leiden is concerned, Versnel's colleague Fokke Sierksma was a strong influence as well.³² As a student of religion, Sierksma, with his interest in psychology, anthropology and ethology was rather prescient. At the time his approach turned him into something of a pariah amongst Dutch scholars of religion and theologians, but it drew Versnel's attention. And his Leiden environment had still more to offer: Versnel credits his *collega proximus*, Harry Pleket, with making a true historian out of the philologist Versnel by virtue of his exemplary work.³³

With the background we sketched above, it does not surprise that philology was always the foundation of Versnel's research: typically, a text or a corpus of texts formed his starting point. But there is here also, especially in the person of Sierksma, an inkling of Versnel's penchant for the social sciences. And, when looking at the specific interests of the people who taught Versnel or with whom he came into contact, it seems obvious that they cannot but have stimulated him to take an interest in religion.³⁴ Such an interest was also fostered, according to Versnel himself, by the fact that he had been a believer and active churchgoer, between the ages of fifteen and thirty, before turning into an

31 Pleket 1993 is quite generous (*De mortuis nil nisi bonum*), but not very specific about Den Boer's legacy. In the introduction to Versnel (ed.) 1981, dedicated to Den Boer, Versnel mentions equivocally that "all [contributors] have benefitted from his work", and in Versnel 1978d Den Boer is praised for making plenty of space for staff to develop themselves, but not for an active role in that development itself.

32 Sierksma was already teaching at Leiden, when Versnel was a student there; he continued to do so until his untimely death in 1977. See Dirven and Versnel 1994, 35, where Versnel acknowledges that he was very much influenced, personally and scholarly, by Sierksma, though he only came across him once only (Versnel refers to having other concerns at the time, and to Sierksma's difficult character. Indeed Sierksma's adversarial stance made him an isolated figure in religious studies. But students liked him; Naerebout, whose PhD subject of dance in a religious context was suggested to him by Sierksma, remembers him as extremely generous and open-hearted. He can only wish that Versnel had known Sierksma better, for Versnel's sake). Versnel, however, avidly read Sierksma's publications, and Sierksma's key concept of projection is to be found implicitly or explicitly all over his work.

33 Versnel 1978d, 17.

34 In addition to acknowledging Sierksma (see note 32), Versnel explicitly refers to Waszink as having stimulated his historical interest, "especially the history of religion" (1978d, 17).

agnostic (not an atheist: another kind of believer, as he rightly stresses). He was certainly well-versed in twentieth-century theology, especially the thought of Karl Barth, and this must have proven an excellent intellectual training ground. Later on, Versnel neither could nor wanted to leave this personal religious past behind him: he will always be a post-Calvinist, i.e. a non-believing Calvinist, as he puts it (fortunately a Calvinist with a very open eye for decidedly non-Protestant religious phenomena).³⁵

The ‘non-Leiden’ scholars mentioned by Versnel as having had an influence on his work are manifold. He has always stressed that he derived much inspiration from the French structuralist or semi-structuralist school, especially Jean-Pierre Vernant, and from Walter Burkert and Detlev Fehling and their advocacy of socio-biology/ethology.³⁶ However, he has also extolled a great many others.³⁷ As was typical of the Dutch academic tradition, Versnel straddled the divide between the French and southern European tradition, and the Germanic (German, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian) one.³⁸ What was contributed by whom is something still to be disentangled from amongst the forest of his footnotes. One outcome, however, is predictable: it will be a large and very eclectic company. Such eclecticism is certainly an expression of the *Zeitgeist* – to which we will return in a moment.³⁹ Amongst the individuals

35 Dirven and Versnel 1994, 36.

36 Versnel 2011a, 26–33; 26: “all students of Greek religion stand in debt of at least one of these protagonists, many – including the present writer – of both” (Vernant and Burkert). Cf. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2012.10.19 Response: Versnel on Bonnet on Versnel, *Coping with the Gods*: Versnel taking some trouble over the correction of an unintended slighting remark about Vernant, illustrating his respect for this “giant” amongst scholars. Burkert, however, is singled out as “the most innovative scholar of Greek religion” (Versnel 1990b, 46).

37 We are aware of the serious limitations of citation scores (see Moustafa 2016), but a rough count of people positively referred to by Versnel (excluding strictly historiographic accounts) can help to identify some front-runners: Jonathan Z. Smith, Victor W. Turner (and behind him Arnold Van Gennep), Thomas Kuhn, Eric R. Dodds, Mikhail Bakhtin, Hendrik Wagenvoort, Burkhard Gladigow, Edward Evan Evans-Pritchard, Dan Sperber, Marcel Detienne, Pierre Vidal-Naquet ... and of course people who cannot not be mentioned: speaking about initiation: Angelo Brelich; about epigraphy: Louis Robert; about contemporary Greece: Harriet Du Boulay and Michael Herzfeld; about ritual: James George Frazer and Émile Durkheim. Of course to be extended *ad infinitum* – it would be an interesting exercise to establish to whom Versnel does *not* refer.

38 We say “was typical” because amidst much talk of internationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalism, even if by no means all empty talk, there lurks the danger of parochialism. Certainly the courses taught by Versnel, requiring reading literature in a number of different languages, would at present run into insuperable obstacles.

39 Or was Versnel once again ahead of the game? Cf. Berger 2005, 403: “At the beginning of the twenty-first century the historical profession is characterized by a healthy culture of robust debate, but no consensus on methods, theories and politics. ... A happy

already important during the early years of Versnel's career, Arthur Darby Nock ("facts are sacred") and Karl Meuli certainly stand out.⁴⁰ In *Vigiliae Christianae* of 1978 Versnel speaks extremely positively about Meuli: "he does not provoke irritation and aversion as do his epigones" – because even Meuli's less acceptable flights of fancy are grounded in an impressive empirical knowledge.⁴¹ Versnel's persistent interest in inversion and reversal most probably derives from Meuli. At a later stage, in addition to his admiration for and contact with Vernant and Burkert just mentioned, we might note that Versnel exchanged pre-print information with, *inter alios*, Chris Faraone, David Frankfurter, Fritz Graf, Richard Gordon, David Jordan, Ramsay MacMullen, and Robert Parker. We should also mention Jan Bremmer, only eight years Versnel's junior, whose scholarly career shows quite a number of parallels to Versnel's. They definitely influenced each other, if only because of a certain intellectual antagonism between them. It always was a complex relationship, with reactions leading to counter-reactions, co-operation changing to mutual avoidance, and praise and criticism alternating.⁴²

From specific individuals we come to wider trends. Around 1975, when Versnel's career took off, one of the present authors (Naerebout) arrived in Leiden to study history. His teachers told him repeatedly that he had arrived at exactly the right moment (as probably they have said before and since), now that historiography had entered a new phase: it had done away for ever with *histoire événementielle* and the great men, warfare and diplomacy associated with that (that this turned out not to be quite correct, is of no import in the present context). From that time onwards historiography would occupy itself with the *longue durée* and *le temps conjoncturel*, to borrow Braudel's categories. Historiography, the Leiden students were told, would deal with structures instead of events and individuals: social hierarchies, the economy, political

eclecticism has produced European Social Science History Conferences, organized on a biannual basis by the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, which would leave representatives of an older paradigm-oriented historical science baffled as to their lack of focus and unity. Many historians have expressed concern about the decline of those 'grand narratives' in history writing which can construct and maintain unity and social cohesion."

40 In a personal communication, Versnel adds M.P. Nilsson and O. Weinreich to his Hall of Fame. Versnel 2006b, 326, mentions that a public letter by M.P. Nilsson to A.D. Nock, published 1949, "was one of the first scholarly articles I read."

41 Versnel 1978a, 237.

42 In a personal letter (2015) Versnel list scholars "of a generation younger than mine" who "are on my heels" and closing in, and who "without exception easily surpass me in an oppressive range of skills", viz. Jan Bremmer, Angelos Chaniotis, Richard Gordon, Fritz Graf, Albert Henrichs and Robert Parker. Albert Henrichs sadly passed away less than two years after Versnel wrote this tribute.

regimes. Analysis would replace narrative. The social sciences were the guiding lights. Versnel was part of this major shift. Again, not because of any conscious choices, as he reminds us. But it is crystal clear that he did not do any traditional narrative history, that he was interested in the structural analysis of past societies, and that he looked towards the social sciences: sociology, anthropology, and psychology.⁴³ Quite what one would expect at that time and place.

Versnel, however, can be seen to move in a somewhat different direction compared to the other Leiden historians: he put more weight on psychology. Psychology and an interest in mentality were another strand of the innovative historiography that blossomed around the journal *Annales*: that particular strand was at first rather less in evidence in Leiden, but Versnel embraced it at an early stage. His interest in the individual, in the sense of the individual Every(wo)man (the oxymoron is intentional), appeared to be quite innovative – people are still catching up.⁴⁴ It resulted in an approach towards ancient history in general and ancient religion in particular that could be described as humanist, anthropocentric, or actor-oriented – most of his work centres on what one might call ‘the *modus operandi*’ of the ancient believer. Already in 1978 Versnel praised Meuli’s humane perspective, his ability “auch im Fremdartigen

43 Versnel himself characterizes his approach to the history of (ancient) religion as anthropological history or historical anthropology, or ‘patternism’ (Versnel 1980b, 541). ‘Patternism’ is something of a neologism here: it is not used in the technical sense in which it was introduced in the 1950s and 1960s by the Old Testament scholar Ivan Engnell, or re-introduced by the cognitive scientist Ben Goertzel from the early 1990s.

44 We quote at length the blurb with which Oxford University Press announced the publication of Jörg Rüpke’s edited volume *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (2013): “Ancient religions are usually treated as collective and political phenomena. Apart from a few towering figures, the individual religious agent has fallen out of view. ... To an astonishing degree even in antiquity individual religious action is not determined by traditional norms handed down by family and the larger social context. Options open up, choices are made. On the part of the individual, this development is reflected in changes in ‘individuation’, the parallel process of a gradual full integration into society and the development of self-reflection and of a notion of individual identity. ... Socialization, that is the biographical process of being integrated into ever larger social contexts as well as the individual’s appropriation of religious roles and traditions, and the development of individual identity go hand in hand. Such processes are analyzed for the Hellenistic and Imperial periods down to Christian-dominated late antiquity, for pagan polytheistic as well as Jewish monotheistic settings. ... The broad range of phenomena is focussed by looking for individual agency, the social context of individual action, by analysing concepts of mind and body, by asking for experience and discipleship.” This would do very well as a description of much of Versnel’s output over the past forty years. See also Rüpke 2021: a programmatic piece that seems to advocate an approach to ancient religion adopted long ago by Versnel and others, above all Chaniotis – both go unmentioned.

das Menschliche zu erkennen.”⁴⁵ This notion of common humanity (without which there could not be any comparativism, or even understanding) has repeatedly been stressed by Versnel when combatting the notion of the basic dissimilitude or alterity of ‘the other.’⁴⁶ Angelos Chaniotis characterizes Versnel’s work with such keywords as ‘mentality’, ‘cognitive processes’, ‘emotions’, and ‘the individual’ (as opposed to explorations of ritual as a community effort, for instance ‘polis religion’).⁴⁷ We would add ‘empathy’ (at least for those deserving of it) – without that, it may be impossible to grasp what, to our mind, religion is about: survival in an inhospitable environment and cruel society.⁴⁸ Indeed, ‘histoire des mentalités’, this turn towards the human construction of the world as a mental process, seems a quite appropriate label for Versnel’s actor-oriented approach.⁴⁹

Chaniotis also describes the core of Versnel’s interests in terms of real human experience, everyday practice, and lived religion.⁵⁰ Indeed, all of this

45 Versnel 1978a, 237.

46 Dirven and Versnel 1994, 26. Cf. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2012.10.19: Versnel defends his use of “cultural others” versus “natural humans”, expressions denounced by the reviewer (C. Bonnet), as shorthand for two opposing positions. “They must (and can only) be correctly understood within the discussion of ‘the desperately alien’ concept, in which I myself choose a position ‘between these two extremes’” (cf. Versnel 2011, 15). Beerden’s dissertation (2013), in large part an exercise in comparativism, was much indebted to Versnel in this respect.

47 Chaniotis in the *Laudatio* he pronounced when Versnel was awarded an honorary degree at Heidelberg 2005 (unpublished): “Als Herausgeber des Bandes *Faith, Hope and Worship. Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World* (1981) belebte Versnel das Interesse an der Mentalitätsgeschichte des Altertums.” It is a bit too much to say that Versnel single-handedly (re-)introduced mentality into the study of the ancient world (in the 1960s in France people like Detienne, Vernant, Crahay and Turcan used *mentalité(s)* as a matter of course), but the word is in the title of the volume and in the title of the paper Versnel contributed to it: certainly an important statement. Cf. Dirven and Versnel 1994, 23: “characteristic for the way in which I approach ancient religion is to situate it in the mentality and society of the time.”

48 Versnel speaks of “life [in ancient society] [as] a concatenation of threats and dangers” and in a number of moving quotes from *Prières secrètes de Français d’aujourd’hui* stresses the need to understand and empathize with the very real suffering of people praying in past and present (Versnel 1981a, 1–2, 64).

