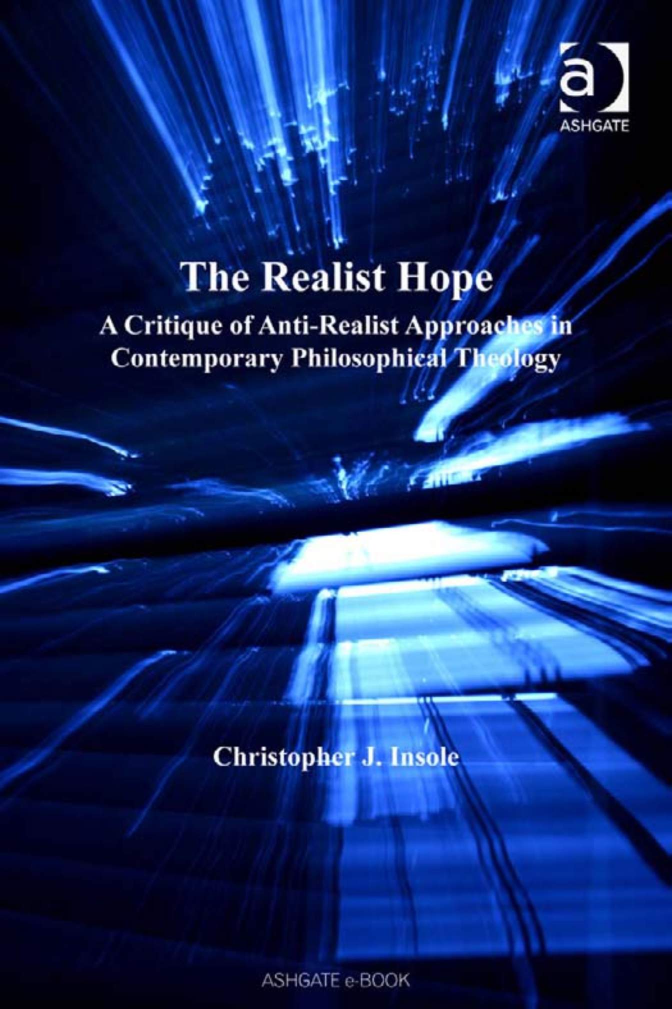

ASHGATE

The Realist Hope

A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology

Christopher J. Insole

ASHGATE e-BOOK

THE REALIST HOPE

This book analyses, and finally rejects, various forms of anti-realism which have had a wide influence in theology over the past two centuries. I have no hesitation in recommending this book to readers.

Professor Richard Swinburne, Oxford

This book is written in a lively style, pursuing energetic and irreverent arguments against the philosophical and theological mandarins with a persuasive reasonableness and an urgent sense of conviction.

Professor Oliver O'Donovan, Oxford

Taking into consideration analytical, continental, historical, post-modern and contemporary thinkers, Christopher J. Insole provides a powerful defence of a realist construal of religious discourse. Insole argues that anti-realism tends towards absolutism and hubris. Where truth is exhausted by our beliefs about truth, there is no conceptual space for doubting those beliefs; only a conception of truth as absolute, given and accessible can guarantee the very humility, sense of fallibility and sensitivity to difference that the anti-realist rightly values.

Cutting through some of the tired and well-rehearsed debates in this area, Insole provides a fresh perspective on approaches influenced by Wittgenstein, Kant, and apophatic theology. The defence of realism offered is unusual in being both analytically precise, and theologically sensitive, with a view to some of the wider and less well-explored cultural, ethical and political implications of the debate.

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The Realist Hope

A Critique of Anti-Realist Approaches in Contemporary Philosophical Theology

CHRISTOPHER J. INSOLE
University of Cambridge, UK

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Contents

Acknowledgments *vii*

1 **Introduction** 1
The scope of the argument 1
Detailed summary of the book's argument 5

2 **The Scope and Meaning of Religious Language** 11
Interpreting the behaviour of religious believers 13
Improving the philosophy: Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism 15
Characterizing the scope of the religious language game 20
Wittgenstein, verificationism and the Wittgensteinians 24

3 **The Relativity of Truth to Language Games** 29
The reconstructed Wittgensteinian approach 30
D.Z. Phillips and the reconstructed Wittgensteinian approach 31
Arguing for relativist realism 33
Family resemblance and particularism 34
Scepticism about rule following 35

4 **Truth in Italics** 42
An argument arising from the redundancy of truth 47
An epistemic conception of truth 51
The model-theoretic argument 53
Critique 54
Conceptual relativity 56
Identifying truth with ideal epistemic conditions 62
The theological dangers of an epistemic conception of truth 65

5 **Worldmaking** 70
First temptation: the rich diversity of possible world-views 71
Second temptation: word and concept contingency 72
Third temptation: the extent of mental organizing 75
Fourth temptation: the inability to give a substantive account of the correspondence relation 80
Fifth temptation: the explanatory and charitable power of relativist truth 84
Final remarks 96

6 **Rumours of Kant** 97
Re-Kanting Kantianism 99
Misunderstanding Kantian incoherence: Alvin Plantinga and Peter Byrne 100
Kant's reasons for adopting transcendental idealism 103
The two-realm interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism 104
The one-realm interpretation of Kant's transcendental idealism 110
Summary 115

7 **Hick and the Noumenal Jam-Pot** 117
Analysis and evaluation 120
Hick and the world 121
Hick's noumenal God 124
Substantial and formal properties 127
Summary 133

8 **Kaufman and the Kantian Mystery** 135
Constructing Kaufman 137
Regulative or noumenal – but not both 143

9 **The New Apophaticism and the Return of the Anthropomorphic** 148
The apophatic narcissistic self 150
The apophatic God and democracy 157

10 **Violence, Breaking and Gift: Realism and Postmodern Philosophy of Religion** 160
Paul D. Janz: tragedy, the cross and realism 160
Religion and realism 'after metaphysics': remembering the ontological difference 164
James K.A. Smith: incarnation as the condition of possibility for realism 166

11 **The Brokenness of Divine Language** 172
An argument for radical indeterminacy 173
J.F. Ross: talking about God and predicate schemas 176
Speaking anthropomorphically 178

12 **Why Anti-realism Breaks up Relationships** 187
First movement: just realism – some political ramifications of anti-realism 188
Second movement: feminism and the appeal to realism in ethics 193
Third movement: why realism about God matters 195
Fourth movement: a non-reductive account of human nature and society as an analogue for realism about God 197
Fifth movement: the gap between our beliefs and reality 199

References *203*
Index *209*

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C.J.I.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In broad brush-stroke terms, 'anti-realist' approaches to Christian philosophical theology, which I take issue with in this book, are those that deny any one of the following: that there is an indispensable core of religious beliefs which are fact-asserting; that these beliefs are made true or false by the way things are, rather than by their epistemic status; that 'the way things are' is independent of our cognitive activity, and that we are able to have beliefs concerning what is true independent of our cognitive activity (that is, God is not such that necessarily we could not have true beliefs concerning God).

The Scope of the Argument

Before filling in this impressionistic sketch I need to say a word about the scope of the book's thesis. We can distinguish three types of anti-realism: (i) a specific anti-realism about a given practice, (ii) general anti-realism which is applicable to more than one practice, but not every practice, (iii) a global anti-realism about every given practice.

The scope of this book can only be as broad as specific anti-realism about religious practice, so I must remain neutral about other specific practices, such as mathematics, science, politics, ethics, aesthetics, the law and so on. Indeed some practices, such as humour,[1] may be construed very plausibly in an anti-realist way. It would take either an heroic or highly reductionist ontology to insist that 'x is funny' is true independently of all our beliefs about what is funny: heroic if we insist that 'funniness' has a reality in the universe as independent of us as matter; reductionist if we insist that there is no more to 'being funny' than 'causing x to laugh' (where x ranges over people) which is true independently of our *beliefs* about whether something causes x to laugh. My task here cannot be to resolve the question of comic realism, but I cite the example as an area where anti-realism looks to this author to be a *prima facie* plausible account of the 'reality' of humour, with the reductionist–realist account failing, paradoxically, to do justice to this 'reality'. My claim is that anti-realist construals of religion are not plausible accounts of religious practice. Although I talk at times of 'religious practice/language' it should be clear that my competency only extends to 'Christian religious practice/language'; of course some of what I say might be relevant to other religions.

---

[1] My interest in this example was sparked off by Crispin Wright's discussion concerning 'discourse about what is funny' and realism, to be found in *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp.7–13.

I will sometimes need to deal with general arguments for anti-realist conclusions which, if successful, *would be* arguments for anti-realism in a number of practices, of which religion is but one. Further, some of the arguments have pretensions to the more global claim that anti-realism must be established for every given discourse. The crucial point to grasp here is that, although these arguments with wider implications would be sufficient for anti-realism in (some or all) other discourses, I do not claim that these are the only sufficient arguments which could be formulated in these other areas. I make no claim to be exhaustive. My rebuttal of the arguments will block off certain routes to anti-realist construals of (for example) science or ethics, but not all possible routes.

I make a braver claim when dealing with religious anti-realism, in that I aspire to deal with not just some sufficient arguments for a religious anti-realism, but all of them. To justify this claim I need to put the flesh on the skeleton anti-realism outlined in the first paragraph. I understand any approach to the practice of religion to be anti-realist *if and only if* it denies at least one of the following *four criteria for a realist construal of religious discourse*[2]

A there is an indispensable core of religious utterances that are fact-asserting, not merely expressive (from here on I will refer to this core as 'statements'),
B statements are made true by a non-epistemic state of affairs (the way the world is, rather than by standards of 'ideal justification'),
C what is the case is independent of human cognition,
D we can, in principle, have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition.

Religious anti-realism involves a denial of at least one of these claims for religious statements. For those who deny one of A to D but wish still to style themselves 'realist' or 'above realism and anti-realism', my use of the appellation ‘anti-realist’ can be considered a stipulated technical term to designate ‘someone who denies at least one of A to D’. This is worth emphasizing, in that none of the theological thinkers I critique in this book as representing ‘anti-realism’ would so style themselves. They prefer in general to be realists, or beyond the terms of the realist/anti-realist debate. I do not in fact much mind what anyone calls themselves. Depending on various self-stylings this book could be read as a ‘critique of certain sorts of realisms, and third-positions above realism and anti-realism which adopt a denial of one or more of A to D’.

---

[2] In drawing up these four criteria I am indebted to W. Alston's article 'Realism and the Christian Faith', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, vol.38, no.3, 1995, pp.37–55. Alston sets out three criteria (pp.37–8), which are similar to my A to C above. They are that, where S ranges over statements: (i) S's are genuine statements of fact; (ii) S's are true or false in a realist sense of these terms, and (iii) for any true statement that p, p obtains and is what it is independently of our attempts to cognize it. I have added the epistemic component D, which I consider that Alston implicitly relies on in his criticisms of Hick and Kaufman (pp.42–55).