49 With this – as with any other characterization in this introduction – we are aware of the fact that these are mostly bold generalizations. See for instance Hulak 2008 about the nuances of the concepts of ‘mentalités.’

50 In his introduction to Versnel (ed.) 1981, Versnel speaks of “real life” (xii), and elaborates: “This is a book on men and gods ... it concentrates above all on the human side of this relationship. The emphasis is on the religious attitude of ancient man, his ways of making contact with the divine world, his responses to divine actions ... his tokens of piety or impiety, of belief and disbelief.” (xi). ‘Ancient man’ must be understood as the common (wo)man, in distinction to ‘poets and philosophers’, who come a distant second.

makes Versnel an *avant-la-lettre* proponent of the lived religion approach. Or perhaps rather an example: “I am never conscious of what I am doing. If I am following a trend or moving in the opposite direction, I am not aware of it. I never knew that I was studying emotions: I was just messing around, seeing whether something interesting would come of it.” Nevertheless, choices are not unpredictable as we said above: while “messing around”, Versnel chooses not to study the landed property of Anatolian sanctuaries or the prosopography of Pergamine priesthoods, but concerns himself with the question why there are sanctuaries or priests at all. The general answer is that we have sanctuaries, priests and the whole (im)material apparatus of religious life because humans have certain needs that are met by institutional and non-institutional religion, i.e. a belief system concerning supernatural powers that can (and will) interfere in the natural world.⁵¹ Subsequently, we can hypothesize about what those needs are, by what mechanisms they are met, and what people think those mechanisms are. That is Versnel’s playing field. It is ritualized behaviour where we see all of this in action. As Chaniotis put it: “Er gehört zu den wenigen Althistorikern des 20. Jh., die die Bedeutung der Rituale als Schlüssel für das Verständnis antiker Gesellschaften erkannt haben.” Already in his first monograph, *Triumphus*, ritual and its dynamics were the core subjects – as Chaniotis also notes. Since then several different kinds of ritualized behaviour have been the subject of Versnel’s research.⁵²

After indulging in our ‘myth of coherence’, we will move somewhat in the opposite direction and unravel the different strands that can be observed in Versnel’s work. But before coming to that, we would like to take a closer look at Versnel’s methodology. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, methodology is 1) a body of methods, rules, and postulates employed by a discipline; a particular procedure or set of procedures, and 2) the analysis of the principles or procedures of inquiry in a particular field. Departing from the latter, we must conclude that Versnel never adhered to a particular methodology in the former sense, apart from a few basic principles, some applicable to the humanities and more specifically to history, and some (not our concern

51 Versnel 2011a, 539–559.

52 Bremmer 2019b, viii, mentions Fritz Graf, Richard Buxton, Claude Calame, Albert Henrichs, Robert Parker, and Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood – but not Versnel, nor Burkert or Vernant – as having been “instrumental in moving the study of Greek religion away from issues related to agricultural fertility and towards a focus on myth and ritual, and their contextualisation in Greek culture.” Yet Graf 2002, 113, mentions precisely Burkert, Vernant and Versnel as the instigators of a renewed interest in ritual. Dijkstra, Kroesen and Kuiper, in their introduction which includes a “biographical sketch” of Bremmer, also steer clear of Versnel. We think that a comparison – not undertaken here – of two scholars whose careers and work show no small number of parallels – Bremmer and Versnel –, would have been fruitful, and remains a *desideratum*.

here) relating to classical philology, epigraphy and so on. In his eclecticism, he of course appropriated the results of research applying a number of different methodologies, and his appreciation and understanding of such methodologies went beyond that of most ancient historians, but he never systematically applied any of these methodologies himself.⁵³ Thus, in what follows, we are thrown back on discussing some principles which might be considered rather too basic to spend much time discussing. We think, however, that the tenacity with which Versnel has defended these principles over more than half a century, explains something about the man and scholar, and underlines once again how his oeuvre hangs together. We are also of the opinion that these principles merit our attention because of their exemplariness.

3 How to Do History According to Henk Versnel

In this section of our introduction we would like to present a number of maxims about how one needs to do history which we have distilled from Versnel's work.⁵⁴ He is – apart from everything else – still very much the schoolmaster he was before he wrote his dissertation, always telling people *how* they should tackle a question. His work will present the reader with a hypothesis that is to be tested and amended, and probably eventually rejected, but *how* it should come to that rejection, and how a replacement hypothesis should take shape, must be made very, very clear. Thinking straight is what Versnel tries to do, and what he expects others to do.

3.1 *Maxim 1: Get Your Facts Right*

In 1979 Versnel commented on Naerebout's MA Thesis (which he did not supervise; he warmly endorsed it, but nevertheless considered it overall too speculative and undisciplined): "you are at a crossroads where three roads come together: the one on the left is called: I am firmly convinced; the one on the right: facts facts facts. Take the middle road: this is the difficult one. It requires that the traveller at every stage matches his own convictions with Nock's 'facts are holy' and in that way turns belief into true scholarship."⁵⁵ So facts are indispensable: that is where it all starts. No facts, no argument.

53 This also contributes to the readability of his publications. These are characterized by a certain timelessness: Versnel may discuss jargon that was/is fashionable, but he himself does not use a particular jargon, even if he may borrow left, right and centre such concepts as he finds analytically or rhetorically useful. His texts are dense, but not hermetic.

54 A revised and expanded version of Naerebout 2015a and 2015b.

55 Personal communication, 1979.

Versnel practices what he preaches, and his work has always been based on a thorough knowledge of the relevant sources. In a 1978 review he complained that essential evidence, epigraphical and iconographical, was overlooked: “the hundreds of *kat’onar*, *visu* and *iussu* inscriptions are not ‘also’ evidence, they are basic.”⁵⁶ Sloppy work was severely criticized: “one feels one’s heart sinking.”⁵⁷ And that was a rather mild critique. Authors also ran the risk of being castigated in a ten-page diatribe, because of a host of errors “that surpass everything that I could have imagined.”⁵⁸ That same year he approvingly quoted Karl Meuli: “wir müssen den Leser mit der Fülle des Materials erschlagen.”⁵⁹ Versnel holds Meuli up to us as an *exemplum*: Meuli has theory, he formulates hypotheses, but to him the facts are sacred.⁶⁰ If someone gets the facts right, Versnel is willing to put up with some wilder flights of fancy. He likes the phrase “les défauts de ses qualités”, and thinks such studies are “endearing”, because showing enthusiasm, and not “irritating.” In these terms he praises Jack Winkler’s *Constraints of desire*, because it is spirited and sparkling, but “with both feet on the ground.”⁶¹

As far as “getting your facts (right)” is concerned, a relative weakness is Versnel’s emphasis on textual sources, as one might expect from someone trained as a classical philologist. Archaeological or visual sources are only by exception the focus of the debate – though never completely neglected whenever relevant.⁶² Versnel pays attention to material objects, but mostly when these carry text, and far less so when this is not the case, such as uninscribed (votive) gifts. For a period of time he worked closely together with Folkert van

56 Versnel 1978b. In this review Versnel emends the translation, offers some conjectures that White has missed, presents several examples of the relevant epigraphy, and appears to have mastered the length and breadth of Artemidorus scholarship. The bar is high, for everyone – including Versnel himself.

57 Versnel 1974b, 330.

58 Versnel 1973, in reaction to a review article of his *Triumphus*. Such combativeness did not die down over the years, cf. Versnel 2006a (characteristically, accusing Rüpké of neglecting “inconvenient evidence”); Versnel 2012b. Versnel 1990b, 79 n. 93 dismisses several publications by N. Robertson as unfathomable – in this case there apparently is not even the need to produce arguments.

59 Versnel 1978a, 237.

60 Cf. his appreciation of Habicht (Versnel 1972, 370): “Studien wie diese sind das Brot unserer Wissenschaft kraft ihrer methodischen Materialsammlung und ihrer kritischen Haltung angesichts der aus dem Material hervortretenden Probleme.”

61 Versnel 1990d on the “heldere, soms speelse, maar bovenal nuchtere betoogtrant.” (“clear, sometimes playful, but *above all sober reasoning*” – our italics). Cf. Versnel 1978a, 237: in praise of “sacred level-headedness”, as Karl Meuli called it.

62 As remarked upon by E. Aston (Aston 2013, 162). But cf. Versnel 1985/1986, 152: “religious interpretation cannot dispense with iconography”, adding “but iconography in isolation is even more precarious.”

Straten who in this partnership took care of the iconography of ancient religion. Even if they never co-wrote anything, this was a very fruitful cooperation, with Van Straten publishing in tandem with Versnel.⁶³ Of course, Versnel has chosen his subject matter in accordance with his competence and predilection. But still some of his research could have benefited from a wider range of source material, and, to look at this from the other side, it is a pity that we have been deprived of the light he would have been able to shed upon all kinds of imagery.

3.2 *Maxim 2: Look over the Wall*

Facts are necessary, but facts are no good without theory (nor is theory without facts: this is what the middle road is all about). You need facts, but you will never arrive at a new insight on the basis of those facts without applying some theory. In an important interview with colleague Lucinda Dirven Versnel distinguished between butterflies and caterpillars, i.e. theorists and empiricists.⁶⁴ Jean-Pierre Vernant is a butterfly. Franz Cumont is a caterpillar. Of course, very clever caterpillars, such as Louis Robert and Arthur Nock, do not get stuck at the caterpillar stage, but turn into chrysalides and subsequently into butterflies. The real challenge, however, is to be both butterfly and caterpillar at the same time (the metaphor makes this an impossibility – but as the metaphor is about human mental operations, Versnel seems to suggest that we should consider the impossible to be possible after all – with Walter Burkert as a representative). In a 1972 review, he praises a study as fundamental, but lacking in theory;⁶⁵ in another review, of 1975, he declares that the main *desideratum* is a sociological and psychological study of the evidence;⁶⁶ in 1986 he finds disciplinary isolation to be a drawback: the book being reviewed was in dire need of a dose of anthropology.⁶⁷ For questions that interest him, Versnel turns to social scientists, to “those who are trained to ask questions.”⁶⁸ Angelos Chaniotis notes how he “stets die Auseinandersetzung mit den Theorien und den Methoden der Soziologie, der Sozialanthropologie, der Ethnologie und der Religionswissenschaft sucht.”⁶⁹ One could add psychology and ethology, mentioned by Versnel himself when, at a Fondation Hardt conference, he released

63 See Van Straten 1976b; 1981. Van Straten was also co-editor of the SGRR series.

64 Dirven and Versnel 1994, 23. The distinction derives from I. Sevcenko, see Versnel 1993a, 34–35.

65 Versnel 1972, 369.

66 Versnel 1975b, 494 (quoting Elias Bickerman).

67 Versnel 1986, 549.

68 Dirven and Versnel 1994, 24.

69 Chaniotis, *Laudatio*, Heidelberg 2005 (unpublished).

the following bomb shell (the detonation reverberates in the work of several of his pupils): “The classicist must allow himself to ‘become’ a psychologist (or sociologist, anthropologist, ethologist for that matter, as far as his health, capabilities and efforts will allow him). The alternative is that he refrains categorically from any interpretation in the real sense of the word.”⁷⁰ That will not have been to everybody’s taste. Vernant definitely was not pleased; he tried to cure Versnel of his silly ideas, by addressing him with the following words: “Monsieur, la psychologie est morte.”⁷¹ Versnel thought otherwise. He does turn to psychology and the other social sciences – admitting that in using them, he will always be a bungler (as will every other ancient historian) – but there is no other way.⁷²

So Versnel is critical of a dearth of theory, but appears equally critical of theory that is insufficiently reined in by facts: especially structuralists come in for criticism, because Versnel finds it suspicious when all things fall into place – a coherent world without room for inconsistency⁷³ – although sometimes he seems to appreciate it when at least some things fall into place.⁷⁴ In 1984 he warns of the danger of arbitrariness,⁷⁵ in 1985 he speaks of a study of the god Pan as the “creation of a learned 20th-century *artist*” (our italics), as a

70 Versnel 1981b, 189. Versnel in his response to Konaris (see below page 308 n.19) calls this remark “conceited.” It probably was *very* arrogant at that time and place, in that company. But that does not make it any less true: we have quoted it often and it has been inspiring to us and to several generations of Leiden historians, classicists and archaeologists. As for the latter, see for instance Miguel John Versluys acknowledging the influence he has undergone from Versnel, especially from his “extremely wide and well-filled theoretical toolbox” (homage spoken 8 October 2016 at the round table, unpublished). In the same year Versnel was very explicit about the need for psychology and the study of emotion, when “looking for a sense of belonging”: 1981c, 61.

71 See below 318 n.19. It might be noted that already in 1974 Versnel deplored that in the literature on ruler cult the psychology of religion was almost completely absent (Versnel 1974d, 154).

72 Dirven and Versnel 1994, 25. Auffarth (1994, 102) mentions how Versnel takes the best of everything: “Like a good old Dutch merchand [sic] he chooses the best of all over the world and rejects what is inedible. All is digested and offered with a spice of humour.” The evaluation of those “good old” spice traders has rather shifted of late, but Auffarth’s intention is to give an unmitigatedly positive view of Versnel’s eclecticism.

73 Versnel 2006b, 321: “the paradigm tyrannized the evidence.” In this instance, he speaks of the fertility paradigm, but his worries about “recalcitrant pieces of evidence” are much more general.

74 Versnel 1985b, 234: “a consistency, not expected before.”

75 Versnel 1984, 421. But, Versnel admonishes us, this is a must read – brilliant, revealing, productive, enjoyable, highly original, even bewitching – while “maintaining an attitude of honest criticism” in order to avoid “injuring yourself.”

construction – though interesting and provocative – instead of a re-construction.⁷⁶ This line of criticism runs all the way from the 1970s to *Coping with the gods*.⁷⁷ But note how his criticism of the ‘École de Paris’ and its epigones is always mingled with high praise for Vernant and for the best that his *équipe* has to offer.⁷⁸ Versnel will always admire the more inspired flights of fancy, but will also remind us of the fate of Icarus. Facts, facts, facts.

In this context Versnel’s famous footnotes may be mentioned: those footnotes, or rather their length and number, have occasioned some debate. He states in 1970: “the amount of literature is always too small when a subject as complicated as the present one is dealt with.”⁷⁹ You cannot have enough in a footnote, nor enough footnotes. But they should be to the point. Versnel complains in 1974 that “besonders bei den Fussnoten beschränkt Weippert sich nicht immer auf das Wesentliche.”⁸⁰ This might raise questions about where ‘essential’ begins and ends, which certainly is not something everyone will agree upon. Versnel was aware of the wonder, amusement, disdain or even disgust with which his footnotes were considered.⁸¹ Two of his contributions to the Dutch journal *Lampas* are without footnotes – and in both instances, he says,

76 Versnel 1985b, 234. In passing, Bourgeaud is also criticized for the lack of anthropology, sociology and comparativism, and “a practically total neglect of the historical setting of the source material.”

77 *l.a.* Versnel 2011a, 33. Naerebout is quoted there as “less sympathising”: he has, however, always thought of Vernant, Veyne, Detienne et al. as extremely inspirational, though in the end their hypotheses remain in several respects unconvincing. Truly less sympathising is Linderski 1984, 565, who spoke of “a torrent of semi-profound banalities in the fashion of the Parisian gurus” in the context of his praise for Versnel whose work was truly profound. After being taken to task by Versnel for this outburst (1990a, 30, n. 93), Linderski in a self-published addendum to his original review doubles down on his criticism and states that “somebody has to call juvenile fancies by the name they deserve.” (https://www.academia.edu/35402387/J.Linderski_Review_of_H.S._Versnel_ed._Faith_Hope_and_Worship_Aspects_of_the_Religious_Mentality_in_the_Ancient_World_1981_in_AJP_105_1984).

78 Versnel 1978a, 238: Karl Meuli is quoted approvingly as stating that “the intuitive mind” in formulating some hypothesis “erfindet nicht, er findet” (“does not come up with something, but comes across something”). See Versnel 2011a, 33.

79 Versnel 1970, 8. This is rather different from the ‘less is more’ approach that has been advocated by several of our Leiden colleagues. They are wrong: see Nimis 1984 – whose article is illuminating about more than just footnotes. Cf. Dirven and Versnel 1994, 23: “The factual knowledge should be clear from the *many footnotes* [our italics] and the theoretical perspective from the overall structure.”

80 Versnel 1974c, 318.

81 E.g., R. Turcan: “H.S. Versnel remue beaucoup d’idées et non pas seulement une énorme littérature plus ou moins spécialisée, sur des dossiers complexes, ou il excelle à débusquer les points cruciaux” (Turcan 1992, 376). Cf. Bonnet 2012; Pirenne-Delforge 1993, 398–399; Pirenne-Delforge 2013, 351; Betz, 1996, 463. Extensive footnotes, as a result of extensive reading, are not a late development: they had already been commented on by Ogilvie

this was quite a relief to the editors.⁸² Versnel keeps playing around with the footnote, “das Fundament der Wissenschaft” – see *Coping with the gods* where he addresses the issue explicitly.⁸³ The display of learning in his footnotes certainly became a hallmark: Richard Hamilton in a review states that “this volume’s combination of comprehensive annotated bibliography and blunt, eye-catching and sometimes baffling text seems quintessentially Dutch ... it could have been written by Henk Versnel.”⁸⁴ Surprising how something that was, and still is, quintessentially German, is now seen as typical of Dutch scholars (or was it mostly the bluntness that brought Hamilton to this conclusion?). But it shows how facts and footnotes were always a very serious matter for Versnel, and that this was duly noticed by his readers.

3.3 *Maxim 3: In Applying Theory, Be Eclectic*

Versnel welcomes paradigm changes and the innovation they bring (see maxim 2). At the same time he urges us to take care not to discard the old paradigms, because you are “stupid when you look at history one-sidedly.”⁸⁵ Versnel has progressed to the symbolic-cultural paradigm, however without rejecting the old paradigms of fertility and functionality, as he has repeatedly stated.⁸⁶ One can also think of another *trias*, not so much paradigms as methodologies, the antiquarian-factual, the historical, and the structural as represented by the social sciences. Versnel sees these as “co-operants”, not one of which can be neglected.⁸⁷ As a general rule: shop around, and see what is useful for your particular purposes.⁸⁸ By embracing, and acknowledging, different paradigms and different theoretical perspectives, what he calls ‘polyparadigmaticity’, Versnel

reviewing Versnel’s dissertation (Ogilvie 1973, 76). Versnel 2011a, 18: “Although I am fully ready to offer my apologies for any irritation caused, I have no understanding of it.”

82 See Versnel 1989a, 221.

83 Versnel 2011a, 18–20. “I am quite aware that all this does not suffice as an apology in the eyes of scholars who do not like footnotes. For them, however, I have an, apparently so far unsuspected, way out of the problem: one need not read them (all)!” repeated in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2012.10.19.

84 Hamilton 1995.

85 Versnel 1990a, 49. Dirven and Versnel 1994, 26.

86 Quite forceful in Versnel 1992a, 53–54. Drawing upon different paradigms, one will at the same time bring out the ‘polyvalence’ of the object of study. Cf. Versnel 1993c.

87 Versnel 1980b, 618, on this “trias of co-operants”: “neglect one, and the other two will lose either their relevance or their reliability. Allow one to dominate the others, and this ... will have ... deplorable effects.” Already in Versnel 1970, 6–7, there is a call to look at all hypotheses, and not to take sides in existing debates. An interesting alternative *trias* ‘zooming in’ on the historiography of ancient religion in Versnel 2012a, 17: the god Hermes was “good to think” (Vernant), “good to function” (Burkert), “good to live by/with” (Versnel).

88 From very early on, Versnel pleaded for a pragmatic approach instead of selling yourself to a particular theoretical framework (see Versnel 1970, 6–7).

escapes from the charge of using eclecticism to obfuscate his indebtedness to whatever has influenced his approach.⁸⁹

Versnel has not only taken theory seriously in his research, but his convictions in this matter, and his eclectic voracity have also trickled down to his teaching. In 1989, on a single page (!) of a syllabus for a Leiden seminar, we find: anomaly, ambiguity, inconsistency, classification, cultural code, cognitive dissonance, exclusivism, hermeneutics, social communication and polysemy, with references to Mary Douglas, Quentin Skinner, Michel Foucault, John Lyons, Geoffrey Leech and several others. The syllabus continues with assignments dealing with connotation, cultural symbolism, the fertility paradigm, the myth and ritual debate, functionalist and structuralist approaches, iconography, reversal and inversion, parallelism, utopia and dystopia, cultural markers, anomy, legitimate rebellion, and so on and on, with a bibliography of 120 items.⁹⁰ One could take these assignments, and use them to paint a fairly complete picture of Versnel's oeuvre: the individual assignments add up to the big assignment which he set himself. With hindsight, he spoke of the syllabus and the seminar as "a most alarming experience" – for the students, that is. In this context, it should be mentioned that students who have expressed themselves on social media remember him as "razor sharp [snoei scherp] but kind to students"⁹¹ and a "great man [geweldig figuur], also as a first year tutor."⁹²

3.4 *Maxim 4: Make Sure Your Reasoning Is Sound*

In a 1994 interview Versnel stated: "when it is a question of integrity, about honest reasoning, then I can get flustered."⁹³ Stupidity and blindness are one thing, but falsehood or untruthfulness another: where people start manipulating because of their ambitions or bank account. Versnel as *censor honestus* and *candidus iudex*.⁹⁴ "I have taken it upon myself – and I see this as one of my most important tasks which I also try to fulfil in my teaching – to insert a bit of honesty, if possible, into my scholarship, in order to provide a counterweight to all the terrible deceitfulness in politics and society at large."⁹⁵ If this

89 See Scott 2005. Polyparadigmaticity is also embraced by Versnel because of the heuristic value of a 'choc des opinions' (2012a, 17). However, it appears that this is not so much because, as the saying goes, from this 'jaillit la vérité', but 'jaillit le doute' (we thank Roos 2005 for this turn of phrase). Cf. De Vos and Versnel 1998.

90 Unpublished: private collection.

91 <https://twitter.com/BieTanjade/status/1031940062727028742>.

92 <https://twitter.com/EsdorvanElten/status/1031826519402967040>.

93 Dirven and Versnel 1994, 36.

94 As was said about H. Wagenvoort by J.H. Waszink, quoted by Versnel (Versnel (ed.) 1980, viii–ix).

95 See Naerebout 2001, with several references to a now untraced 1981 document: apparently an in-depth interview with Versnel.

is your ideal, scholarship and the university are bound to disappoint. Versnel, never an optimist, became increasingly disillusioned, both about his institutional environment and about the world and humankind in general: “and once again, I was too much of an idealist.”⁹⁶ More than once he predicted the demise of Europe, and in due course – but sooner than generally expected – of the world.⁹⁷ Humanity’s self-destructive drives worry him deeply.

We suppose that several people have some idea of Versnel’s polemic side: somebody criticizes him, but either has not got their facts right (an unforgivable fundamental flaw, see maxim 1), or takes a wrong turn in their reasoning (bad) or falsely ascribes such a wrong turn to Versnel (worse).⁹⁸ Such foolhardy people can expect an answer twice or more the length of their original critique in which their argument is going to be demolished one step at a time, until there is nothing left. According to Renate Schlesier “hat er wie nur wenige andere zu einem bedeutend genaueren Verständnis vieler zentraler Forschungsaspekte und Detailfragen beigetragen, dabei aber auch manche gewohnte Sichtweisen produktiv außer Kraft gesetzt.” Angelos Chaniotis’ wording is a bit more spirited; he stresses “die humorvolle und schonungslos kritische und selbstkritische Persönlichkeit [Versnells]”, whose argumentation he honestly assesses as “sehr kritisch, sehr scharf, hin und wieder auch aggressiv oder ironisch.”⁹⁹

Only those who read Dutch will know of the controversy that rocked the country (or at least the Protestant part of it) when Versnel addressed the question of Christian belief in contemporary Dutch society. Having lost his faith, he sought, as he put it, to know “where I am situated” – in relation to personal and organized religion. Having been invited to speak at the (Protestant) Free University of Amsterdam on the occasion of their 110th anniversary (1990), he accused religionists who ‘modernize’ the faith by rejecting many beliefs of past

96 Kuitert and Versnel 1993, 96.

97 Frisch and Versnel 1992. Carried to its inescapable conclusion already quoted above, that it would be better not to have been born.

98 Versnel for quite some time was seen at work wearing a baseball cap distributed by a well-known Dutch *DIY* firm with the slogan of their advertising campaign: ‘Dat zeg ik!’, roughly translatable as ‘Just what I said!’ Originally referring to the large assortment and competitive pricing, Versnel appropriated the text to imply that people are bad listeners and one has to repeat or re-phrase one’s argument again and again. Around the same period he liked to repeat the popular phrase ‘Ja toch, niet dan?’ (supposedly coined in Rotterdam), meaning: ‘That is what I think about it, and I take it you agree?’ The phrase could be used to underline one’s argument, but also to criticize another’s faulty argument, hinting that one sees through the aplomb and certainty with which it is presented (thus used repeatedly by Versnel in Kuitert and Versnel 1993, 37, 38, 40). Cf. Versnel 1991d, 35: “Wél blijven lezen, hoor, jongens!” (Hey you guys, don’t stop reading) and Versnel in Kuitert and Versnel 1993, 111: “Passen we goed op?” (Are you still with me? Please stay alert).

99 Chaniotis, *Laudatio*, Heidelberg 2005 (unpublished). Schlesier is quoted by Chaniotis.

orthodoxy, but hold on to their belief in God, of cherry-picking, thus creating their own faith through a process of *bricolage*, but having no authority left to appeal to.¹⁰⁰ This was above all a plea to dare to be honest, rather than an attack on revisionism and a defence of orthodoxy, although some of course understood it as such.