The corollary to this is that ‘religious realism’, in my sense, is intact if none of A to D are denied. This is the work done by the ‘if and only if’ above; the realism I am defending is no thicker than that which is laid out in A to D. As I will stress in Chapter 12 the realism I claim as essential to religious practice is to be dissociated from gratuitous commitments to natural theology, the certainty/justification of religious beliefs, or particular political/theological agendas. Indeed the realism I defend could be adopted by an atheist, who would insist that ‘there is no God’ is to be construed in terms of A to D above.

I believe that with these four criteria – which I will refer to frequently in the book – I can avoid much of the confusion in the literature on religious (non)realism. In such literature there is often a loose understanding of (non)realism as a metaphysical doctrine concerning the (non) existence of an entity ‘God’. I consider that this characterization of realism is not helpful or just. The consequent debate is confused: D.Z. Phillips claims a third position beyond realism and anti-realism, and considers that realism is an ‘irreligious’ position, in that it reduces God to being just one more object in the universe, which might or might not exist. Hick and others claim that Phillips is a disingenuous (metaphysical) anti-realist; Hick overlooks a sense in which he himself is an anti-realist, and G. Kaufman dismisses traditional Christianity on the basis of a crude understanding of metaphysical realism.

By adopting A to D we are able to carve up the realist/anti-realist debate, not primarily in terms of the existence of a divine object, but rather in terms of what it is which constitutes a religious statement’s truth. This benefits the debate on religious realism in that it enables an evaluation of subtle Wittgensteinian and Kantian approaches (which are primarily concerned with what it is which makes a statement true, rather than the existence of God or the truth of specific statements).

I hope the A to D structure is found helpful. I have enjoyed using it for the very personal reason, which may not be philosophically irrelevant, that it reflects the momentum of my own religious convictions since around 1990 when I first articulated my faith in non-realist terms. A seemingly in-born religious sensibility and pre-disposition, coupled with intellectual doubt, seemed to lead almost inevitably to my accepting, with some reluctance, that religious utterances must be understood merely expressively (the denial of A). I embraced Wittgensteinian approaches in 1992 with some enthusiasm and relief. Insisting that religious truth was immanent to religious practice seemed to offer a way of doing justice to the rich experience of being religious, without swallowing unpleasant ontological pills and being forced to confront the ubiquitous atheist.

I fear the main fruit in my case, although not I hope motivation, of denying that truth was independent of practices was urbanely to avoid answering direct questions from other undergraduates as to whether I 'believed in God'. My integrity finally out-stripping my ingenuity, I felt compelled to drop the claim that truth was entirely and comfortably immanent to practices, but was unable to shake off the original philosophical anxieties which made the notion of available-but-transcendent truth seem so problematic. Briefly I attempted to get along without the transcendent horn of the dilemma, by straight-forwardly claiming that 'the way things are' is constructed entirely by our cognitive activity (the denial of C).

This pure denial of C was too austere and disciplined for me to bear for long, as well as being hostile to that longing for transcendence which I detect in all theological thinkers who feel both compelled by the 'truth' of not-C, yet repelled by its full consequences. Summers on Iona, along with exposure to transcendental idealism (both Kantian and Wittgensteinian varieties), led me – again like many theological thinkers – to dabble in the 'inaccessible' and 'ineffable' realm of reality-independent-of-human-cognition, becoming addicted, as one does, to that illicit noumenal *frisson* of which one must not speak, but about which one harbours secret unsaid hopes and hunches. So I spent the final stage of my anti-realist curve on the pleasantly mystical, although melancholic and anti-social, plateau of denying D (God, although real and other, is such that we can never have true beliefs about God).

I flatter myself that my potted autobiography shows some method threading its way through the stages, which taken individually at any point might pass for madness. There is an assymetrical relationship between the claims A to D. By this I mean that anyone who denies one of these statements (B for example) will be committed to the denial of later statements (C and D in this example), but not of earlier statements (A). So if one denies that religious utterances are made true by a non-epistemic state of affairs (B), one will also deny that religious utterances are made true by what is the case independent of human cognition (C). In turn this will render it impossible that we could have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition (D). But the denial of (B) need not involve the negation of (A) at all – religious utterances might be fact-asserting, it is just that for something to 'be a fact' is for it to conform to standards of ideal justification.

The structure of A to D, as described above, enables me to develop my argument in response to a trajectory of thought which *a rational anti-realist could be expected to follow*. So the anti-realist whose denial of A is exposed as flawed would have a natural sympathy and recourse to B, and so on, until we reach the last outpost in D. Of course there can be no hiding that the 'rational anti-realist' I have in mind is somewhat on the model of myself from 1990 to 2000. The dangers of myopic self-absorption or the rude zeal of the convert are real, but my aspiration is to have used my intellectual and religious development such as it is in order to probe sensitively the source and trouble of anti-realist approaches without caricature, slander or trivialization.

The arguments in support of anti-realism considered in further chapters are not intended as concocted 'straw-men'. Many of them were adopted in some form by one flesh-and-blood practitioner of religion: myself over the years, as I went through various intellectual contortions to avoid falling into realisms or atheism. Although I am critical of the likes of D.Z. Phillips, John Hick, Gordon Kaufman and Gordon Kaufman, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge here – before hostilities begin – the huge debt I owe to their work which, over the years, I have found to be stimulating, consoling, entertaining, enriching and infuriating.

Detailed Summary of the Book's Argument

Biography and deserved acknowledgements aside, it is time to outline the content of the book as it follows the structure laid out and justified above. At this stage I will mark the scope of the arguments (specific/global) for anti-realism being considered in the various chapters, although it should always be borne in mind that I only have an interest in general or global anti-realism in so far as they have a bearing on religion within the terms set out by A to D.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are concerned with Wittgensteinian approaches to philosophy of religion, which undermine A and B above. If the Wittgensteinian view is correct, there will be no requirement to believe that religious beliefs are factually true (the denial of A), that they are capable of being true or false outside of an epistemic practice (the denial of B), or that they contradict secular, atheistic view-points, and could be widely wrong about the nature of the universe (the denial of B). An important aside should be made at this point, that I concern myself with philosophers of religion who claim an influence from, or an affiliation with, the later Wittgenstein. This is to be distinguished from a concern with what the historical Wittgenstein actually has to say, or would say, about religion (interesting though this is).

Philosophers who espouse a Wittgensteinian approach, such as D.Z. Phillips, frequently complain that they are not properly understood, and that the depth of the challenge they pose is not appreciated. I consider that there is some justice in this complaint, but also some evasion. The complaint is just in that the Wittgensteinian approach cannot be properly understood unless one delves into the Wittgensteinian mind to explore wider philosophical issues, such as the nature of philosophy; what it ever is to ‘mean’ or ‘believe’ something; the context-relative nature of epistemic justification, and the nature of truth. The element of evasion becomes clear when one considers that Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion do not always present their views in as structured, forceful and comprehensible a way as might be both desirable and possible.

In this book I attempt to do justice to the depth of the Wittgensteinian position, while remedying the evasion. Chapters 2 to 4 deal in turn with Wittgensteinian approaches to meaning, justification and truth. This being so, my evaluation of the Wittgensteinian project re religion is exhaustive (there are no ignored depths): pending, of course, a re-statement in very different terms.

Chapter 2 concerns arguments for a denial of A which are aimed specifically at religious utterances, with no more global pretensions. The anti-realist draws on considerations such as the evaluative role of *religious* beliefs, an attempt to maximize the intelligibility of *religious* utterances and behaviour, and the theological/grammatical propriety of mixing God-talk with concepts such as ‘factual existence’. The latter part of this chapter deals with the claim that an expressive interpretation ‘improves the philosophy’, and a claim that the scope of religious discourse rules out fact-assertion. Although in these sections I draw on arguments which have been widely applied to ethical discourse, I gear the discussion to religious utterances and remain neutral about their validity in the ethical sphere. At any rate, I find the merely expressive interpretation of all religious utterances to be unsustainable.

In Chapter 3 I argue that it is possible to strengthen a Wittgensteinian approach by disposing of the expressive thesis, and focusing on the relativization of meaning and epistemic standards (in all cases) to so-called ‘language games’. If these arguments are valid they would be effective across all epistemic practices. We are dealing here with arguments for a global anti-realism, in that they would apply to every and any discourse.

I find no considerations that support the complete relativization of meaning and criteria to ‘language games’, such that even terms such as ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are relative to, and exhausted by, epistemic practices (the denial of B). I also argue that, even if we allow such a relativization, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for establishing any of the distinctive Wittgensteinian aversions to natural theology and traditional epistemological procedures. This of course is an *ad hominem* argument against Wittgensteinian approaches, it being no part of my brief to defend natural theology or traditional epistemological procedures, neither of which are implied or ruled out by claims A to D. The *ad hominem* argument is a good one nevertheless, in that it hits hard at one of the Wittgensteinians’ principle motivations for adopting their whole approach.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I aim to show how the epistemizing of truth lies at the heart of the Wittgensteinian approach. Again I am concerned here with an argument for global anti-realism, with the claim that, in every practice, truth is constituted and exhausted by our standards of *ideal* justification (rather than *actual* justification, as in Chapter 3). Noting the remarkable similarity between Phillips's position and Putnam's 'internal realism', I draw Putnam into Phillips's defence. Nonetheless I conclude that an epistemic conception of truth (the denial of B) is either implausible or dependent on a non-epistemic conception. I discuss what the real dangers are, for the practice of religion, of holding an epistemic conception of truth, suggesting that such a conception is inimical to religious practice on soteriological grounds.

Towards the end of Chapter 4 I offer a diagnosis of what philosophical anxieties are behind the tendency to epistemize truth. I identify the general problem to be a worry that we are epistemically unable to 'get-outside-of-our-own-skins', where for 'skin' we should read 'conceptual schemas, language games, epistemic practices and perceptual limitations'. This impossibility of getting-out-of-our-own-skins renders 'impossible' any concept of the world-as-it-is independent of our conceptions of it.

Now the last sentence above is ambiguous between two readings. On a 'strict' reading, the 'impossibility' of the concept of 'the world-as-it-is independent of our conceptions of it' means that we *really are not able* to frame *any* such concept. We must say that there *is no world* outside of our conceptual frameworks, no world independent of our cognitive activity. In as much as this is the case we can be said to 'construct' our world(s), in that the way-things-are is constructed by the organizing activity of our minds, rather than being given by the nature of the way-things-are independently of the organizing activity of our minds. On the other hand, an 'indulgent' reading of the 'impossibility' involved here equivocates or relents on the issue of whether *there is* a world-independent-of-our-cognitive-activity, and perhaps hints of a 'noumenal' realm of things-in-themselves. What is now 'impossible' is that we should have true beliefs about such a realm (were it to exist).