One should read Versnel's rejoinder to his opponents in the ensuing debate in order to see how he tries to argue as logic requires and how he despairs of his counterparts who simply refuse to reason in a straight line, at least according to Versnel. He forcefully rejects the idea that in speaking about inconsistent past phenomena, the modern interpreter could be inconsistent as well: "I see it as my task as a historian to create order by disclosing the disorder out there and explain its function."¹⁰¹ Inconsistencies are to be studied, but otherwise to be avoided, expressed forcefully and succinctly by this scholar widely recognized as the expert in dealing with inconsistencies as: "Ik heb een hekel aan inconsistencies" ("I detest inconsistencies").¹⁰²

Of course, there are more ways to corrupt an argument than by being inconsistent. In 1981 Versnel says: "I have undertaken to be incorruptible in my scholarship – in so far as that is possible, in this world where in politics and society at large everybody is deceiving everybody else."¹⁰³ The danger of corruptibility within scholarship can only have increased now that competition for limited funds has become all-important. Versnel's striving for complete honesty results in a striking self-awareness in many, if not all, of his publications – to which we will return below.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ See Versnel 1991c and 1991d, giving rise to a huge controversy, and later that year reprinted together with the responses of his opponents in a collection of newspaper articles and in Maurice and Noorda 1991. Kuitert and Versnel 1993 is a prolongation of the same polemic. At Easter 1992 an even fiercer controversy erupted. Fiercer, because it concerned possible pagan antecedents for the concept of Jesus' substitute sacrifice – a subject that came rather too close to the basic tenets of the Christian faith. See Versnel 1992b and 1992c. These were again collected in a booklet together with a number of reactions. Never before or after was Versnel's name on the lips of so many of his compatriots, but in the end it probably was a disheartening experience, because the debate was so fruitless, maybe with the exception of Versnel himself who launched himself into this with a wish to know how he himself was situated vis-a-vis the (Protestant) Christian faith in its current manifestations, and may have come out the wiser.

¹⁰¹ Dirven and Versnel 1994, 27. Versnel 1991d, 37.

¹⁰² Dirven and Versnel 1994, 36. Cf. De Vos and Versnel 1998: "I have no intention to propagate inconsistency."

¹⁰³ See above, note 95.

¹⁰⁴ Aston 2013, 162, notes, quite insightful about *Coping with the gods*: "V. is self-conscious throughout with regard to his own approach and its implications. Though the rhetorical manifestation of this self-consciousness occasionally irks, on a more important level it is

3.5 *Maxim 5: Provide Etic Definitions*

First of all, Versnel is a stickler for definitions: we should know what we are talking about. In a 1982 review he criticizes an author for having no definition ancient or modern. “The first thing to do, however, is to define what one wishes to understand by”¹⁰⁵ This sentence to be completed at will – write on the dotted line. The concepts that we work with (as opposed to concepts that are the object of study) should definitely be modern ones. Their use is inevitable and indispensable: “We ask questions that would never have occurred to the members of other societies.”¹⁰⁶ Such outsider’s questions are anachronistic and/or rooted in another cultural background – and there is nothing we can change about that. The concepts and definitions used in asking such questions are what anthropology has dubbed etic ones. Their validity is determined by their usefulness and nothing else, as Evans Pritchard said: “terms are only labels ... the facts will be same without their labels.”¹⁰⁷ Versnel used to say that a definition is an agreement between sensible people. If only ...

3.6 *Maxim 6: Resist the Urge to Make Things Consistent*

We have already seen Versnel’s doubts concerning the all too neat schematic image of society as produced by the structuralists. But other scholars, of whatever hue, have been cleaning up their evidence base as well. In a 1978 review Versnel complains of learning run wild, learning enslaved to fantasy.¹⁰⁸ One should not support one’s suppositions by ever more evidence, but hold them up to scrutiny. Facts may be sacred, but they should not be amassed to support, and customized to fit some preconceived notion. They should be considered on their own merit, in all their glorious contradictoriness. Already in 1976 Versnel asked of us to accept that in his *Bacchae* Euripides does not present Dionysos in a positive or a negative light, or rather does both at the same time, impossibly so and successfully nonetheless. He states that we understand Pentheus, even sympathize with him, but also know that he is on the wrong side of history, fighting a losing battle – a battle which Dionysos must win.¹⁰⁹ Eight years later, Versnel urges us to “accept the ambivalence and inconsistency of the

what allows V. to avoid the pitfalls inherent in such a wildly ambitious book.” Hamilton 1991, in a cautiously positive review, had another adjective in mind: “self-indulgent.”

105 Versnel 1982, 442. Versnel 1991b, 197.

106 Versnel 1986b, 72–73. See also Dirven and Versnel 1994, 34; Versnel 2011a, 551.

107 Evans-Pritchard 1937, 11 (quoted by Versnel 1991b, 185).

108 Versnel 1978c, 285; complaining of “a merciless hunt for facts and interpretations that may confirm the vista.”

109 Versnel 1976.

classical attitudes towards women.”¹¹⁰ And so on. We should not try to plaster over inconsistencies or ambiguities (or use sledgehammers or steamrollers to complete our jigsaw puzzles, as his stronger metaphors have it): they are there and should be included in our analyses of society.¹¹¹ Of course, that (and not so much the modern refusal to acknowledge them – although the two cannot be seen apart) becomes a main theme of Versnel’s work and will be discussed in more detail below. His quote from R. MacMullen neatly encapsulates this: “nothing is true that leaves out untidiness.”¹¹²

3.7 *Maxim 7: Look for the Tertium Comparationis*

When we have got A and B, and these show common traits that have not evolved independently, they either stand in a genetic relationship to each other (A derives from B) *or* both derive from a common background. Versnel favours comparative work as a way to gain an understanding of the parameters of the possible and the probable (again quoting R. MacMullen: “analogy comforts conjecture”).¹¹³ But we also see the *tertium comparationis* cropping up again and again: comparative work might also show that we are dealing with comparable circumstances, or with universal human traits, where others will make up ‘genealogies.’ Thus the common pursuit of a genetic relationship between polytheism on the one hand and Judaism and Christianity on the other might be void because both draw on a common background. Commenting on Naerebout’s MA thesis, which sought to explain similarities between the ethics of the Hebrew Ben Sira (*Ecclesiasticus*) and Cicero’s *De Officiis* by looking for Stoic influence on Ben Sira, Versnel suggested that the ethics might be similar because the socio-cultural backgrounds in which they were rooted resembled each other in many ways. Nobody had said this to Naerebout before – and it was an eye opener. Genetic, evolutionary explanations at that time reigned supreme, and have not disappeared since. Indeed, recently, with the huge interest in reception, intertextuality, and anchoring, such explanations are quite *en vogue* again. This is not to say that they cannot be wholly or partly true, but Versnel, as in so many instances, pleaded for an open-mindedness that will break the common intellectual mould and be on the look-out for alternative interpretations.

¹¹⁰ Versnel 1984b.

¹¹¹ The interview in De Vos and Versnel 1989 is in large part about the need to accept inconsistencies in our sources. Interestingly, Versnel states that to neglect or explain away inconsistent facts is “unfair towards those facts.” Nock would have liked this.

¹¹² MacMullen 1990, 12.

¹¹³ As remarked upon by, e.g., Fritz Graf: Graf 1993, 261. See Versnel 2011a, 65.

3.8 *Maxim 8: Keep Going*

Despite the fact that Versnel has repeatedly said that we should re-construct and not construct (that is: be imaginative, by all means, but on the basis of evidence), he knows very well that in the end “everything is a construct”, as he put it himself.¹¹⁴ Or, as he said in 1996: “we can only give A interpretation: THE interpretation does not exist (or is not attainable).”¹¹⁵ In 1976 he had illustrated this by way of an anecdote. The question after the poet’s intentions is disconcerting for any pupil who has to analyse a poem. But what Versnel found just as disconcerting was the question whether the teacher actually knew better than his pupils. A friend told him the story of the famous Dutch ‘prince amongst poets’ Adriaan Roland Holst who was invited to discuss his poetry with a group of students. When prompted by the students Roland Holst insisted that he was the very last person to know what he meant. All of the suggested interpretations looked plausible to him.¹¹⁶ And as Versnel used to say when a satisfactory conclusion had been reached, or at least seemed within reach: “And so we start all over again and think of something new”, quoting Wilamowitz: “Und so geht es weiter, solange Leben in der Wissenschaft ist.”¹¹⁷ The idea of progress does not really seem to enter into this: every generation re-writes history on an enlarged basis of facts, but their new interpretations are not necessarily any better than the old ones.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, Versnel himself not only speaks of interpretations that are new or different, but of “progress”, even progress that “necessitated radical modifications” of his ideas.¹¹⁹ But obviously, *le dernier cri* is not always an improvement, and could even be retrogression. In that sense, Versnel is right – but we would like to maintain that overall historical scholarship progresses, and that the work of Versnel provides an example of that.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Dirven and Versnel 1994, 25.

¹¹⁵ Versnel 1996b, 47. Cf. 56: “if I repeat myself, that does not mean I am now more confident of my interpretation than before.”

¹¹⁶ Versnel 1976, 8–9.

¹¹⁷ Versnel 1980a, 147.

¹¹⁸ Versnel 1980a, 97: “preference for one possibility over another does not make it a probability, let alone a historical certainty”, with reference to Russell Meigs’ *Athenian Empire*, where we find in the index “probably: *passim*.” Versnel verges from extreme caution to what may look like overconfident statements. De Vos in Vos and Versnel 1998 contrasts Versnel’s professed relativism with the apparent certainty with which he asserts things; Versnel reacts that every now and then he just “likes to advance his ideas with apparent certainty” but that one should not read too much into that: the truth about the past will remain out of our reach. Probably: *passim*.

¹¹⁹ Versnel 2011a, 5.

¹²⁰ Martin 1998. Versnel (1990b, 67) approvingly quotes the anthropologist Ackerknecht to the effect that after half a century we have come back to the same point “but at a higher level.”

In this conviction that there is a multiplicity of valid answers, Versnel is of course a modern, post-World War II, scholar – one even may wonder whether we had not better call him post-modern.¹²¹ The supposed objectivism and disinterestedness of the nineteenth-century scholar have gone out of the window, no matter how much one values empirical research. Despite the ‘sacrality of the facts’ Versnel is convinced, with every other legitimate contemporary scientist or scholar, that meaning is produced, and not found – that even the facts have been canonized by us (and have to be) before we can venerate them as ‘sacred.’ That is not to say that ‘anything goes.’ There is more than one valid outcome, but not every outcome is valid.

In a hyperbolic mode Versnel not seldomly claims things such as: “I am always right”, “it is obvious that my answer is the right one”, “a marvellous book” (about his own work):¹²² this is meant to underline, by way of inversion (one of his favourite subjects), his conviction that any work of scholarship is outdated from the moment it is published.¹²³ Angelos Chaniotis’ appreciation of Versnel’s self-criticism and irony have already been quoted above. Unfortunately, Versnel’s words are sometimes misunderstood and people deplore his arrogance. In general, he tends to overrate the ability of people to detect and appreciate irony, and underrate their propensity to think the worst of someone. Versnel also has a very clear sense of the absurd, which not everybody shares. His mischievous kind of humour will drive some people up the wall.¹²⁴ Indeed, as he himself

121 The *Wikipedia/Encyclopedia Britannica* description of “the postmodern outlook” as “characterized by self-referentiality, epistemological relativism, moral relativism, pluralism, irony, irreverence, and eclecticism” seems quite apt for Henk Versnel (minus the moral relativism). Deconstruction and post-structuralism, often associated with postmodernism – one might say that there the postmodern outlook was pushed to its limits – are rather less to Versnel’s liking: true to his postmodern eclecticism (!) or undogmatic postmodernism, he has not jettisoned his modern trust in the scientific-rational – but with an awareness of the intersubjective, temporary nature of its outcomes. Otherwise, one would have to close shop, he argues. Cf. Versnel 1993, 30–31; Dirven and Versnel 1994, 25. We agree. For Versnel the postmodern man, see also above 7.

122 Versnel 1991d, 37.

123 For instance Frisch and Versnel 1992: “Most of the time I think that most of time I am irrefutably right. But what I am now absolutely convinced of turns out to be somewhat different tomorrow.”

124 Versnel 1975a notes that Bengtson never allows himself any witticisms of pleasantry, “the kind of thing that makes a text more readable.” But which also carries many dangers, as Versnel is quick to add. However, with his very personal style, culminating in *Coping with the gods*, at least in this respect he himself has thrown all caution to the wind. Happily, most reactions are positive: “[the] style [of *Coping with the gods*] is unfailingly lively and frequently amusing” (Aston 2013, 162). Cf. Auffarth 1994, 102; Betz 1996, 464. In De Vos and Versnel 1998 De Vos as a layperson attests to the humour and general readability of Versnel’s work. Versnel reacts that “to have a bit of fun” is what makes scholarship bearable.

realizes, his personality and his demeanour leave few indifferent: with most people it is either love or hate, pleasure or exasperation.

4 The Main Threads

As already announced above, we will now attempt to unravel the different threads or strands that can be observed in Versnel's work – without jettisoning our 'myth of coherence', only operationalizing it at a different level. Versnel's often quite divergent emic viewpoint will again be included. What threads, and how many? If one has to make a list of Versnel's interests and categorize them, there are, of course, several different ways to do so. One of these is reflected in the arrangement of the sections and chapters in this book (partly overlapping with the format of the *table ronde*), which tallies with Versnel's own views: 1) Inconsistencies and other complexities; 2) Myth and Ritual; 3) Magic, Prayer for Justice and Emotion; 4) Self-sacrifice; 5) Henotheism (and a sixth, hidden, section of 'miscellaneous subjects').¹²⁵

We have a different, of course much better, categorization: 1) Coping with a climacteric by way of sacrificial ritual; 2) Coping with a climacteric by way of rituals of reversal; 3) Coping with the god(s) by way of accommodation; 4) Coping with life by way of communing with the gods (and, from our etic perspective as well, a hidden category of miscellaneous publications).

Probably the most striking aspect of our categorization is that we have not included inconsistency. The 'inconsistency trilogy' embraces a lot of the above: this already intimates that 'inconsistency' is more of an overarching interpretative framework than a subject in its own right. From the early 1970s 'inconsistency' became ever more central to Versnel's work, even if the word itself is not (always) used.¹²⁶ Versnel applied it very effectively to many different aspects of ancient religious life, where it helps in the understanding of what was previously misinterpreted as misguided or seen as incomprehensible. This need not surprise. Indeed, if the premise is true that producing and dealing

¹²⁵ Versnel has previously considered myth and ritual, and henotheism as sub-categories of inconsistency, and personal religion and emotion as standing "somewhat apart", not immediately related to magical practices and the like (personal letter 2015). Obviously, with regard to the necessary, but always contradictable business of categorizing, almost anything goes.

¹²⁶ Versnel 1974, 147–148, stresses "ambiguity." Versnel 1976 speaks of the "schizophrenia" of Euripides' audience. In Versnel 1978, 6, "inconsistencies" is used, contrasted with the "strain towards congruence." Cf. Versnel 1978, 14–16, about "two realities" and about inconsistency and ambiguity at a time of crisis. Another, fairly early occurrence of 'inconsistency' is in Versnel 1984, 28: "the only solution is to accept the ambivalence and inconsistency of the classical attitudes towards women."

with inconsistencies is a fundamental feature of the human mind, we will find inconsistencies everywhere – and therefore also in polytheism itself, in magic, in all kinds of ritualized behaviour, and so on.

In what follows, the more important of Versnel's publications are grouped according to our fourfold classification, followed by a general characterization. The whole procedure is of course extremely distortive: the developments of Versnel's ideas over the course of several decades, remain underexposed; moreover, there are no summaries of individual items, and not enough attention is paid to 'the small print', the countless details, especially in the footnotes. The value of his work depends on the big picture: the whole being greater than the sum of its parts is definitely applicable to Versnel's articles and books, which should be read instead of browsed. However, god is in the details – and that holds good as well: pursuing the myriad of subordinate issues dealt with by Versnel in his main text and footnotes is quite rewarding. However, we have to be brief, and cannot do justice to the learnedness of his work – say the 435 footnotes of the first chapter of *Coping*. Our aim is merely to introduce very concisely the four threads we have distinguished, and give the gist of Versnel's most important work, rounding out our account of his career, preparing the reader for what follows, and hopefully easing students of ancient religions into the subject matter by giving them a starting point from which to explore Versnel's work.

We will ignore the miscellaneous publications, comprising text book contributions, ephemera,¹²⁷ reviews, ten publications in two specific clusters, viz. the *lapis satricana* (7 titles) and the Roman triumph (3 titles), and a very few items that could not be fitted easily into our quartet of threads. This does not imply that everything passed over would be completely unrelated to Versnel's main body of work. In fact, and this is quite supportive of our etic perspective, there is hardly anything in Versnel's bibliography of which it can be said with certainty that it stands in splendid isolation.¹²⁸ Neither does the exclusion of a title from our discussion imply a judgement on its merits or impact – which

127 Even the majority of ephemera are not unrelated to the threads below, e.g., the journalistic contributions that deal with Jesus' substitute sacrifice (these turned out to be not so very ephemeral: they caused a nation-wide uproar and were reprinted in book form; see above, note 100. By now, the storm has passed, though).

128 An odd one out within Versnel's oeuvre is his appreciation of Hendrik Wagenvoort, an example of *Gelehrtenegeschichte* (Versnel 1990d). But even there, part of the text has to do with admonitions about how to do ancient (religious) history quite comparable to the more didactic passages in his other writings.

often has been considerable, especially in the case of the two clusters just mentioned.¹²⁹

The one word that ties our four threads together is ‘coping.’ Obviously, this is a tribute to *Coping with the Gods*, but ‘coping’ also offered itself as shorthand for what ancient religion was about for the individual believer, the object of Versnel’s individualistic, humane, actor-oriented, empathetic approach, as it is called in the first part of this introduction. ‘Making sense’ is another favourite expression of Versnel: we have chosen ‘coping’ as more comprehensive, including the more rational ‘making sense’, emotional responses, and behavioural patterns.

4.1 *The First Thread: Coping with a Climacteric by Way of Sacrificial Ritual*

The publications that we classify under this heading comprise studies concerning self-sacrifice; substitute sacrifice; offering oneself in compensation; the *pharmakos*; and Jewish and Christian martyrdom, self-sacrifice and substitute sacrifice:

Enige opmerkingen over de Romeinse devotio, *Hermeneus* 36 (1964) 68–85.

A Note on the *Maschalismos* of Apsyrtos, *Mnemosyne* 26 (1973) 62–63.

Wie was Marcus? Een hoofdstuk uit de Narracio de Mirabilibus van Magister Gregorius, *Hermeneus* 45 (1973/4) 130–142.

Sacrificum Lustrale: The Death of Mettius Fufetius (Livy 1, 28). Studies in Roman Lustration-Ritual I, *Mededelingen van het Nederlands Instituut te Rome* 37 (1975) 1–19.

Two Types of Roman *Devotio*, *Mnemosyne* 29 (1976) 365–410.

Polycrates and his Ring: Two Neglected Aspects, *Studi Storico-Religiosi* 1 (1977) 17–46.

129 As *Triumphus* was Versnel’s first substantial publication, it may be of interest to quote him about its genesis: “I selected the subject for my thesis because I was interested in the *ludi circenses* and they happened to have something to do with the Roman triumph. So I chose to write about the triumph, for no particular reason. In those days you just picked some subject that you did not know anything about – nor did your supervisor. ... The one thing that was different about my book and not really expected of a dissertation in Classics was the length and interdisciplinary character of my treatment of the central issues (the Babylonian New Year). *Triumphus* was generally well received, but then hardly anybody was equipped for the task of criticizing it. The only scholar who did have the requisite knowledge, and nevertheless appreciated my work, was Walter Burkert” (personal communication). For some sympathetic reviews of *Triumphus*, see Ogilvie 1973, Heurgon 1972, Musti 1972, Raepsaet-Charlier 1971, Smith 1972. If they find something to criticize, it is the interdisciplinary, comparative component that is considered (too) speculative.

Destruction, *Devotio* and Despair in a Situation of Anomy: The Mourning for Germanicus in Triple Perspective, in: G. Piccaluga (ed.), *Perennitas. Studi in onore di Angelo Brelich* (Rome 1980) 541–618.

Self-Sacrifice, Compensation and the Anonymous Gods, in: *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité*. Entretiens sur l'Antiquité classique 27 (Vandoeuvres-Genève 1981) 135–185.

Quid Athenis Hierosolymis? Bemerkungen zur Herkunft des stellvertretenden Sühneopfers in 4 Mak., in: J.W. van Henten *et al.* (edd.), *Die Entstehung der jüdischen Martyrologie* (Leiden 1989) 162–196.

Jezus Soter, Neos Alkestis? Over de niet-joodse achtergrond van een christelijke doctrine, *Lampas* 22 (1989) 219–242.

Making Sense of Jesus' Death: The Pagan Contribution, in: J. Frey and J. Schröter (edd.), *Deutungen des Todes Jesu im Neuen Testament* (Tübingen 2005) 213–294.

We will first give Versnel's sketch of the background to this: "My very first article, concerning *devotio*, was motivated by my general interest in early Roman subjects. This developed into an interest in self-sacrifice, not because of its religious aspect, but because it was an old Roman custom. 1980 was a crucial year because I was asked to contribute to 'le sacrifice dans l'antiquité.' I had not done any work on sacrifice, but I thought self-sacrifice would be doable. My paper still took *devotio* as its point of departure, but broadened in scope to take in Greek myth, legend and tragedy. After having been invited to contribute to some collections of Jewish studies, this line of research came to embrace Jewish and early Christian ideas about the 'saving death of Jesus.' This development of my interest in self-sacrifice could be called a logical sequence, but much of it was accidental, dependent upon chance invitations."¹³⁰

If this impressive forty-year arc can be called accidental, anything can. To us it seems a very clear example of "[an] *evolution* [that] meant addition and enrichment, never complete substitution or abandonment of former sections of research" [our italics].¹³¹ It is obvious that Versnel was interested in sacrifice and sacrificial matters in general – how could it be otherwise for a student of ancient ritual? Even if the 'theological' *Coping with the Gods* is not primarily about ritual, there are still hundreds of references to sacrifice.¹³² However,

¹³⁰ Personal communication.

¹³¹ Versnel 1990d, 74, about Wagenvoort. Versnel might object that "addition and enrichment" do not preclude accidental development. We choose to stress "evolution." Versnel continues: "Time and again Wagenvoort would return to subjects ... a revision that always entailed reconsideration and reassessment" – a characterisation that would fit perfectly Versnel himself.

¹³² And see Versnel 2012a.

from an early moment and for reasons he has explained above, he came to concentrate on very specific kinds of sacrifice, which have in common that the victims are human.¹³³ Versnel has brought up human sacrifice – a perennially fascinating, not to say juicy subject – in some of his lectures and seminars, but in his published work he has concentrated on human *self*-sacrifice. This includes a whole range of phenomena that all have to do with dying for or dying instead of: vicarious death, substitute sacrifice, expiatory sacrifice.¹³⁴ When we look deeper, the core subject seems to be the nexus between ‘crisis’, ‘death’ and ‘grieving.’ This is about crises to be warded off by death, or crises brought on by death.¹³⁵ An instance discussed at length in a very illuminating paper is the death of Germanicus: a climacteric only to be coped with by the most extreme reactions. Its expectations crushed, society revenges itself upon the gods, by way of throwing out the gods themselves, self-sacrifice, but also exposure of children. This is a quite brutal example of ‘social suicide’ in a situation of anomy. In this liminal period of mourning normal societal structures are inversed, nothing is what it normally is and culturally conditioned behaviour is abandoned. Anomy is a concept that will frequently return in Versnel’s work, to describe a period of transition, an interregnum, an interval that is liminal, marginal, and given over to chaos.¹³⁶

In the context of self-sacrifice several concepts received in-depth treatment (*devotio*, *devotio pro principe*, *vota*, *supplicatio*, *sacrificium*) and related phenomena were mentioned that guided us back at least part of the way to human sacrifice: the death penalty as sacrifice,¹³⁷ and the phenomenon of the *pharmakos*, the scapegoat. Versnel never dedicated a publication to that subject, with the exception of his article on Polykrates and his ring (the *pharmakos* here is an object).¹³⁸ He, however, did supervise a dissertation on the subject: E.J.B. Knibbeler, *Saving the city. Ambiguities in ancient Greek crisis management*, 2005. Knibbeler’s “ambiguities” and “crisis management” tie in with Versnel’s research interests. Considering what has already been said above, one

133 Animal sacrifice Versnel has left largely to Folkert van Straten, whose magnum opus, *Hierà kalá. Images of animal sacrifice in archaic and classical Greece*, started life as a dissertation supervised by Versnel. He has always maintained that Van Straten was not so much his pupil, as his equal – and indeed the parallelism and complementarity of their work is striking.

134 Versnel 2005, 227–253 offers an extensive and very clear exposition.

135 Versnel 1980, 580 refers to Meuli’s psychopathology of death and grief as a fundamental insight.

136 Versnel 1980, 576–577, 582.

137 Versnel 1975, 99. Versnel 1994a mentions the ordeal, which also stands in a relationship to self-sacrifice.

138 Polykrates and his ring make brief reappearances elsewhere, as in Versnel 2011a, 180–181; Versnel 2005, 237. Cf. Versnel 1975c, 101 about *purgamina*.

might argue that for Versnel self-sacrifice is crisis management – and as we will see, not only self-sacrifice: people are managing crises all the time, and some crises ask for a special, ritualized effort. Such crises occur, or, more precisely, an awareness of crisis¹³⁹ arises at a moment of caesura, bringing with it ambivalent feelings wavering between expectation and anxiety. Such moments of caesura are the New Year, agrarian incisions, initiation, the return of the dead, and so on.¹⁴⁰ Obviously, Van Genneep's *rites de passage* loom large here. Larger-scale societal change that is too incisive or happens too quickly for people to adapt, leads to comparable climacterics.¹⁴¹ In these periods of anomic transition, we encounter several kinds of role reversal and licence as coping mechanisms.