It should be recognizable that the 'strict' reading outlined above is a pure denial of C (the claim that 'what is the case is independent of human cognition') and that the 'indulgent' reading is a denial of D (the claim that 'we can, in principle, have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition'). Chapter 5 is dedicated to dealing with some of the main philosophical drives which push people into such a constructivist denial of C (the claim that what is the case is independent of human cognition). The arguments dealt with in Chapter 5 would apply, if successful, to all practices, and as such are globally anti-realist. They draw on concerns such as the rich diversity of possible world-views; the contingency of language; the extent of mental organizing of our experience; the inability to give a substantial account of the correspondence relation, and the ability of relativist-constructivism to give a powerful and charitable explanation, where realism fails, of the wide variety in belief systems.

All of the above are at least arguments which have troubled me in the past, and I have had enough conversations to know that I am not a constituency of one. In this fifth chapter I attempt some therapy, by showing that in every case the realist is able to give a better account of what is going on than the constructivist; or that, where this is not the case, this is because the problem is a pseudo-issue that is impossible to resolve because of the way the constructivist has contorted the question.

Most theologians who are drawn to constructivist arguments, such as I treat in Chapter 5, are reluctant to accept the loneliness of a universe that is completely, and in every aspect, dependent upon human cognition. So the likes of Hick and Kaufman express a vague sympathy with 'Kantian' constructivism (reality is mind-constructed) and talk 'indulgently' of the 'impossibility' of having true beliefs about that which is independent of human cognition, most importantly of having true beliefs about the noumenal God (God inasmuch as God is independent-of-human-cognition). So God-in-Godself, the real God, becomes completely conceptually transcendent, in such a way that none of our concepts ('truth', 'reality', 'existence', 'being') can ever refer to God. The God we talk about is a relative conceptual construct: God-for-us, the phenomenal/available God. In other words, Hick and Kaufman deny D.

In Chapter 6 I facilitate an in-depth examination of the 'Kantian' positions of Hick and Kaufman, by surveying Kant's actual arguments for transcendental idealism and summarizing well-rehearsed problems with these arguments. Kant's denial of D takes the form of insisting that we can only have true beliefs about reality if we have certain knowledge, and that we can only have certainty where our minds have 'constructed' reality. That which is independent of human cognition is not something about which we can have true beliefs. Kant's approach, if effective, would be valid across all discourses, such that 'what is the case' – in the sense of 'what we can frame true beliefs of' – is never independent of human cognition, and 'that which is independent of human cognition' is always an 'impossible' concept (in a sense which oscillates from the strict to the indulgent).

In Chapters 7 and 8 I capitalize on this critique, applying it to Hick and Kaufman, who both cite Kant as having 'established' that D must be denied. I demonstrate that Hick and Kaufman make the same mistakes as Kant, as well as making some mistakes of their own. I also invoke more *ad hominem* arguments against Hick and Kaufman, showing that they are not faithful to their own denials of D, and that they cannot be without dropping substantial elements of their thought. Hick considers himself a 'realist' on the basis of his positing a real noumenal God; owing to problems with the notion of the 'noumenal', I argue that Hick can be a realist only if he drops the Kantian denial of D. Kaufman too must choose between a 'real' God and the denial of D.

In Chapter 9 I take a step back from the mechanics of the technical argument against anti-realism to consider an important motivation for many denials of D: a concern that God, if talked about in certain ways, will be rendered anthropomorphic. I argue that the way in which an ‘apophatic’ strain of theology attempts to avoid anthropomorphism actually leads them to some of the most directly anthropomorphic projections possible in our contemporary context.

In Chapter 10 I consider some more ‘postmodern’ reflections on the problem of realism, which tend to circulate around C and D. I argue that, even where the final position defended is realist, it can be so for the wrong reasons. In brief, I argue that such approaches tend to show too much deference to the ‘Kantian problem’, while being too confident about their own more or less idiosyncratic ‘solutions’.

Chapter 11 explores an alternative route into epistemic anti-realism (the denial of D). My protagonist here is one who claims that it is indeterminate what words learnt in mundane contexts mean when applied to God. Because our language breaks down when we speak of God (we do not know what words mean when used of God, in that they are equivocal or analogically strained in indeterminate respects), it is not in principle possible for us to have a belief p, where p is a truth about God. I refute this claim by critiquing the suspect ‘ontological’ theory of what it is for applications of the same words to have a common meaning. I conclude that, even if words change their meaning because they are applied to God, we are aware of the new meaning, which is itself motivated by substantial theological views.

In Chapters 1 to 11 I deal with the intellectual probity of anti-realist approaches to philosophical theology, arguing that for a variety of reasons, denying one or more of A to D is untenable and unnecessary. In the concluding chapter I go out on something of a limb and try to make a case for the religious/spiritual value and necessity of the ‘realist hope’. Chapters 1 to 11 show that one should not be an anti-realist; Chapter 11 aims to stimulate a sense of the importance and excitement of being a realist. Otherwise ‘realism’ might be adopted rather reluctantly as a default position when all the denials of A to D have been run through.

I am partly responding in the final chapter to theologians who are inclined to regard the realist/anti-realist debate with hostility or indifference, and who would regard the project of this book with luke-warm indifference at best. I present a case for the importance of realism, for why realism matters, and what is at stake. First of all, I separate the heart of realism from gratuitous doctrines which are too often associated with it. Religious realism is the claim that truth is independent of our beliefs about truth, and that we can in principle hope to have true beliefs about God. Realism is not intrinsically concerned with the existence of ‘objects’, with natural theology or rational justification. I then show that even thinkers who are hostile or indifferent to religious realism, so defined, usually make an implicit appeal to a similar realism in the sphere of ethics, and would fiercely resist anti-realism.

To establish that realism matters in religion as well as ethics I draw an analogy with realism/anti-realism about persons, to show that anti-realism makes mutually risk-taking and courageous relationships impossible. I go on to argue that, far from it being the realist who is obsessed with rational certainty, this is one of the worst vices of the anti-realist, who cannot bear there to be a gap between her beliefs and reality.

I conclude that the most vital feature of religious realism is not certainty of belief, but the opposite – the acknowledged risk that all our hope could be in vain. In closing the possibility on this risk, the anti-realist demonstrates an unfaithful and uncourageous movement of thought.

CHAPTER 2

The Scope and Meaning of Religious Language

D.Z. Phillips claims that certain influential philosophers – Richard Swinburne looming large here – misinterpret the meaning of religious utterances. Phillips also considers that these same philosophers include under the aegis of 'religion' uses of language which do not belong there: for instance, proofs for the existence of God, and causal accounts of the efficacy of prayer. Language used in a religious context, Phillips claims, has a radically different 'depth grammar' from language used in other contexts. So although 'I believe that this table exists' and 'I believe that God exists' appear to have a superficial grammatical similarity, in fact the former is descriptive (it asserts a fact) and the latter is expressive (it does not report a fact, but expresses an attitude towards the facts).

Phillips never states his position quite so tersely, but there are plenty of passages which certainly imply it. Some care is needed to ensure that justice is done to the exact shade of Phillips's position. About the safest characterization of his position is to call it a 'non-factualism' about religious language: religious utterances do not describe matters of fact, do not attempt to refer to a transcendent 'something' which is 'God'. Phillips is clear on this:

> Because the question of divine reality can be construed as 'Is God real or not?' it has often been assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever is over *a matter of fact*. The philosophical investigation of the reality of God then becomes the philosophical investigation appropriate to an assertion of a matter of fact. That this is a misrepresentation of the religious concept is made obvious by a brief comparison of talk about facts with talk about God.[1]

In the literature this non-factualism is usually referred to as 'the expressive thesis/interpretation' or 'expressivism'. Phillips warrants this characterization in passages such as the following:

> (The) religious pictures give one a language in which it is possible to think about human life in a certain way. ... When these thoughts are found in worship, the praising and the glorifying does not refer to some object called God. ... religious expressions of praise, glory, etc. are not referring

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[1] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.1.

> expressions. These activities are expressive in character, and what they express is called the worship of God.[2]

Throughout his work Phillips 'elucidates' the expressive character of individual religious beliefs by focusing on specific examples. So in *Faith After Foundationalism*, after quoting an account by Jakob Fries of a terrifying storm at sea, Phillips offers a discussion of the notion of the 'will of God':

> In moments of extreme peril, such as being in a storm at sea, a person may say that his life is in God's hands. God's will will be made manifest in his survival or destruction, as it is in the raging storm. Above the waves, above the thunder and the lightning, is the omnipotence of God – an omnipotence the writer finds both terrible and wonderful. The notion of God's will gets its sense *in* such reactions ... The notion of God's will is not related to what has happened as a higher *explanation*. ... 'It is the will of God' is not an answer to the question 'Why is this happening?' but one way in which someone may die to the desire to ask the question. The notion of God's will is formed, not in the search for explanations, but in the abandonment of explanations.[3]

It is vital for Phillips that his entirely expressive account of the meaning of all religious language is an interpretation of what users of religious language really mean, and always have meant – not a re-interpretation. Related to this concern is Phillips's insistence that he is not reducing religious utterances to mere human attitudes. Although religious utterances are expressive in character, they are expressive in an irreducibly *religious* way. This is where caution is needed in characterizing Phillips's position as 'expressivism': this must not imply reductionism.[4]

This insistence that an expressive/non-factualist account of religious utterances is neither a re-interpretation, nor a reduction, suggests that there is either something subtle, or something crazy going on here. The 'crazy' interpretation is popular amongst both traditional atheists (such as J.L. Mackie[5]) and theists (such as Richard Swinburne). So Richard Swinburne[6] claims that, as it stands, Phillips's expressive thesis could be flatly contradicted by taking a survey of how most religious believers interpret the utterances they make. Such an easy victory is a little shallow. There is more that Phillips both does, and does not but *could* say in defence of a more subtle version of the expressive thesis.

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[2] D.Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), pp.149–50.

[3] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), pp.281–2.

[4] See D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.46–8.

[5] J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp.222–9.

[6] R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.96.

In the process of attacking a factual interpretation of religious language, Cyril Barrett praises the Wittgensteinian 'revolution', that would understand religious belief not as irreducibly expressive. The question that Wittgensteinian revolutionaries are always faced with here is as follows: if it is the ordinary use of words that determines their meaning, and if most people use these words with a metaphysical meaning, on what grounds is this usage being deemed reprehensible, given that the Wittegensteinian maxim is that meaning is determined by ordinary use? As with many political revolutions, the Wittgensteinian revolution is carried out in the name of the people, but with some contempt for the actual quality and understanding of those people; there is a benign, elitist and patrician attempt to speak for the people while really speaking against them. The strongly proscriptive nature of the Wittgensteinian project comes out clearly when Barrett comments that Wittgenstein attempted 'in a dramatic manner' to tell people that 'when they speak about matters religious, they are dashing themselves against the boundaries of language in thinking that they can say what remains unsayable'.[7] The contempt and pity for the people reaches a climax, with Barrett lamenting that the prospects for the 'Wittgensteinian revolution' are 'not good': 'I cannot see that many people in this generation or in the next (or perhaps in any future one) will see the world as Wittgenstein saw it and wanted others to see it'.[8] Given this, one might well be surprised that the expressivist interpretation of religious beliefs is supposed to be derived from observing how religious people actually use religious language.