When Versnel broadened his *devotio*/self-sacrifice line of research to include the Jewish and early Christian environment, it was not a question of establishing direct influence (though there are instances of that as well: as Versnel emphasized, cross fertilization through contact and cultural 'analogy' do not exclude each other and should not be radically distinguished), but rather of asking "why vicarious death became a model and a source for interpretation of deaths that asked for an explanation and meaning."¹⁴² The answer lies in a 'Mediterranean *koinē*' where the required explanation and meaning indeed was 'vicarious death.'¹⁴³

4.2 *The Second Thread: Coping with a Climacteric by Way of Rituals of Reversal*

The titles we gather under this heading have to do with myth and ritual, carnival phenomena, the Thesmophoria, Kronia, Saturnalia, and Bona Dea festival, and women in Greek society:

Vrouw en vriend: vrouwen van het oude Athene in anthropologisch perspectief, *Lampas* 17 (1984) 28–45.

Vrouw en vriend: vrouwen van het oude Athene in antropologisch perspectief, *Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis* 5 (1984) 37–62 (enlarged version).

Gelijke monniken, gelijke kappen: myth and ritual, oud en nieuw, *Lampas* 17 (1984) 194–246.

¹³⁹ Versnel 1993b, 111.

¹⁴⁰ Versnel 1993b, 115.

¹⁴¹ Versnel 1981, 62, mentions 'Selbstaufopferung' in the context of religious upheaval (*religiöser Umbruch*). Cf. Versnel 1993b.

¹⁴² Versnel 2005, 283.

¹⁴³ For the development of a general ideology, a "Mediterranean koine", see Versnel 2005, 284. Cf. 280: a "general consciousness."

- Komedie, utopie en de omgekeerde wereld, in: R.J.H.G. Bemelmans et al. (edd.), *Mixta ex diversis viribus astra. Een bundel opstellen uitgegeven ter gelegenheid van het derde lustrum van het Collegium Classicum c.n. E.D.E.P.O.L.* (Leiden 1985) 107–126.
- Apollo and Mars one hundred years after Roscher, *Visible Religion* 4/5 (1985/6) 134–172.
- Wife and Helpmate: Women of Ancient Athens in Anthropological Perspective, in: J. Blok and P. Mason (edd.), *Sexual Asymmetry: Studies in Ancient Society* (Amsterdam 1987) 59–86 (revised English version of *Vrouw en vriend*, 1984).
- Greek Myth and Ritual: the Case of Kronos, in: J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London 1987) 121–152.
- Wijnkruid is honingvat, wijn is melk. Een paradigmatisch voorbeeld van ‘myth and ritual’ in het Oude Rome, in: P.W. de Neeve and H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (edd.), *Kaleidoskoop van de oudheid* (Groningen 1989) 159–176.
- What’s Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New, in: L. Edmunds (ed.), *Approaches to Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1990) 25–90 (revised translation of *Gelijke monniken, gelijke kappen*, 1984).
- The Festival for Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria, *Greece & Rome* 39 (1992) 31–55.
- Saturn and the Saturnalia: The Question of Origin, in: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg et al. (edd.), *De Agricultura. In Memoriam P.W. de Neeve* (Amsterdam 1993) 98–120.
- Two Carnavalesque Princes: Augustus and Claudius and the Ambiguity of Saturnalian imagery, in: S. Döpp (ed.), *Karnevaleske Phänomene in antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen* (Trier 1993) 99–122.
- Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual. Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* 11, Leiden 1993.
- Komödie, Utopie und verkehrte Welt, in: G. Binder and B. Effe (edd.), *Das antike Theater: Aspekte seiner Geschichte, Rezeption und Aktualität* (Trier 1998) 93–114.
- Ritual Dynamics: The Contribution of Analogy, Simile and Free Association, in: E. Stavrianopoulou (ed.), *Ritual and Communication in the Graeco-Roman World* (Liège 2006) 317–327.
- Die Saturnalien. Zu Fragen von Ursprung, Function und Bedeutung, in: D. Fugger (ed.), *Verkehrte Welten?* (Munich 2013) 72–101.

Versnel presents a background account, at least of the developments leading to the publication in 1993 of the principal work *Transition and Reversal in*

Myth and Ritual: “In the case of *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* the first chapter started life as a paper on myth and ritual as such, the second as one on the topic of Kronos. The third and fourth chapter, on Saturn and the Thesmophoria/Bona Dea respectively, were first published as separate articles concerned with the comparable nature of the gods and their cults. In the Saturn article I was dealing with ‘inconsistencies’ but as I went along I discovered the myth and ritual dimension. The fifth chapter on Mars and Apollo started from my intuition that Roscher’s old idea about similarity, and even identity of these two gods (on the basis of 19th-century *Naturmythologie*) though as such untenable, was not without merit. Rejecting Roscher not necessarily meant turning a blind eye to the many striking similarities in the myths *and* rituals of these two gods. As a matter of fact, I built upon what we know about these myths and rituals in order to characterize both gods. ‘Initiation’ seemed to be a common denominator and this is why Mars and Apollo received their place in my book on myth and ritual.” As *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* is the second volume of the Inconsistency trilogy, Versnel elucidates: “of the five chapters there are some which fit under the header of Myth and Ritual as well as under that of Inconsistencies – this is valid for chapter 2 (which was intentionally written from this double perspective) but also for chapters 3 and 4 (which evolved in this direction in a more organic manner). Two chapters, chapters 1 and 5, only fit under the header of Myth and Ritual because no inconsistencies can be found there (nor did I look for them).”¹⁴⁴

Let us forget about the inconsistencies for the moment, and concentrate on the ritual. Ritual, all kinds of ritualized behaviour, constituted of course a very important part of Versnel’s research area, as already argued above. But within this wide field there were some specific subjects that kept him occupied: on the one hand the relationship between myth and ritual, a long-standing discussion, on the other a particular type of ritual, viz. role reversal, the carnivalesque, the upside-down world. Here we again encounter the liminal period, the crisis that elicits anomaly¹⁴⁵ – except that here the crisis is almost always one that is willed. Put differently: ritual is a collective way of dealing with anomalies or paradoxes in society (and so is myth: the two subjects distinguished here continually blend: the myths and rites of festivals of license and initiation, to be discussed below, share the same pattern and can in this sense be studied together).

Versnel discusses three so-called festivals of exception: the Thesmophoria, the Saturnalia and the Kronia, festivals focused on transition and reversal, wherein it is imagined “what happens if one ventures outside the borders of

¹⁴⁴ Personal communication.

¹⁴⁵ Conversely, myth and ritual are already present in Versnel 1980, 590–592.

orderly society.”¹⁴⁶ The subject can be traced from *Triumphus* (1970) onwards. The three festivals are all over the place.¹⁴⁷ “That one complex [the Saturnalia] is embedded in a process of nature, the other [the Kronia] in a social passage, is, seen from a structural point of view, not immediately relevant. What matters is the close relationship in the typically transitional situations and the mythical symbols in which they find their expression.”¹⁴⁸ The same could be said about the Thesmophoria.

As to the relationship between myths and rituals, there are, roughly speaking, three positions, which Versnel summarized as follows: “1) the myth is an (aetiological) reflection of the actual ritual; 2) the ritual imitates mythical examples; 3) both are parallel but more or less independent symbolic processes for dealing with the same type of situation in the same affective mode.”¹⁴⁹ The first was the most common approach amongst historians of ancient religion; the second has hardly ever been presented as an option, although a few instances can be established; the third is favoured by anthropologists – and by Versnel, for a fair number of cases, including his festivals of choice. He expresses his conviction “that there was ... a myth and ritual complex ... in which myth and rite were indeed formed *pari passu* ... and developed as parallel expressions.”¹⁵⁰ The historiography, the theory and its application are discussed at length in his *Transition and Reversal in Myth and Ritual* – a book that is cleverly titled, because it is about myths and rituals of transition and reversal, and about ‘myth and ritual’ as a complex, of which the festivals that are built around transition and reversal then, together with their mythic components, provide the necessary examples.

We have also included the article about women in Greek society (the three versions are essentially the same text) here, because it has a lot in common with Versnel’s analysis of the Thesmophoria and the Bona Dea festival. It is an interesting demonstration of the way in which anthropological concepts – crisis, anomy and reversal once again, but also patronage – can help break a deadlock. That deadlock was the useless, but endless debate about ‘the position of women’ in Greek, or more specific Athenian, society: was that position good, bad, or maybe something in between? Whatever the answer, it could

¹⁴⁶ Versnel 1993a, 3.

¹⁴⁷ Also when titles give no indication, e.g. Versnel 2006b, 322, on the Thesmophoria, anomy and reversal. In Versnel 1998b the Saturnalia and Kronia are addressed by way of the comedies of Plautus and role reversal.

¹⁴⁸ Versnel 1993a, 83.

¹⁴⁹ Versnel 1993a, 136.

¹⁵⁰ Versnel 1993a, 90. Cf. Versnel 1989b, 118, about the Kronia: “myth and ritual should be understood as two parallel expressions of the climate of ambiguity surrounding the break between the Old Year and the New.”

always be supported by judiciously selected ancient sources and comparative evidence. Versnel, however, dodges that question and attempts to lay bare the mechanisms concerning sex and gender that were shaping Athenian society. He analyses these as a relationship of patronage, with the man as *patronus* in this undeniably patriarchal society – but a *patronus* whose dominance is under constant threat from the vital roles that women play. Myth and ritual are put to work to maintain the existing, skewed power balance.

It is a pity that Versnel never really took up the subject again. Newspaper articles in 1990 and 1998 show that he maintained his interest, and in 1991 a dissertation about the Amazons came to fruition under Versnel's supervision: Josine Blok's *Amazones antianeirai. Interpretaties van de Amazonenmythe in het mythologisch onderzoek van de 19e en 20e eeuw en in archaisch Griekenland*. With its focus on historiography and on Greek myth and ritual, this must have been a subject quite to the liking of Versnel. He translated Pomeroy's *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, but by that time that once ground-breaking book was twenty years old and out of date. He could have written a far better book himself.

4.3 *The Third Thread: Coping with the God(s) by Way of Accommodation*

The titles gathered here deal with ruler cult, a subject that subsequently blossoms into the study of many aspects of polytheism, including henotheism:

Philip II and Kynosarges, *Mnemosyne* 24 (1973) 273–279.

Het begin van de heersercultus in Griekenland, *Lampas* 7 (1974) 129–163.

A Parody on Hymns in Martial v, 24 and some Trinitarian Problems, *Mnemosyne* 27 (1974) 365–405.

Pentheus en Dionysos. Religieuze achtergronden en perspectieven, *Lampas* 9 (1976) 8–41.

De tyrannie verdrijven? Een les in historische ambiguïteit. Rede Leiden 19 mei 1978, Leiden 1978.

Religieuze stromingen in het Hellenisme, *Lampas* 21 (1988) 111–136.

Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion I. TER UNUS. Isis, Dionysos and Hermes: Three Studies in Henotheism, Leiden 1990.

Thrice One: Three Greek Experiments in Oneness, in: B. Porter (ed.), *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute 1, 2000), 79–164.

Coping with the Gods: Wayward Readings in Greek Theology, Leiden 2011.

Heis Dionysos! One Dionysos? A Polytheistic Perspective, in: R. Schlesier (ed.), *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism* (Berlin 2011) 23–46.

Polytheism and omnipotence: incompatible? in: C. Bonnet, N. Belayche and M. Albert-Llorca (edd.), *Puissances divines à l'épreuve du comparatisme: constructions, variations et réseaux relationnels* (Turnhout 2017) 241–261.

Great Hermes. Three Ways toward Stardom, in: J.F. Miller and J. Strauss Clay (edd.), *Tracking Hermes, Pursuing Mercury* (Oxford 2019) 337–355.

From an early involvement with ruler cult (it is already there in *Triumphus*, 1970) Versnel moves to a wider conspectus of concepts of the divine in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, focusing on henotheisms, situates these in the context of polytheism in general, and 45 years later ends with ruler cult: the final chapter of *Coping with the Gods*. On the way, all important questions concerning the conceptualization of the divine have been asked – and tentatively answered.

First, let us see how Versnel comments on the genesis of the first and the third volume in his Inconsistency trilogy, viz. *Ter Unus* (1990)¹⁵¹ and *Coping with the Gods* (2011), separated from one another by a period of twenty years and by the publication of the second, myth and ritual volume already discussed above. He insists that *Ter Unus*, on henotheism, contains three articles “created independently about unrelated subjects. The only thing they have in common is that they were written as a kind of historical commentary on a literary source (I have always felt comfortable working that way, supposedly because I was trained as a classicist). Two parts of *Ter Unus* are concerned with ambiguities and tensions inherent in a phenomenon that mirrors past societal realities, with parallels in the present: Isis as a good tyrant and vanquisher of bad tyrants. Dionysos, a superior god versus Pentheus, superior ruler: the god vanquishes the ruler; both, however, are in the right. In the original Dutch versions of these articles the word ‘henotheism’ was never mentioned. Apart from these articles I had already published an article on Hermes, of a completely different nature, not concerning itself with ambiguity but with the analysis of the hymnic-aretalogical character of the poem [Martial v, 24] – the last sentence of which, *omnia solus et ter unus*, obviously drew attention to this kind of henotheistic acclamation. ... My la(te)st book, *Coping with the Gods*, which I consider to be my most important¹⁵² but also most idiosyncratic book, is an outlier for a number of reasons. Most importantly because this is my only book

151 Versnel considers the titles of several of his publications to be ill-judged. He recounts how an American colleague used to refer to *Ter Unus* as “The anus”, meaning to say that a Latin title was *pessimi exempli* (Versnel cannot refrain from commenting that *anus* is Latin as well).

152 Reviewers concur: Bonnechère 2012; Kaizer 2013; Pirenne-Delforge 2013; Bonnet 2012; Strauss Clay 2012; Aston 2013.

of which all chapters (with the exception of the last one) have been newly composed, first as Sather Lectures, and then developed into this book. The last chapter takes up one of my very first articles, but is much more extensive in its interpretation – and as such provides a new analysis. In the third chapter parts of *Ter Unus* are incorporated (in more or less changed form) and of course in the other chapters one will also find echoes of my previous work. ... I am not certain that I consciously wanted to write a book from the viewpoint of inconsistency. But that is certainly what it is about, from beginning to end. In fact, it is the only one of the three books [on inconsistencies] where every chapter legitimizes the title *Inconsistencies*, if it had crossed my mind to give it such a title.”¹⁵³

As can be gathered from the above, *Coping with the Gods* is where Versnel's work on the nature of polytheism culminates: it brings together a lot of scattered material and revises it into a veritable theology¹⁵⁴ of polytheism (and several other things besides – as always, Versnel's asides are numerous, and worthwhile, if sometimes somewhat distracting). Its six chapters “explore problems inherent in: order vs. variety/chaos in polytheism, arbitrariness vs. justice in theodicy, the peaceful co-existence of mono- and polytheistic theologies, human traits in divine imagery, divine omnipotence vs. limitation of power, and ruler cult.”¹⁵⁵ He is again on top of a trend: a renewed interest in the gods of the ancient world from whom researchers had, for quite a while, turned away in order to foreground the human activities. Although we should take care not to overdo that supposed development, the general focus has been shifting.¹⁵⁶ To again put the gods at the heart of the analysis does not imply a return to a nineteenth-century theology: *Coping with the Gods* is very much at the crossroads of concepts of the supernatural, belief(s), communicating with the gods, and all kinds of ritualized behaviour.¹⁵⁷ It has (for once?) exactly the

153 Personal communication.

154 The word ‘theology’ has drawn the attention, e.g., Bonnet 2012; Harrison 2015, 170–174; Pirenne-Delforge 2013, 348.

155 Versnel's own summary as appearing in the publisher's blurb.

156 An example of overdoing it in Kindt 2022: “After decades of focusing on rituals and the humans conducting them, students of ancient Greek religion have returned to the supernatural beings at the receiving end of religious practices such as prayer, divination and sacrifice.” One might want to be reminded of Bremmer and Erskine 2010, or the Routledge series ‘Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World’, which started publication in 2005. And of course the (fundamentally different) views of the polytheistic cosmos of Vernant and Burkert, which lie at the basis of part of Versnel's discussion (see below), date to the 1970s.

157 The specific nature of Versnel's theology – a “wayward” one – was lucidly worded by Angelos Chaniotis: “The aim of Greek rituals – sacrifices, prayers, hymns, processions – was to bring the gods from heaven to earth. This is exactly what H.S. Versnel achieves: his Sather lectures bring the Olympians from the heaven of philosophers and theologians to the real

right title (happily it did *not* cross Versnel's mind to call it *Inconsistencies III* with some subtitle): it is about the conceptualization of gods, polytheism, the relation between gods and between different instances of the same god, and about humans who have to negotiate all of this. Conceptualization and negotiation are crucial words: the human being is still at the centre. Versnel does take care not to reify this supernatural world: it is about how humans cope with a complicated cosmos – of their own making.

A pivotal debate for the whole book is the disagreement between Vernant's view of polytheism as a structured whole, and Burkert's as (potential) chaos.¹⁵⁸ Burkert sees the pantheon, and the individual gods within the pantheon, as dynamic, being shaped and re-shaped according to time and place. Vernant sees the pantheon as a 'logical ensemble' in which the mutual relationships between gods determine their nature and position: a god cannot be seen on his/her own. Versnel, in a quite typical stratagem, states that "both views have their merits but each at a different level of discourse and viewed from a different perspective",¹⁵⁹ and asks if these are the only two options and whether there is a third way. He concludes that there is: "there is no unity, there are *unities*, creating at a different level a new diversity, even a new type of 'potential chaos', that of the multiplicity of classifications, one challenging the other and unpleasantly disconcerting the modern observer."¹⁶⁰ Although nuancing Burkert's view in this way, it is obvious that Versnel sides with that view, but this only leads on to the main question he seeks to answer in his book: how did the Greeks cope with this chaos? In the other five chapters, already outlined above (not forgetting the four appendices which are rather more crucial than the word 'appendix' suggests), this question is addressed and answered – for the time being, as Versnel would be the first to stress.

Of the 400-page answer we want to highlight just two elements: henotheism and ruler cult. They are important, not to say elementary, parts of Versnel's analysis of how the Greeks went about coping with their gods, henotheism

world of the mortal Greeks. Versnel places belief in the gods in the socio-cultural context of the Greek polis, with all its complexities, contradictions, and dynamics." (previously on the Brill website; now (spring 2022) to be found on the Amazon website: <https://www.amazon.com/Coping-Gods-Religions-Graeco-Roman-World/dp/9004204903>).

158 The two positions are juxtaposed throughout the book, leading some to comment on the danger that this becomes a rhetorical device more than reality: Bonnet 2012; Pirenne-Delforge 2013, 348. With Versnel leaning very much towards Burkert's side, it is to be expected that some will come to the defence of Vernant. In De Vos and Versnel 1998, Versnel reminisced about a conference at which he was present where Burkert and Vernant managed to constantly misunderstand each other: "one of my topmost intellectual experiences."

159 Versnel 2011a, 6.

160 Versnel 2011a, 146.

being one of the coping mechanisms, ruler cult one of the socio-religious developments that set in motion or furthered the formation and refinement of coping mechanisms, including henotheism. But henotheism and ruler cult are also of special interest because they evidently have deep roots in Versnel's lifework.

Ruler cult, as already stated above, was there as a focal point from the very start. If one accepts that it is a religious phenomenon (which has of course been much disputed), it raises fundamental questions about the ancient conceptualization of the divine sphere. How can one deify a mortal? After death it might be conceivable, during the ruler's lifetime it is a construct that *we* find troubling – but *they* did not, and that opens a window to a worldview that does not shrink back from ambiguities, contradictions and inconsistencies. Versnel speaks of the “double awareness” of human and divine characteristics, and of *Augenblicksglauben*.

In this light let us draw attention to an article by Versnel on the clash between the Roman Empire and early Christianity, at first sight something of an exception in Versnel's oeuvre.¹⁶¹ Point of departure is the superhuman status of the emperor as *euergetes*, and guarantor of order. The opposing Christian ideology is not about a mortal who is deified, but about a god reduced to living as a mortal – who, to make matters worse, dies on the cross (back to substitute sacrifice). These two ideologies are contradictory, irreconcilable: the reality of euergetism versus an imaginary utopia: the Christian expectation of salvation. The Christian position is seen as leading to anomy. The threat of chaos is quite enough reason for the populace to turn against the Christians. Anomy and substitute sacrifice, but also scapegoats, myth and ritual, and cognitive dissonance, turn this illuminating essay on ruler cult into an essay on several of the subjects that Versnel has given his attention to.

About henotheism we will be very brief, as the subject is discussed at length in the present volume, in the paper by Nicole Belayche and in Versnel's extensive response. It might, however, be useful to point out how in this case, as in so many others, the roots go deep indeed. Conceptually, Versnel was working towards henotheism or henotheistic tendencies in the 1970s, and again took it up towards the end of the 1980s¹⁶² – and never looked back. We will look back, however, in order to point out that in the 1970s the subject was definitely in the air, at least in Leiden.¹⁶³

161 Versnel 1988b.

162 Though supposedly, in the interim period, henotheistic tendencies were never far from his mind, e.g. 1981c, 63, about *Allmachts-Formeln*, miracles, and *soteria*.

163 Van Straten 1974; Pleket 1979; Pleket 1981.

Henotheism as a concept is not generally accepted, although Versnel has done very much indeed to put it on the map. There can be no debate that the sources indicate that one god could be seen as superior: "In fact, henotheistic gods are competing for omnipotence."¹⁶⁴ This of course explicitly entails that there are many gods. Henotheism does not comprise a movement towards unity, but shows an ongoing plurality. This has been sufficiently demonstrated by Versnel, but typically pushing forward, he asks *how* the very concepts of unity and plurality of the gods relate to each other in Greek perception. The two ideas were apparently not exclusive (as they would be for every monotheist, at least on a doctrinal level), but coexisting and complimentary.

4.4 *The Fourth Thread: Coping with Life by Way of Communing with the Gods*

Under this heading we collected those of Versnel's studies that deal with the contiguity of the human and the divine sphere, what we might call 'the interface' where we find many different kinds of contact and communication: prayer, confession texts, epiphany, and magical practices such as cursing and praying for justice. This is the terrain of personal religion, lived religion, and the religion of the common man. It is a long list of titles, again the fruit of a sustained effort of several decades:

- Van onderen. Antiek gebed in kelderlicht, *Lampas* 12 (1979) 7–49.
 Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer, in: H.S. Versnel (ed.), *Faith, Hope and Worship* (Leiden 1981) 1–64.
 Mensen magie. Vervloekingsinscripties (*tabellae defixionum*), *Hermeneus* 55 (1983) 196–206.
 "May he not be able to sacrifice." Concerning a Curious Formula in Greek and Latin Curses, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 58 (1985) 247–269.
 In het grensgebied van magie en religie: het gebed om recht, *Lampas* 19 (1986) 68–96.
 Les imprécations et le droit, *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 65 (1987) 5–22 (French translation of In het grensgebied, 1986).
 What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw a God? Some Reflections on Graeco-Roman Epiphany, in: D. van der Plas (ed.), *Effigies dei: essays on the history of religions* (Leiden 1987) 42–55.
 A Twisted Hermes. Another View of an Enigmatic Spell, *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 72 (1988) 287–292.

¹⁶⁴ Versnel 2011a, 303.

- (with J.C. Nieuwland) Een Kleinaziatisch Staphorst: de religieuze cultuur van de biechtinscripties, *Lampas* 23 (1990) 165–186.
- Beyond Cursing: The Appeal for Justice in Judicial Prayers, in: C.A. Faraone and D. Obbink (edd.), *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (New York 1991) 60–106.
- Some Reflections on the Relationship Magic-Religion, *Numen* 38 (1991) 177–197.
- Πεπρημένος. The Cnidian Curse Tablets and Ordeal by Fire, in: R. Hägg (ed.), *Ancient Greek Cult Practice from the Epigraphical Evidence* (Stockholm 1994) 145–154.
- Die Poetik der Zaubersprüche, in: T. Schabert and R. Brague (edd.), *Die Macht des Wortes* (Munich 1996) 233–297.
- Καὶ εἴ τι λοιπὸν τῶν μερῶν ἔσται τοῦ σώματος ... (“and any other part of the entire body there may be ...”): An Essay on Anatomical Curses, in: F. Graf (ed.), *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Geburtstags-Symposium für Walter Burkert* (Leipzig 1998) 217–267.
- Κολάσαι τοὺς ἡμᾶς τοιοῦτους ἡδέως βλέποντες (Punish those who rejoice in our misery). On Curse texts and *Schadenfreude*, in: D.R. Jordan, H. Montgomery and E. Thomassen (edd.), *The World of Ancient Magic. Papers from the first international Samson Eitrem Seminar at the Norwegian Institute at Athens 4–8 May 1997* (Bergen 1999) 125–162.
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- Prayers for Justice East and West: New Finds and Publications since 1990, in: R. Gordon and F. Marco (edd.), *Magical practice in the Latin West. Papers from the international conference held at the University of Zaragoza, 30 Sept.–1st Oct. 2005* (Leiden 2009) 275–354.
- Response to a Critique, in: M. Piranomonte and F. Marco Simón (edd.), *Contesti Magici/Contextos Mágicos* (Rome 2012) 33–45.

Versnel again puts several of the above writings into context for us: "About magic, though it always had my interest, I only started publishing in 1983, mainly by way of the curse tablets. Prayers for justice followed because I noticed that the first twelve *defixiones* in Audollent's *Defixionum tabellae* were different. This is exemplary for my scholarship: I notice something interesting, often an anomaly, I analyse as closely as possible wherein the difference lies, and try to explain its occurrence, often by looking at disciplines and at data from outside the field of Classics."¹⁶⁵ This is a rather brief observation, considering that the impact of Versnel's work on this subject has been extraordinarily strong and is likely to be long lasting. But it does refer, somewhat obliquely, to the main achievement: the categorization of *defixiones*, curse tablets, where Versnel distinguished between *defixiones* proper and what he called 'prayers for justice.' This distinction has been generally accepted and it is now advisable to speak of 'curses' instead of *defixiones*/*defixios*, this category of 'curses' to be broken down into the subcategories of *defixiones* (or binding spells) and 'prayers for justice.' We might add to Versnel's narrative that his interest in 'deviant' *defixiones* arose of more than a chance event (if looking into Audollent can be called a chance event). In 1982 Naerebout was working on a review of Peter Salway's *Roman Britain*, and preparing a lecture series on Britannia. In that context he worked his way through *Roman Inscriptions in Britain* and came across curses from Caerleon and Lydney Park which were different from the 'ordinary' *defixio* – about which he had heard Versnel lecturing – and he alerted Versnel to these few examples.¹⁶⁶ This must have triggered him to look again at Audollent's collection with a keen eye for anomalies comparable to those in the British material. One of those 'happy coincidences' that is likely to be embraced by Versnel. But maybe it is different still: Versnel possibly had already for some years been turning over this idea of the 'deviant *defixio*' in his mind, because somewhere around 1980 or before he had identified a category of "juridical or revenge prayers."¹⁶⁷

We have thrown in the so-called confession inscriptions and prayers with the curses, defensibly if only because Versnel himself has shown that some

¹⁶⁵ Personal communication.