Interpreting the Behaviour of Religious Believers

The case for an expressive interpretation of religious utterances is going to have to do more than simply listen to what people say about these utterances. A more promising approach involves basing one's case on the 'whole behaviour' of religious believers. One refuses to accept just what people *say at first* about their religious utterances as giving an account of their meaning. Instead the philosopher must look more holistically at the whole weave of behaviour (including verbal expression of beliefs) and then interpret this behaviour in the most intelligible way possible. The hope is that, once we have interpreted religious utterances in the whole context of religious behaviour, an expressive interpretation will offer the most intelligible account of people's actions and 'beliefs'.

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[7] Cyril Barrett, 'The Wittgensteinian Revolution', in *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: the Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Harriet H. Harris and Christopher J. Insole (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), pp.113–14. Some of my comments here, and further on, first appeared in the 'Introduction' to this collection.

[8] Ibid., p.126.

There is a distinction to be made between what religious language users believe they are doing when they pray, worship and so on, and what constitutes an intelligible (for 'us') account of their behaviour (which includes, but is not exhausted by, their second level reflection on their primary activity).[9] Armed with this distinction the expressive thesis is at least no longer plainly false. If we were to do a Gallop poll of religious language users we can concede that most people would be 'confused' by the superficial similarity between, say, the existence of tables and the existence of God (in the sense that both are ontologically independent-of-us objects).

This leads us to suggest that the so-called 'depth grammar' of religious language is reached, not by asking what people think they are doing, but by looking to what gives an intelligible account of their behaviour. What are these behavioural features which are most intelligibly accounted for by the expressive thesis? M. Banner[10] finds some of the following arguments suggested in Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations*:

a The immunity to criticism argument. Religious people do not usually amend their ways simply when pointed out an error, or if they cease to think that the proofs for God's existence are valid.
b The technical competence argument. When people pray they are aware of how the world works, and of the need to cope with the world by using practical skills. So in their religious practices people cannot really be using religion to achieve the same technical ends.
c The due season argument. If rituals were supplements to other causal activities, people would turn to them *whenever faced with a difficulty*. But we find that people do not pray for rain outside of the rainy season; and that Christians pray for a good harvest when the crops are being planted and when they are about to be gathered.
d Religion as practical, not hypothetical. The importance of religion for most people is as a guide to life, not a rival (to science/common sense) explanatory hypothesis.

These arguments are persuasive and suggestive up to a point. Their cumulative effect is to emphasize the extent to which some religious utterances and practices will not be fully intelligible unless we give some consideration to their expressive, attitudinal import. This is a long way, though, from the strong thesis that religious utterances are entirely expressive. Banner offers a definitive response to each of these arguments, along the following lines:

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[9] Phillips frequently stresses the importance of taking account, not just of what believers say, but of how they behave. See *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), pp.28, 167, 237–8, 243, 252.

[10] M. Banner, *The Justification of Science and the Rationality of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). See ch.4 for a more extensive treatment of this issue, on which I draw in this section.

- a′ The immunity to criticism argument. Although people do not ‘take account of the evidence’ in a naive, falsificationist sense, there is such a phenomenon as loss of faith. Such a loss of faith often has a cognitive factor, such as being unable to resolve the problem of evil. It may be that one is led to this problem because of a traumatic experience to which one has a certain attitude, but this does not create a dichotomy between expressive and cognitive factors. Rather one leads to the other: a process that could occur in either direction, into or out of religious faith.
- b′ The technical competence argument. Often religion concerns areas of people’s lives over which there is no technical control, such as death or major illness.
- c′ The due season argument. It would be possible for a prayer for rain to be made in the due season *and* to be taken as instrumental (the former is necessary, the latter necessary and sufficient).
- d′ Religion as practical, not hypothetical. This is a false dichotomy. Something can be a guide to life *because* it is considered to have explanatory value.

The holistic interpretation approach can help us to link up religious and theological concepts with their surroundings and behavioural criteria, as well as emphasizing the importance of taking expressive factors into account when interpreting religious beliefs, utterances and practices. A Wittgensteinian approach goes beyond its limits, though, when it claims that the meaning of religious language is in fact (not ‘ought to be’) exclusively expressive.

Improving the Philosophy: Simon Blackburn’s Quasi-realism

There is really no alternative for the expressivist: they must argue that interpreting religious utterances in an expressive sense improves the philosophy in a normative sense, whatever people do or do not usually think is involved (metaphysically) in their religious utterances.

The move being made here is similar to projectivist accounts of ethics,[11] where ethical statements are put into the class of ‘projected/spread-onto-the-world properties'. 'Projected' properties are a sub-set of the broader class of properties which have no independent-of-us existence in the world; they arise from our habitual, emotional, sentimental and attitudinal reactions to the world. The projectivist notices that, as a matter of fact about human nature, we tend to project some of our predilections and reactions onto the external world. So Blackburn talks in terms of the mind 'spreading itself on the world'.[12] We behave and reason *as if* these properties are really in the world, but if challenged philosophically would concede that the properties are merely projections, or – in Blackburn's terminology – only 'quasi-real'.[13]

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[11] Cf. S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), particularly ch.6.

The projectivist account is supposed to be desirable in that it enables the user of ethical or religious language to carry on using, and being – in a sense – committed to, the problematic language in question, while enjoying the advantages of an improved philosophy. We can identify two respects in which the philosophy is supposed to be improved by adopting an expressivist/projectivist account.

First of all, it is claimed that projectivism tidies up the explanation of action. Let us take the example of prayer (as a religious action to be explained). In a descriptive/factual interpretation of religious utterances there would need to be a two-stage explanation of this action. First of all there is the attitude-neutral descriptive belief that certain truth conditions are met in the case of the claim 'God exists'. The holding of this attitude-neutral belief does not go all the way in explaining the action of prayer. To do this we must add the second stage of explanation: that the believer has certain attitudes towards the object of this belief. In this case the believer has the attitudes of worship, adoration, guilt, duty and so on.

Interpreting religious and ethical beliefs in an expressive way tidies up the explanation of action, by disposing of the need for a two-stage explanation. Adopting an expressive interpretation we can give a one-stage explanation, by interpreting religious/ethical beliefs as expressive attitudes and actual dispositions formed by reacting to the natural features of things. In terms of the two-stage model described above, we leap-frog straight to the second stage of explanation.

The second advantage the expressivist/projectivist account is supposed to give us is a greater economy in our ontology. We ask no more of the world than what we know is there, a natural world and patterns of reaction to it. It is thought that, in the case of ethics, a theory assimilating moral understanding to perception demands more of the world. Further what it demands of the world (ethical/moral truths) is of an ontologically mysterious nature. Similarly, the argument would go, if we wish both to interpret religious utterances in a descriptive way, *and continue to make such utterances*, we will demand considerably more from the world; further the more that is required is certainly mysterious (God), of a radically different ontological type from anything else in the universe.

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[12] Ibid., p.181.

[13] Ibid.

To avoid such a lack of economy we will need to take one of two paths. The first is to continue to offer a descriptive interpretation of religious utterances, but to accept that such utterances are in error about the nature of the universe, and so to resolve to stop making these utterances. The second is to hold on to the area of commitment (religious utterances), whilst graciously paying the philosophical price, which is to offer an expressive interpretation of religious utterances.

The 'projectivist' approach does not fall down on the results of an empirical survey of what religious believers say about their utterances. I consider that the price it pays for being more convincing, is that it is supported by more unsubstantiated but substantial presuppositions.

First of all, the considerations concerning the explanation of action are contentious and move too quickly. The relationship between evaluative/religious commitment and action is subtle. There is an attitude of doing something 'even though one knows/believes it to be wrong', and also the sentiment of not caring whether God exists. The relationship between religious or moral convictions and action will come out in a more diffuse way, perhaps with retrospective feelings of self-disgust, moral shame or religious guilt. There is no straight inference from expressing moral/religious convictions to any particular desires or behavioural dispositions leading to action.

Given that there is in fact no inevitable, uncontroversial connection between convictions/beliefs and desires and dispositions leading to actions, it can be no virtue in a theory if it explains actions by claiming that there *is* such a connection. The projectivist theory does just this in a very heroic way by interpreting ethical and religious beliefs as *exclusively* expressive of desires and dispositions leading to actions, and not at all descriptive. The projectivist account leaps straight to an explanation of dispositions and actions, without being encumbered by attitude-neutral descriptive beliefs. If I am correct in holding that the connection between the holding of beliefs and dispositions and actions is complex, it would seem that not only is the projectivist account claiming something which *we know not to be the case* (namely that there is an inevitable connection between holding an ethical/religious belief and the way one acts), but it has rendered itself *unable* to account for instances where someone expresses a belief but fails to act on it, or to show a disposition to act on it. Hence it seems that, if anything, the projectivist account is at a philosophical disadvantage in explaining action (or lack of it).

The second boasted advantage of the expressivist/projectivist account of religious language is that it achieves a greater 'metaphysical economy'. Behind this boast there is one massive assumption, which certainly most religious believers would not share: namely that God does not, and could not exist (in a metaphysically realist sense). The expressivist interpretation is only more economical if one has already accepted the metaphysical conclusions of traditional atheism. If the expressivist interpretation is to compel us, on the grounds that it 'improves the philosophy', then we can expect the expressivist to justify this by arguing that positing a metaphysically supreme being leads to an unacceptable lack of economy.

D.Z. Phillips has (to his mind) two good reasons not to engage with the atheism/theism debate, and not to make his expressivist interpretation hang on the 'result' of such a debate. The first reason is given in *Religion Without Explanation*, where Phillips writes of 'Hume's legacy' as follows:

> If the 'religious' beliefs are as Hume describes them, Hume's criticisms are, in my opinion, unanswerable. But what if the beliefs are not as Hume described them? It would not be surprising in that event to find that his criticisms had little to do with such beliefs.[14]

Phillips's conviction of course is that religious beliefs are not as Hume describes them, but are rather *expressive* in character. We find that we are beginning to move in circles. Phillips's argument could be put as follows:

1. We are seeking to understand the standard/literal meaning of religious utterances. The account we give must be an interpretation and not a re-interpretation.
2. If religious utterances are beliefs which are at all descriptive of facts about the universe, then they fail to be at all plausible (Hume's legacy). Any attempt to interpret religious utterances in an expressivist way to avoid Hume's assault will (if the above antecedent is true) be a re-interpretation, or a reduction of religious utterances.
3. If religious utterances are not beliefs of this nature, but rather expressive of the most fundamental attitude to adopt to the (naturalistic/uncontroversial) facts, then Hume's criticisms are irrelevant. An expressivist interpretation of religious utterances will be an interpretation, and not a re-interpretation or reduction. In fact the charge of the reductionism will be on the other foot, as Hume (and traditional theists such as Swinburne) will be guilty of 'reducing' or distorting the real meaning of religious beliefs.
4. As it turns out, by paying attention to the behaviour and language of religious believers, we find that religious utterances are in fact expressive in their meaning.

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[14] D.Z. Phillips, *Religion Without Explanation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1976), p.25.

5 From 1, 3 and 4 we find that Hume's onslaught is irrelevant, as is the traditional debate between theists and atheists.

In fact, at each stage, the strongest form of the argument we can muster for the expressivist interpretation goes as follows:

1′ We are seeking to understand the standard/literal meaning of religious utterances. The account we give must be an interpretation and not a re-interpretation.

2′ If religious utterances are beliefs which are at all descriptive of facts about the universe, then they *may* fail to be at all plausible (depending on the truth of Hume's legacy). It is reasonable to contend that this is an open question, to be argued one way or the other. If it is thought that Hume's assault is successful, but one wishes to go on using religious language, then it will be necessary to give an expressivist interpretation. This will (if religious utterances are descriptive beliefs) be a re-interpretation, or a reduction of religious utterances.

3′ If religious utterances are not beliefs of this (descriptive) nature, but rather expressive of the most fundamental attitude to adopt to the (naturalistic/uncontroversial) facts, then Hume's criticisms (whether successful or not) are irrelevant. An expressivist interpretation of religious utterances will be an interpretation, and not a re-interpretation or reduction. In fact the charge of the reductionism will be on the other foot, as Hume (or traditional philosophical theists such as Swinburne) will be guilty of 'reducing' or distorting the real meaning of religious beliefs.

4′ As it turns out, by paying attention to the behaviour and language of religious believers, we find that religious utterances are in fact *at least in part* beliefs that are descriptive about how the universe is at the most fundamental level.

5′ Given 1′, 2′ and 4′ we find that Hume's legacy, and the traditional theist/atheist debate is relevant to justifying what is asserted in the literal/standard content of religious utterances. If, and only if, it was thought that Hume's atheistic legacy had won the day, and for some reason we wished to go on making religious utterances, then we find that an expressivist interpretation of religious utterances is required, in order to achieve what we have already decided is the desirable economy in our metaphysics.

So we see that even if the expressivist interpretation is sustainable on the grounds of 'improving the philosophy', its success is of a rather different nature than Phillips expected. It is only successful, if at all, as the implication of the conclusion of an extensive and traditional theistic/atheistic philosophical debate. It is not the starting point of philosophy of religion, the 'meaning of religious utterances as genuinely religious people understand them'. Most religious people would only come to adopt an entirely expressivist reinterpretation of their religious utterances if they became convinced that some of their traditional beliefs were unsustainable. As a consequence these people would become rather quixotic atheists, caught on the horns of religious sensibility coupled with honest intellectual doubt.

Characterizing the Scope of the Religious Language Game

D.Z. Phillips's second reason for not getting involved in the traditional theism/atheism debate would, if convincing, be enough to block my argument above. At (2′) I wrote that 'if religious utterances are beliefs that are at all descriptive of facts about the universe …'; Phillips would feel confident in blocking this move straight away, thanks to certain convictions about the scope of religious language, what counts as a 'religious utterance'.

To get this idea off the ground, Phillips makes extensive use of the notion of different 'language games'. A 'language game' can be understood here as a stretch of language used for a particular purpose, in a particular context. We might, for heuristic purposes, distinguish two types of 'language game': there are what could be called 'discourse-limited language games' and 'cross-discourse language games'. The former are stretches of language as carved up into 'subject matters' or 'practices': so we have the stretch of language that can be used in a religious context, and the stretch of language that can be used in a scientific or legal context, and so on. The latter are activities which can run through many different 'subject matters': in this category we might put the forming and testing of hypotheses, thanking, asking, affirming and justifying.[15]

The contours of a 'discourse-limited language game' can be given by exploring two things: first of all, which 'cross-discourse language games' run through it, and which ones do not; and secondly, the particular nature of any 'cross-discourse language game' in the specific context of the practice being looked at (the 'discourse-limited language game'). Phillips is convinced that philosophical confusions often arise when we fail to realize which cross-discourse language games run through which discourse-limited language games; or when we fail to attend to the particular nuance of an activity as it is carried out *within a practice*. This latter point is important. We will see how it points to another instance of Phillips combining considerable subtlety with peculiar blindness.

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[15] The 'cross-discourse' type of language game is more what Wittgenstein has in mind in *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), para.23.

Phillips does not think that the activity of 'thanking' or 'asking' is the same in all contexts:

> We cannot say without qualification of asking, thanking and cursing that whereas they can occur in the course of a wider activity one need not have any particular activity in mind. Failure to keep in mind the activity in question may lead to the ignoring of important conceptual differences.[16]

The task of philosophy is almost defined for Phillips as that of describing/clarifying two things. First of all, the philosopher should seek to establish whether the application of a cross-discourse language game is permitted, or if it is somehow beyond the scope of the discourse-limited language game. Secondly, where a cross-discourse language game (such as thanking) does have a place in the discourse-limited language game (in this case 'religion'), the philosopher needs to tease out the way in which the context (the religious practice) shapes the activity (for instance, asking for help).

> Philosophy may clarify certain misunderstandings about (religious beliefs). It may show the naivety of certain objections to religion, or that some so-called religious beliefs are superstitious. But philosophy is neither for nor against religious beliefs. After it has sought to clarify the grammar of such beliefs its work is over.[17]

One of the prime philosophical confusions is to apply the criteria which are at home in one context to disciplines where they are inappropriate. Taking religion as the 'discourse-limited language game', Phillips draws some strong conclusions concerning which 'cross-discourse language games' fall within its scope. Figure 2.1 gives a partial map of the way Phillips would draw up the scope and contours of the 'discourse-limited language game' religion.

When activities from the 'OUT' column are used in a religious context, Phillips insists that there is a 'confusion', a 'misunderstanding' or 'philosophical illusion'. When this happens we have an instance of an 'alien grammar' being introduced.[18]

Phillips's subtlety here is in teasing out the way in which asking or giving thanks *in a religious context* can show features that are unique to that context.

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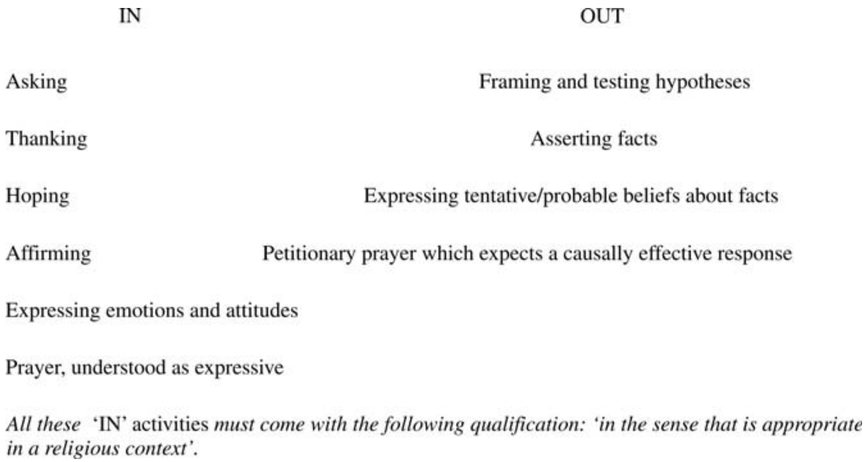
[16] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.85. See also pp.69–70, 83, 84–6, 96–7, 108–9.

[17] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), pp.108–9.

[18] See D.Z. Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965), p.81. Also note Wittgenstein's comment: 'if the question arises as to the existence of God, it plays an entirely different role to that of the existence of any person or object I ever heard of', in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).



IN	OUT
Asking	Framing and testing hypotheses
Thanking	Asserting facts
Hoping	Expressing tentative/probable beliefs about facts
Affirming	Petitionary prayer which expects a causally effective response
Expressing emotions and attitudes	
Prayer, understood as expressive	

All these 'IN' activities *must come with the following qualification: 'in the sense that is appropriate in a religious context'.*

Fig. 2.1 Scope of 'discourse-limited language game': religion

So it might be the case that sometimes, for some people, in a religious context what it is to ask for and receive protection 'is determined by the holiness of God'; by which it is meant, the believer will not judge that protection has not been given if 'all does not go well'.[19]

Phillips's blindness comes out in not countenancing the possibility that the same qualification – that the context/practice (in this case religion) gives a particular shape to the activity in question – could be applied to the activities of 'framing and testing hypotheses *as that is appropriate in a religious context*', and 'asserting facts *as that is appropriate in a religious context*', and so on with the other activities in the 'OUT' column. So although people do not 'test and frame hypotheses *in the sense appropriate to the investigation of physical objects*' in the case of religion, it might be quite a plausible account of what many religious people do, to say that they test the 'religious hypothesis' in the sense in which it is appropriate to do so. So religious people might seek and be sensitive to patterns and experiences of hope, divine presence, benevolence and the primacy of love. Although religious belief is unlikely to be crudely falsified by a 'counter-example' there is a sense in which religious belief makes broad and fundamental claims about the universe, and so a sense in which it frames 'a vulnerable hypothesis'. If there were no patterns or experiences of love, hope, trust or benevolence, talk of the protection and love of God would perhaps vanish in a similar way to an unsustainable hypothesis.[20]

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[19] See *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.60: 'in the eyes of the world all cannot be well if anything will happen to one. Things must go in one way rather than another. Since, for many believers, love of God determines what is to count as important, there will be situations where what the believer calls 'success' will be failure in the eyes of the world, what he calls 'joy' will seem like grief, what he calls 'victory' will seem like certain defeat. So it was, Christians believe, at the Cross of Christ.'

So although even a Wittgensteinian approach (of being sensitive to the particular and not generalizing) can make room for the excluded activities, Phillips is very clear that he wants them to remain excluded. Just a few quotes can make this clear:

> it is patently obvious that belief in God is not a matter of believers entertaining a hypothesis.[21]

> Tentativeness must not be admitted to the grammar of the belief itself. When this is done, the logic of belief in an inescapable God is turned into belief in a god who may or may not exist.[22]

Phillips's convictions about what belongs in the 'IN' column play an important role in justifying the idea that religion should only be judged in terms of its internal criteria, rather than 'external' criteria or standards. If the holding of an ostensibly religious belief involves non-religious 'cross-discourse language games' (activities), such as in the case of a factual understanding of eschatological language, then it is already judged to be outside the scope of 'genuine' religion. On these grounds Phillips can tell *a priori* that the theism/atheism debate is going to be irrelevant, in the 'OUT' column. The whole project of natural theology is firmly in the 'OUT' column, seeing as it concerns itself with the justifying and weighing up of the rational probability of the 'God-hypothesis'.

With this robust delineation of the scope of religious language, Phillips can leap-frog all the objections to arriving at an expressive interpretation of religious utterances by observing the behaviour (verbal and non-verbal) of religious people. *If* Phillips's account of the scope of religious language is correct then he wins the argument at point (3′) above:

> (3′) If religious utterances are not beliefs of this (descriptive) nature, but rather expressive of the most fundamental attitude to adopt to the (naturalistic/uncontroversial) facts, then Hume's criticisms (whether successful or not) are irrelevant. An expressivist interpretation of religious utterances will be an interpretation, and not a re-interpretation or reduction. In fact the charge of the reductionism will be on the other

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[20] The 'semi-Wittgensteinian' approach being hinted at here perhaps has echoes with W. Alston's position as given in *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

[21] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.9.