¹⁶⁶ The time lag between 1983 and 1986 (the year Versnel introduced his 'prayers for justice') pleads for the fact that the British material alerted him to the Cnidus texts and not the other way round as Versnel himself seems to suggest. In 1986 Versnel refers to *RIB* 306 (as Audollent 106) and to a number of newly discovered texts published in *Britannia*. The almost 200 curses from Bath and Uley were of course not yet available. The Bath curses were only published in full in 1988 (Tomlin 1988), the Uley ones as late as 1993 (Tomlin 1993).

¹⁶⁷ Versnel 1981 a, 21.

curses are in fact prayers – or that some prayers have a lot in common with curses (there is quite some cross-pollination between these genres). And the net can be cast even wider: Versnel himself moves effortlessly from magical spells (that include curses) to divine miracles (that include epiphanies).¹⁶⁸ We can only agree that all of these hang together as ways of ‘communing with the gods’ (of course a category that is not exhausted by magic and miracles, or confession texts and prayers). Epiphany was the main subject of just one article by Versnel – a monograph on the subject was planned but never realized, which is a pity.¹⁶⁹ Versnel also devoted only one article to the confession texts or *Beichtinschriften* from Asia Minor,¹⁷⁰ but this is deceptive because he in fact brings up the confession texts, and quite prominently too, in several others.¹⁷¹

However much attention is paid to the confession texts, it is mainly for the benefit of the analysis of the Cnidus curse texts and the prayers for justice in general. Curses are the focus of Versnel’s research, and not only their categorization and background, but also very specific aspects, such as *Schadenfreude*: the idiom of censure, suspicion, envy and so on, and the mentioning in curses of different body parts. Versnel introduces here a specific category of ‘anatomical curses.’ Their general motive is retribution: the cursed person is not a social competitor, as in the ‘traditional *defixiones*’, but has committed an offence and this curse is his just punishment. Such curses relate to (and partly overlap with) the ‘prayers for justice’ – think of the cross-pollination mentioned above.

The focus on curses inevitably drew Versnel into the long-running (and never-ending) debate on the relationship between magic and religion. In order to definitively argue that the ‘prayers for justice’ are a distinct category, Versnel needed to show how *defixiones* proper differed from such prayers. This led him to argue more explicitly than ever about the notions of etic and emic, speaking about the concepts of magic and religion: “Magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts.”¹⁷² Some, however, have argued we should do away with these definitions altogether. Versnel is in no doubt that we should hang on to the use of etic definitions (in studying, i.a. the emic ones). We may think about the distinction between magic and religion in terms of intention (which goal can be achieved?); attitude

168 Versnel 2006b.

169 1987b. See Versnel 2006b, 326, with its beautiful characterization of the epiphany, developed into a “a fixed and predictable programme”, as “the ritualization of expectancy.” One would like to have had more like this.

170 Versnel and Nieuwland 1990.

171 Versnel 1978, 11; 1981a, 54; 1981c, 63 (implicit); 1987a, 11–15; 1991a, 63–68; 1994a, 148–150; 1999, 146; 2005, 292; 2019, 340–341 (speaking of the confession texts as “rudimentary aretalogies” and linking them to henotheistic deference and praise).

172 Versnel 1991b, 177.

(manipulative or submissive); action (what kind of ritual action was necessary); or social-moral evaluation (what did peers think about this). On this basis, Versnel defends the time-honoured definition of magic as ‘forcing the supernatural to do something’, whereas religion is defined as ‘asking the gods to do something.’ ‘Prayers for justice’ are then ‘religious acts’ while the true binding curses are ‘magical acts.’ And Versnel would not be Versnel if he did not note the grey zone between the one and the other.

Our fourth thread in particular has much to do with emotion (without denying its importance for the other three threads). Versnel has been called a forerunner in the study of emotion, and what this might tell us about ancient mentalities, with a focus on the ancient non-elite individual. See his work on curses. In this context it is worth mentioning that Versnel himself has drawn our attention to the “Envoi” by Maria Theodoropoulou in the volume *Unveiling Emotions I*¹⁷³ and the comments on this by Borgeaud,¹⁷⁴ the gist of which is that one should be careful not to conflate the experience of emotions on the one hand, and the representation of emotions, in texts or images, on the other. It is interesting to see Versnel worrying about this, because deeper down, of course, this is once again a question about the presence, or absence, of human universals. If we would misread the sources and impose our present vision, instead of eliciting the past one, the implications for all four threads of Versnel’s lifework would be profound. Although we have to be vigilant, at all time and everywhere – and thus a word of warning such as Theodoropoulou’s is always in order – our gut feeling tells us that Versnel has been proceeding in the right direction. And if gut feeling is not good enough for you, there are always Versnel’s very careful procedures. In Dutch there is the idiom ‘de zaak helemaal dichtspijkeren’, literally ‘to nail everything shut’, meaning that one presents an airtight argument. If such an argument exists at all, Versnel has come a long way towards realizing it.

5 To Conclude

In truly Versnellian mode there will now be a brief conclusion – and a post-script. We have given a personal account of the scholarship of Henk Versnel: his subjective, and our subjective view of the matter. His rather fragmentary comments spoke for a minimal amount of coherence in his body of work; our more sustained argument for a surprisingly large amount of coherence. The many connecting lines warrant, we think, our use of the word ‘oeuvre.’

173 Chaniotis (ed.) 2012.

174 Borgeaud 2014.

We might even have convinced Henk Versnel that chance encounters and happy coincidences had rather less impact on the way his scholarship developed than he has persistently maintained.¹⁷⁵ His emic perspective in fact may prevent him from seeing how coherent and interconnected his body of work is – whether it is the handful of themes (our four threads, all interconnected) or the one overarching concern (human ritualized behaviour to help people cope) that our etic view has endeavoured to lay bare.

6 Postscript: Inconsistency

We have rejected inconsistency as a category, not because of its unimportance, but because it transcends the categories – it is more of an organizing principle, or a lens through which to view things. Nevertheless it may be helpful for the reader to have a list of those publications by Versnel which feed into – or at least have left echoes in – his ‘trilogy of inconsistency.’ Versnel long ago spoke admiringly of Karl Meuli’s “indomitable inclination to buttress up the earlier studies with more recent material and fit them into a wider frame whenever possible.”¹⁷⁶ In this respect, as in others, he himself has followed in Meuli’s footsteps. The bibliography below, composed by Versnel himself, includes his publications which in revised form have been included in the inconsistency volumes as well as everything else from his own bibliography that in one way or another helped to more immediately shape his thinking on this matter:

Het begin van de heersercultus in Griekenland, *Lampas* 7 (1974) 129–163.
A Parody on Hymns in Martial v, 24 and some Trinitarian Problems,
Mnemosyne 27 (1974) 365–405.

Pentheus en Dionysos. Religieuze achtergronden en perspectieven,
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(1977) 17–46.

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Gelijke monniken, gelijke kappen: myth and ritual, oud en nieuw, *Lampas*
17 (1984) 194–246.

Apollo and Mars, one hundred years after Roscher, *Visible Religion* 4/5
(1985/6) 134–172.

¹⁷⁵ J.O. Naerebout greets this supposition with derisive laughter. For derisive, scornful or mocking laughter, see Versnel 1999, passim, but especially nn. 61, 79, 80.

¹⁷⁶ Versnel 1978, 234. Cf Versnel on Wagenvoort, above, note 131.

- Greek Myth and Ritual: the Case of Kronos, in: J.N. Bremmer (ed.), *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London 1987) 121–152.
- Wijnkruid is honingvat, wijn is melk. Een paradigmatisch voorbeeld van ‘myth and ritual’ in het Oude Rome, in: P.W. de Neeve and H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg (edd.), *Kaleidoskoop van de oudheid* (Groningen 1989) 159–176.
- What’s Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander: Myth and Ritual, Old and New, in: L. Edmunds (ed.), *Approaches to Greek Myth* (Baltimore 1990) 25–90 (revised translation of *Gelijke monniken, gelijke kappen*, 1984).
- The Festival for Bona Dea and the Thesmophoria, *Greece & Rome* 39 (1992) 31–55.
- Saturn and the Saturnalia: The Question of Origin, in: H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg et al. (edd.), *De Agricultura. In Memoriam P.W. de Neeve* (Amsterdam 1993) 98–120.
- Religious Projection: a Hellenistic Instance, in: L. Martin (ed.), *Religious Transformations and Socio-Political Change* (Berlin-New York 1993) 25–39.
- Two Carnavalesque Princes: Augustus and Claudius and the Ambiguity of Saturnalian imagery, in: S. Döpp (ed.), *Karnevaleske Phänomene in antiken und nachantiken Kulturen und Literaturen* (Trier 1993) 99–122.
- Waarom worden moeders maagd? *Lampas* 26 (1993) 283–295.
- Thrice One: Three Greek Experiments in Oneness, in: B. Porter (ed.), *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World* (Bethesda, Md. 2000) 79–164.

One may add the following three titles, published after *Coping with the Gods*, which are directly related to the inconsistency trilogy:

- Heis Dionysos! One Dionysos? A Polytheistic Perspective*, in: R. Schlesier (ed.), *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism* (Berlin 2011) 23–46.
- Die Saturnalien. Zu Fragen von Ursprung, Function und Bedeutung, in: D. Fugger (ed.), *Verkehrte Welten?* (Munich 2013) 72–101.
- Polytheism and omnipotence: incompatible? in: C. Bonnet, N. Belayche and M. Albert-Llorca (edd.), *Puissances divines à l’épreuve du comparatisme: constructions, variations et réseaux relationnels* (Turnhout 2017) 241–261.

A final note: the general idea behind ‘inconsistency’ is as follows: the Greeks are humans like we are, so “they share the common human tendency to

prevent multiple registers from clashing. They may do so by a virtuoso winking process, well-known from (socio-)psychological reactions to cognitive dissonance or by means of other culturally ingrained strategies that control perception.”¹⁷⁷ This implies that the prevalence of inconsistency and the concomitant coping processes are indeed universal. However, as Versnel argues: “One specific feature of Greek culture, as opposed to our modern culture, is that it displays an unmatched capacity to unashamedly juxtapose the two, tolerating glaring contradictions and flashing alternations.”¹⁷⁸ Versnel elaborates: “[But] two coexisting realities” [or] “a paradox of two contrasting realities [such as the reality of a *free* city going together with the reality of *subjection* of that city to an autocrat] surely [...] is absurd? It is, but it reveals the schizophrenia naturally inherent in concepts such as freedom, autonomy, independence and the like, a schizophrenia which, moreover, tends to be exacerbated in situations of transition.”¹⁷⁹

This seems an excellent note to end upon: the quote once more underlines that looking for ‘situations of transition’, liminal events or periods, and the way people deal with such situations, is one of the main things that tie the oeuvre of Versnel together. The coping mechanisms, psychologically explicable, can be self-sacrifice, the sacrifice of some third party or other violent reactions to the state of anomy, and at the other extreme a festival that is held according to the religious calendar, where anomy is willed and reversal is performed according to the rules (always in danger of breaking down). In between we find curses, where the urge to kill, destroy or subvert is sublimated into text (always in danger of spilling over into deeds, as in all cases where a recourse to magic replaces action). That people are never very consistent in acting out these things (or ever), and that, indeed, inconsistencies can be a constitutive element of ritualized behaviour is something that in ordinary life we all take in our stride, but that in scholarship has to be defended against strong harmonizing tendencies. The general acceptance of inconsistency, and the scholarly dislike of it are again both psychologically intelligible. All of this should be seen in the wider context of on the one hand the real world (the socio-economic and political framework of society), and on the other the human conceptualization of the cosmos, especially the divine world in which they put their faith and from which they draw – and here follows what is possibly the paramount concept inspiring Versnel’s work – hope.

177 Versnel 2011a, 148.

178 Versnel 2011a, 149.

179 Versnel 1993a, 80–82.

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¹⁸⁰ Some ephemera will be lacking: we know of contributions to *Voltreffër* (Libanon Lyceum) and *HIC* (*Historische Informatie Courant*, Leiden University), and of a play *De Leermeester*, performed by pupils of the Libanon Lyceum in 1963. We have not attempted to trace these. We do not doubt there are other published texts, especially instances of the so-called 'grey literature', that we have missed altogether.

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