[22] Ibid., p.12. See also pp.4, 7, 10, 71.

> foot, as Hume (or traditional philosophical theists such as Swinburne) will be guilty of 'reducing' or distorting the real meaning of religious beliefs.

The obvious objection to raise here is 'what gives Phillips the authority/insight to draw up the scope of the religious language game?' The frequently quoted Wittgensteinian maxim that one cannot judge religion by 'external criteria' is deceptively uncontroversial, because non-substantial. If by 'external to the practice of religion' we mean 'not belonging in any way to the expression of, holding of, or accounting for religious utterances' then *of course* we should not apply external criteria. We are saying here nothing more interesting than 'we should not apply irrelevant criteria to religion'. The interesting philosophical work has yet to be done in establishing just what types of activity are 'external' or irrelevant to the practice of religion.

The expressive interpretation of religious language, is in trouble. Let us take stock of the argument. We are seeking some sort of justification for the claim that it is correct to interpret (not re-interpret) religious utterances as expressive, not descriptive. I have argued that this claim is not supported by attending to the behaviour (verbal and non-verbal) of religious believers. Although *some* religious utterances are expressive, and many have important, indispensable expressive aspects, it is still the case that what is taken to be a crucial core of religious utterances (such as 'I believe in God') is in some sense descriptive.

Phillips's last trump card was to claim that this 'crucial core' of descriptive religious utterances is nothing of the sort, but rather outside the scope of the discourse-limited religious language game. But we have seen that this trump card cannot be played *unless* Phillips has in fact already established the correctness of the expressive nature of religious utterances, which he has not. If Phillips is wrong about the merely expressive nature of all religious utterances – which he is – then he has absolutely no basis on which to make his claims about the limited scope of the religious language game. Given this, he certainly cannot bring in these unsupported claims about the scope of the religious language game to rescue the very same expressive interpretation that is needed to give support to his claims concerning the limited scope of the religious language game.

Wittgenstein, Verificationism and the Wittgensteinians

The relationship between Wittgenstein's own thoughts on the nature of religious belief, and those of the neo-Wittgensteinians, is not unproblematic. As so often happens, the work of the disciples can be more doctrinaire, and lacking in a subtlety and struggle exemplified in the source of the tradition.

Felicity McCutcheon[23] has done a fine job of arguing that D.Z. Phillips has a more proscriptive and inflexible account of what is properly 'religious' than Wittgenstein himself would endorse. The best that one can say, McCutcheon suggests, is that Phillips's position resembles elements of Wittgenstein's early thought, influenced heavily by verificationism: the doctrine that a statement is only meaningful if there is a clear and demonstrable means of verifying it. So there is a striking resemblance between some of Phillips's more expressivist statements, and comments from A.J. Ayer such as the following:

> In saying that a certain type of action is right or wrong, I am not making a factual statement … I am merely expressing certain sentiments. And the man who is ostensibly contradicting me is merely expressing his moral sentiments. So there is plainly no sense in asking which of us is in the right. For neither of us is asserting a genuine proposition.[24]

McCutcheon is quite correct to see the 'clear parallels between the Neo-Wittgensteinians and Ayer when it comes to the confusion succumbed to by believers in thinking that God is a name'.[25] Consider how close the following passage by Ayer is to some of Phillips's pronouncements:

> It is when the theist claims in asserting the existence of a transcendent god he is expressing a genuine proposition that we are entitled to disagree with him … the mere existence of the noun is enough to foster the illusion that there is a real, or at any rate a possible entity corresponding to it. It is only when we inquire what God's attributes are that we discover that 'God', in this usage, is not a genuine name.[26]

McCutcheon is successful in showing that Wittgenstein's account is harder to pin down, but not perhaps that it is ultimately more defensible. We can take the example of Wittgenstein's ruminations on the doctrine of the resurrection, in comparison with a dispute about whether there is a German aeroplane overhead. In the case of the aeroplane, there is a clear disagreement between us, if you hold that there is such a plane, and I hold that there is not. The case is quite different with a belief in the resurrection:

> Suppose I say that the body will not rot, and another says, 'No. Particles will rejoin in a thousand years, and there will be a Resurrection of you.'

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[23] Felicity McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001).

[24] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.142.

[25] Felicity McCutcheon, p.177.

[26] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, pp.153–4.

> If someone said: 'Wittgenstein, so you believe in this?' I'd say: 'No'. 'Do you contradict this man?' I'd say: 'No'.
>
> If you say this, the contradiction already lies in this.[27]

McCutcheon glosses this passage as follows:

> Wittgenstein's final remark is what is important here. He allows that there is a kind of contradiction, even though it may not be of the same kind that we find between straightforward disagreements (those that can be settled) ... He is effectively saying that the contradiction lies in the *stance* one has taken on a matter ... For disagreements that we can settle, the disputants must agree on something, hence they can be said to occupy the same stance. The contradiction in these cases does not lie in the stance but over the evidence (re: the German's aeroplane). Reading his remarks this way also helps to explain Wittgenstein's next point that the disagreement between believer and unbeliever is not one of being 'fairly near' – but of being 'on an entirely different plane'.[28]

As often with Wittgenstein, one can just take his remarks as they stand, and they remain too enigmatic to amount to anything substantive enough to be controversial. Alternatively, one can put enough pressure on the aphorisms to render them substantive enough to be controversial, and then they contain as many problems as those of the neo-Wittgensteinians.

As they stand, Wittgenstein's comments are compatible with a range of positions about the status of religious claims. There may be a rather banal sense in which there is 'no contradiction' between the believer and non-believer in resurrection, in that there is no contradiction *yet*, until we know what it is that is going on behind the dispute. We would need to clarify what each person meant by that claim: whether 'resurrection' was being demythologized along Bultmannian lines, or used in a more ambitious sense to describe a continuity of (albeit transformed) identity after death. If we find that the believer is using 'resurrection' in this latter sense, and the non-believer holds that there can be no continuity of identity after death, what could it mean to say that there was 'no contradiction'? I suspect that the momentum for this suggestion is Wittgenstein's conviction that it is simply impossible to accept that someone *really* means that, just because such a belief (in bodily resurrection) is simply absurd. And it is here that Wittgenstein's latent verificationism does damage. The claim that 'meaning is use', alongside a charity in interpreting what others *really mean* when they use language in – supposedly – confused ways, leads to the conclusion that language is being used more or less 'expressively'. But it is a dubious form of charity that presumes that other people can't *possibly* be saying *that* (a literal belief in resurrection), because that is a crazy thing to say. And this is what Wittgenstein's comments seem to amount to, if they are interpreted as saying anything at all substantive and controversial.

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[27] Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p.53.

[28] Felicity McCutcheon, p.184; McCutcheon is quoting from Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations*, p.53.

To put the point more succintly we can say that either there is or there is not disagreement between religious and non-religious positions. If there is no disagreement, this is because the two positions are straight-forwardly expressive, owing to a verificationist account of meaning. If there is a disagreement, this is one that either can or cannot be articulated in language. If it cannot be articulated in language, we want to know why. It is hard to see any sort of reason except a latent verificationism: that the 'evidence' of the believer (faith, religious experience, scripture, the authority of testimony or tradition) simply will not be admitted. Quite apart from this, it seems unlikely that any Wittgensteinian worth their salt will want to explore the possibility of disagreements that cannot in principle be articulated in a public language.

Even if Wittgenstein has a damaging latent verificationism at play, it must be said that his expressivist interpretation of religion is *much* better than that given by Ayer. Wittgenstein's personal sense of guilt and anxiety led him to a much more full-blooded appreciation of the need for a saviour. Take, for example, the following passage:

> What inclines even me to believe in Christ's Resurrection? It is as though I play with the thought. – If he did not rise from the dead, then he decomposed in the grave like any other man. *He is dead and decomposed.* In that case he is a teacher like any other and can no longer *help*; and once more we are orphaned and alone ... We are in a sort of hell where we can do nothing but dream, roofed in, as it were, and cut off from heaven. But if I am to be REALLY saved, – what I need is *certainty* – not wisdom, dreams or speculation – and this certainty is faith ... Only *love* can believe the Resurrection. Or: It is *love* that believes the Resurrection. We might say: Redeeming love believes even in the Resurrection; holds fast even to the Resurrection. What combats doubt is, as it were, *redemption.*[29]

Wittgenstein's sensitivity to the expressive commitments of religious language is deep and engaging, and does better than some factualist interpretations of the same beliefs. But to claim this as grounds for an entirely expressivist interpretation of religious beliefs is a little like the following movement of thought: (i) some factualist interpretations of religious beliefs are not aware of some of the expressivist implications and subtleties of those beliefs; (ii) here we have an approach (Wittgenstein's) which is so aware, and which is also expressivist; therefore one can only be aware of subtleties and implications if one is an expressivist. This is of course wrong. It is as if we were to say 'some As are B, here is a not-A which is not-B, therefore not-B if and only if not-A', where A stands for 'factualist interpretations of religious beliefs' and B for 'an ignorance concerning the subtleties and implications of religious beliefs'.

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[29] Wittgenstein, *Lectures on Ethics, Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trs. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), p.77.

In fact, I would suggest, we have a subtlety about religious language in spite of Wittgenstein's expressivism; or, perhaps more precisely, owing to an eye particularly inclined to search out the expressive dimension, but in spite of the larger expressivist interpretation of all religious belief. Wittgenstein's verificationist prejudice is perhaps revealed in the opening comment of the above passage, 'what inclines *even me* to believe in Christ's Resurrection?' (italics mine). Why the comment – 'even me'? A very plausible interpretation would seem to be 'even me who, of course, is not inclined to believe what is clearly, in factual terms, such nonsense'. But against Wittgenstein I would urge that it may be nonsense to say that a factual belief in the resurrection is sufficient, without the expressive and ethical commitments which surround it; but that it might also be said that it is nonsense to say that the expressive and ethical commitments can stand without the factual. Both the factual and the expressive, taken singly, are necessary but not sufficient.

So what resources does Phillips, or Wittgenstein, on a substantive interpretation of his enigmatic words, have for excluding natural theology – the framing, testing and justifying of religious beliefs – from the scope of the religious language game? It seems clear that for Phillips or Wittgenstein the resources must be their conviction that, if one observes how people actually/really use religious language, one will find that it reveals itself to be expressive rather than descriptive. But this thesis is both unsustainable in its details and prejudicial in its verificationist presuppositions.

The expressive thesis and the conclusions concerning the scope of religious language stand up only by leaning on one another; neither is supported at its base, so both fall into thin air. One suspects that for Wittgenstein, and the Wittgensteinian, straight-forwardly empirical statements and facts are the only legitimate non-expressive realities (things 'out there' rather than being our attitude to what is out there). In a telling anecdote Cyril Barrett – in the context of defending expressivism – remembers a boatman on the Grand Canal in Ireland commenting of a sunset, 'all I can see is a bleedin' sunset'; Barrett comments that this 'of course, was empirically and philosophically true',[30] as if 'philosophical' truth were reducible to the empirical. Lurking here is an unargued and unnecessary deference to verificationism, the maxim that only statements that can be empirically verified have substantial meaning. Cynical boatmen may not have the last word on sunsets, and we might reply that all we can see is 'bleedin' empiricism'.

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[30] Cyril Barrett, 'The Wittgensteinian Revolution', p.115.

CHAPTER 3

The Relativity of Truth to Language Games

Although the merely expressive interpretation of religious statements (the denial of A) has failed, the strongest Wittgensteinian case is yet to be made. To make this case we must dispense with the burdensome non-factualist interpretation of religious language. The focus of our attention must be what happens when one takes *extremely seriously* the claim that the meaning of and criteria for the correct application of concepts is relative to different language games, in such a way that 'truth' is relative to different language games. This claim, of which there is ample evidence in Phillips's work, is one way of denying B, the claim that statements are made true by a non-epistemic state of affairs. Another, more sophisticated way of denying B is to argue that statements are made true, not by virtue of belonging to different language games, but by meeting standards of 'ideal epistemic justification'. In this chapter I will consider the 'different language games' denial of B. The next chapter will attend to the 'ideal epistemic justification' approach.

The structure of this chapter will be as follows. First of all, I will show how the Wittgensteinian approach can be reconstructed entirely in the light of denying B rather than A. I will then consider two arguments for the relativization of meaning and truth to language games, first of all an argument from 'family resemblance and particularism', and secondly an argument which draws on scepticism about rule following. I will bring two types of objection to these arguments. First of all I will argue that the considerations brought forward by the anti-realist are not persuasive in their own right. Secondly, I will make *ad hominem* comments to the effect that, even if they were persuasive, they would share the fate of the earlier claim that we must not 'apply external criteria to the practice of religion', in that almost no practical consequences would arise from the mantra that 'truth is relative to language games', in the absence of any compelling delineation as to what the boundaries of the language game are.

This should be of particular concern to the Wittgensteinian who is keen to use the relativity of truth to language games in order to support and generate the following characterization of religion: (i) religious beliefs are epistemically autonomous, subject to internal criteria only,[1] (ii) we hit epistemic bedrock in the justification of our religious beliefs very early on, such that natural theology is irrelevant, and it is needless to provide reasons or justifications for one's beliefs,[2] and (iii) philosophy cannot adjudicate between different belief systems.[3]

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[1] For instance, see D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.3: 'The criteria of what can sensibly be said of God are to be found *within* the religious tradition ... the criteria of meaningfulness cannot be found *outside* religion, since they are given by religious discourse itself.'

I have no brief in this book to endorse or attack (i) to (iii). What I will do in the last section of this chapter is show that a denial of B, to the effect that truth is relative to language games, is neither necessary nor sufficient to generate these typical Wittgensteinian characterizations of religion. Further, in the next chapter, we will see that this characterization of religion comes to be at odds with the demands put on anyone who desires to develop a plausible epistemic conception of truth.

The Reconstructed Wittgensteinian Approach

First of all, we should see how the Wittgensteinian approach looks when it is modelled on the relativization of truth to language games rather than the merely expressivist thesis. To make this case we must take *extremely* seriously the claim that all meaning and criteria for justified application of concepts are relative to different language games. A reconstructed Wittgensteinian approach along these lines would look as follows:

1 Religious utterances, it is accepted, are 'descriptive'. They sometimes express beliefs which attempt accurately to describe the 'facts' about the divine origin, meaning and purpose of the universe.

2 All epistemic standards for the correct application of concepts are relativized to different language games. The application of any concept ('fact', 'descriptive', 'real', 'true') is justified according to whatever epistemic standards are relevant.

3 The content of the concepts being considered can only be fixed if we know how the concept is *used* (meaning is use). The epistemic standards and criteria for the application of the concept fix how the concept is used, and so what the content of the concept is.

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[2] See D.Z. Phillips, ibid., p.79: 'In Wittgenstein's work the difficulty of stopping, the urge to go beyond a certain point in a search for explanations, justifications and foundations is explored in a variety of contexts ... the difficulties and temptations all involve in some way or other a failure to stop when one should stop.'

[3] So Phillips, ibid., p.233, when talking about the task of the philosopher, comments: 'His concern is with their conceptual character, not with their truth. Indeed, clarity about their conceptual character will bring one to see why philosophy cannot determine truth in such matters.'

4 So it turns out that the very content of a predicate such as 'descriptive', 'fact', 'true' and 'real' is relativized to different language games. So the sense in which religious language is 'descriptive' will have some family resemblances with the sense in which scientific or common-sense language is also 'descriptive', but many features it will not share.
5 The content and justified application of all concepts can only be understood relative to certain language games/epistemic practices. Justification is always internal to the practice, in that what *exhaustively* constitutes a justified application of a concept is fixed by the content and epistemic rules given within that practice.
6 From (1) to (5), statements are not made true by a non-epistemic state of affairs, but by their being located within a specific language game.

D.Z. Phillips and the Reconstructed Wittgensteinian Approach

Although D.Z. Phillips has never stated his position in this way, and quite probably would not recognize it, there are passages scattered through his work – especially more recent work in epistemology – which seem extremely similar to this reconstructed post-expressive Wittgensteinian approach.

Phillips certainly concurs with the thesis that epistemic standards and the meaning of concepts is relative to specific epistemic practices, and accepts the implications of this as spelled out in (6) above. In *Faith After Foundationalism* Phillips quotes Wittgenstein with approval:

> All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. And this system is not a more or less arbitrary and doubtful point of departure for all our arguments: no, it belongs to the essence of what we call an argument. The system is not so much the point of departure, as the element in which arguments have their life.[4]

In response to Plantinga's notion of defeasible 'trust' in basic beliefs, Phillips writes disparagingly of 'trust in face of the possibility that all our epistemic practices are wrong'.[5] In a passage remarkably reminiscent of (5) above, Phillips writes:

> But what if the whole notion of an external justification of epistemic practices … is confused? In that event the possibility of their being wrong is also confused. If showing that the practices are correct is confused, so is

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[4] Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), para.105; quoted in *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.43.

[5] Ibid., p.25.

> showing that they are incorrect. … we might say, with Wittgenstein, that they are simply there, like our life.[6]

The difference between Wittgensteinian and non-Wittgensteinian approaches to understanding religious statements now becomes quite subtle. It takes a certain amount of probing to get anything controversial out of Phillips. In *Wittgenstein and Religion* Phillips claims that he would agree with Trigg that

> The existence of God is in no way dependent on our individual or collective thoughts of Him. This is an indispensable part of the concept of the Christian God. Part at least of the notion of God as Creator must involve the belief that God existed when men did not. It is obvious, too, that the very idea of God being limited by being dependent on anything or anybody must be incoherent.[7]

Hints of danger emerge when this is directly linked to what we are justified in *saying* in different language games:

> It is part of our talk about mountains that we say that they existed before men. It is not part of our talk about banking to say that it existed before men. Banking is a human institution created by men. Within religion, things are said about God of a time which precedes man's existence.[8]

Now the distinctive relativizing move:

> That does not mean that God existed before men in the sense in which mountains, rainbows or rivers did. These are all empirical phenomena and my beliefs concerning their prior existence allow me to ask questions about what they looked like, how long they had existed, whether some of these empirical phenomena have ceased to exist, and so on. Nothing of this sort makes any sense where God's reality is concerned. *That being the case, these examples cannot throw any light on the religious beliefs* (italics mine).[9]

Interestingly, Alston quotes Phillips at a conference being prepared to say *anything at all* that the traditional realistic theist would say, but in terms of his Wittgensteinian language game-relativist approach:

> Of course I accept the point that God transcends our language-game, is not dependent for His existence, His nature, or His doings on the way we play our games. That is another, indeed a fundamental, thing we say within the

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[6] Ibid.

[7] R. Trigg, *Reason and Commitment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p.69, quoted in 'On Really Believing', *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.52.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

> Christian language-game, and it is to be understood in (generically) the same way we understand other things said in Christian discourse.[10]

Arguing for Relativist Realism

In outlining the reconstructed Wittgensteinian approach, I have not presented anything that constituted a convincing argument in support of that approach. Rather I found myself assuming that meaning and epistemic justification are relative to different language games, to arrive at the insight that what it is to be 'descriptive', 'real', 'true' and 'factual' is dependent on the particular context of the surrounding language game. Frustratingly this seems to be as far as we get in much of the literature.

Phillips will frequently denigrate his critics for not realizing the radicalness of the Wittgensteinian challenge,[11] for misconceiving the whole debate, or for not putting the question mark deep enough. Very rarely are we presented with arguments for this language game relativizing approach; it seems to be something we are expected to *see* if we look at language attentively enough (perhaps something that can be shown, but not said). Of course there is a good philosophical reason for Phillips not to offer arguments to justify the language game relativizing approach: the sorts of argument that could be given are *just the sort of cross-language game, generalizing and non-context-relative arguments which, if the language game relativizing approach is correct, are impossible*. We seem to be in an unhappy position: if the language game relativizing approach is correct, we will not be able to argue for it. Either we see it or we don't.

Fortunately the situation is not so grim. Even if formal arguments cannot establish the language game-relative approach, it is supposed to be something that we will arrive at if we attend to our actual use of language closely and sensitively enough. When we look to our use of language, in our different practices, we will be led to see that meaning and epistemic standards are indeed relative to different language games, and that our beliefs are groundless.[12]

Our task now must be to expose ourselves to those features of language and its use that are supposed to lead us to these insights. We will not feel compelled to concur with these 'insights' if either of the following turns out to true: (i) the remarked upon features of our use of language are not as the Wittgensteinian observes; or (ii) the observed features are – or might be – as the Wittgensteinian observes, but the relativist implications are incautiously or wrongly drawn.

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[10] W. Alston quotes D.Z. Phillips as saying 'something like this in the course of the conference'. The reference is to be found in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1995), ed. Tessin and von der Ruhr, p.29. See also p.5.

[11] For an example of this, see 'On Really Believing', *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.34.

[12] Ibid., p.235.

The first argument I will attend to attempts to establish the relativity of truth to language games, by drawing on a family resemblance theory of meaning.

Family Resemblance and Particularism[13]

The relevant (to our purposes) aspect of the family resemblance theory of meaning is the claims that the same concept can have radically different meanings in different contexts, and that the job of philosophy is just to give paradigmatic examples along the lines: 'this ... (is an example of x), as is this ..., this ..., and this ...'. So in *Philosophical Investigations* (#66–71)[14] Wittgenstein argues that the word 'game' can only be explained by giving a list of examples: 'this is a game ... this is ... this is'. There is a network of similarities running between the examples but no 'common property' running through them all.

Wittgenstein uses the analogy of a rope: at either end of the rope there will be no common fibres, but we still have a single rope constituted by the natural weave of intertwining fibres. We can see such a particularism at work in Wittgensteinian approaches to the meaning of beliefs such as 'God is real' or 'God is present'. The contention would be that there is no single cross-subject matter meaning of 'real' with a single set of criteria for when its use is justified. Rather we must just give particular examples: 'this is real (in this sense but not others), this ... is real, this ... is real'. So on the rope analogy science is at one end with 'this entity is real' and religion at another with 'God is real'. There are no common fibres, but it is the same rope: the concept of 'reality' is autonomous in science and religion, but it is the *same concept*. So, for example, God is real, but does not share with real physical objects the feature of being an existing x among other existents.[15]

I think that Wittgenstein's extreme particularism (by which I mean his aversion to generality) is problematic.[16] As a methodological caution against over-assimilation and generalization it is well made; but as an epistemological maxim as to when we are justified in ascribing predicates, such as when we can call something a 'game' or 'real', it is not at all helpful or well substantiated. I would challenge whether the type of explanation which just lists examples – 'this . . . , this . . . , this . . . is a case of x' – can give any type of unity to our concepts.

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[13] I am grateful to Bede Rundle for an instructive conversation which helped to form the arguments of this section.

[14] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), paras 66–71.

[15] D.Z. Phillips echoes Wittgenstein's aversion to generality in *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.63: 'What Wittgenstein shows us in his remarks on religious belief is why there is good reason to note the different uses which "belief" and "existence" have, and to resist the craving for generality.'

[16] For the points made in this paragraph I am grateful to points made by Bede Rundle in conversation. See his *Wittgenstein and Contemporary Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), ch.3.

If, in the spirit of Wittgenstein, we attend to the actual use of language, I suspect we will find that the rope analogy is not a good one. Consider the word 'ball'. We use the same word of an Oxford college May ball, and a football, yet we say here that the word 'ball' has two distinct meanings. Why do we say this? *Because there are no similarities, no common properties/fibres, between the two uses of the word.* So, with 'game', to do justice to our actual uses of the word we must be able to do more than simply list examples. To say anything useful we must draw out the structural features that make something a game and not a contest. That there are such features is something attested to in our natural expertise as language users when we consider the shared conviction that weightlifting and skiing are not games but contests.

Extreme particularism, which holds that the same concept can have radically different meanings in different contexts (such as 'real' in science and religion), commits the worst philosophical sin (in Wittgensteinian terms): that of not attending to the actual use of, and our natural expertise in using language. In claiming that religious practices and beliefs are susceptible only to internal justification, Wittgensteinians are not being Wittgensteinian enough. The challenge now open to the Wittgensteinian is to offer another defence of this position, not drawing on a presupposed particularism. One possible candidate for such a defence is the democratic solution to scepticism about rule following. Before evaluating this I turn to look at an argument for the groundlessness of our beliefs.

Scepticism about Rule Following[17]

Scepticism about rule following attempts to give some respectable substance to relativist inclinations. The sceptical assault is on our certainty that we can know that there is one normative way of following the rule, of 'going on in the same way'. If the sceptic is right, our way of following a rule is parochial, arbitrary and conventional. If someone were to follow the rule in what we considered a 'bent' way (the bent-rule follower), the sceptic would argue that

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[17] Throughout this section I am drawing on Chapter 3 ('How is meaning possible?') of S. Blackburn's *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

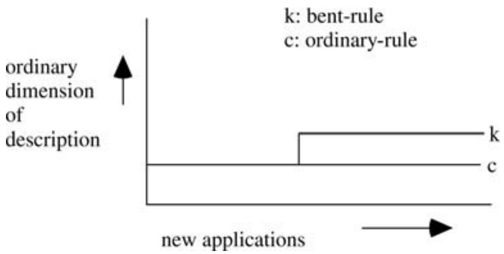

Fig. 3.1

we have no resources to draw on to claim that the bent-rule follower is doing something different (not going on in the same way).

This scepticism tends to be filled out with two sorts of examples: arithmetical and the application of predicates (for example ‘is red’). For clarity’s sake I will use an arithmetical example to set up the problem, although we will transfer this to the (for us) more interesting case of the application of predicates such as ‘real’, ‘exists’ and ‘transcendent’.

Consider our rule ‘add 2’, which means to us add 2; the equivalent bent-rule ‘add 2’ means ‘add 2 until 186, then add 7’. If we were to observe a bent-rule follower doing his arithmetic, we would comment on a pattern which looked something like Figure 3.1.[18] In this illustration, continuities in practice *for us* are plotted by the line c, and kinks in practice with the line k. The bent-rule follower has somehow grasped a perspective which reverses the picture. Our dimension of arithmetical plus-functions represents someone who adds 2 up to 186, and then starts to add 7 as bent; the bent-rule dimension represents the bent-rule follower as going on in the same way, with somebody who continues to add 2 after that point being represented as kinked. The picture for the bent-rule follower would look something like Figure 3.2.

Now, for the scepticism about meaning here to get a footing, it is essential that both the positions shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 are possible (conceivable) and mutually incomprehensible. These two requirements do not sit easily with each other, but for the moment I will assume that the problem has been set up.

Given such a sceptical possibility we are presented with the challenge of spelling out what it means for us to say that a rule has been correctly followed; what resources do we have to draw on to give an account of the normative aspect of meaning? So, for instance, what is the rule for correctly applying the

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[18] Ibid., p.75. The example I use is Blackburn’s. Wittgenstein’s own ‘quus’ example is to be found in para.185 of the *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

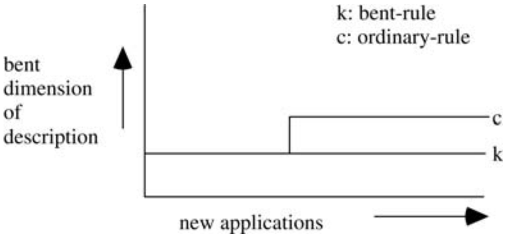

Fig. 3.2

predicate 'is real'? It is no good appealing to the *intention* of the person applying the predicate, as in the case of 'I intended to add 2' it is the very interpretation of what is involved in *intending to apply the predicate* that is up in the air. Here we are echoing Wittgenstein: 'any interpretation still hangs in the air along with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning'.[19]

The threat is looming that nothing can create the existence of a rule. So a 'bent-rule follower' calls a taxi a bus, a banana red and 'God' (un)real. The bent-rule follower is not incorrect, but just different from us. The contents of our mind, or the minds of others, do not provide us with a rule determining whether what we are saying is correct or incorrect; any course of action can be made out to accord with a rule. There is no right and wrong, and no judgements are made.

One influential interpretation of Wittgenstein[20] has presented him as answering this scepticism by finding the rules which govern the correct use of a term in its *use*: the custom, technique or practice that surrounds the application of the term. So with any predicate ('is real/red/a bus'), a word is correctly or incorrectly predicated in as much as it is embedded in the 'language game' or the 'form of life' of a community.

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[19] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), para.198.

[20] Cf. S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982). For a rival interpretation, see G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Rules, Grammar and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp.154–81. Baker and Hacker claim that there is no rule scepticism in Wittgenstein, and that anyway rule scepticism is more unstable than other kinds of scepticism. It is a scepticism about the very possibility of meaning and understanding, whilst the sceptic must rely on the possibility of meaning and understanding to set up his position. I am, as it happens, in broad agreement with Baker and Hacker. At the same time I attend to the Kripke rule scepticism just because it is *this* approach that might, if successful, sustain the reconstructed Wittgensteinian approach outlined above. The point should be acknowledged that there are other 'Wittgensteinian' approaches to rule following which would not come close to bolstering relativism.

From highly reduced resources we manage to build up to the normative aspect of meaning. The reduced resources consist of a non-normative continuous flow of utterances and a play of dispositions (a possibly infinite variety of bent-rule followers). We observe that these dispositions include a tendency to correct, criticize and adjust 'deviations'. So in a community a deviant who calls a bus a taxi is criticized. The normative aspect of meaning, whereby some applications of terms are incorrect and rules prescribe what is correct, emerges from the mutual pressures towards conformity.

So a community, in its language-using practice, is like an orchestra, which turns on players whose notes are discordant with a democratic attempt at harmony. We see we have built up to just the sort of language game relativism that Wittgensteinians bring to bear on religion: an individual in the orchestra may go wrong, but how can the orchestra itself go wrong? *There is no external standard whereby it can be deemed to be going well or badly.*

So with religion it is part of the practice to say certain things: that God is real, that Jesus is the saviour (if we are Christian), that various actions need doing, and so on. If the practice is to say these things, and the saying of these things is understood as an action within a practice, how can it be criticized? Of course the natural thought here is 'if these things are *intended to describe what the world is like, they may be wrong*'. For the sake of the argument here we are accepting that the sceptical problem has been set up. This renders impotent the 'natural thought' expressed above. It is what it means to *intend* to do something (to follow a rule) that is the target of our scepticism. The suggested solution claims that we can overcome this scepticism only by attending to the practice of a community; it is the nature of the practice that is held to determine what the intentions are, not the other way round.

So, with religious people, it is not their mental lives and the correspondence of their thought to reality that determines the correctness/incorrectness of saying that 'God is real', but rather their customs, techniques and ways of life. There seems to be no room for an ingredient of meaning that makes it possible for their sayings to be *false*. If the utterances of believers conform to the 'form of life' of religion, the 'religious language game', then there are simply no further external resources that we can draw upon to countenance the possibility that the beliefs are false, or needing further justification.

As I commented above, it is contentious whether the scepticism about rule following can really be generated. How much sense can we make of a sensibility that naturally operates in terms of bent predicates? We can press difficult questions about setting up the problem.[21] We can imagine a bricklayer, who is also a 'bent-rule follower' watching a film about an episode where a fellow bricklayer adds 2 bricks to a pile, until he reaches 186, when he naturally, 'going on in the same way', adds 7 to the pile. Now we can imagine the bricklayer having come in half-way through such a film. Now the bent-rule follower cannot know if the filmed bricklayer is going on in the right way *unless* he knows how many bricks he has already added. There are two possible accounts of what is going on here. First, the bent-rule follower knows these things in some mysterious, innate way. This is just the sort of appeal to 'mental magic' that was denied to us when we tried to account for the normative aspect of meaning in terms of speaker's intentions. If such an appeal is allowed in this case, why not earlier on in order to account for how we 'know' that a rule is being correctly followed?

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[21] The following counter-example is taken from S. Blackburn, *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.79.

Second, the bent-rule follower knows these things in the normal way, but if he loses track of how many along in the sequence he is, he does not know how to keep on in the same way. So coming in during the middle of the film, he cannot describe whether the colleague is adding 2 bricks at a time or not, as he cannot tell when he passes 186. This would seem to suggest that the bent-rule follower is using the 186 thresh-hold to mark a *difference*. The bent-rule follower needs to know whether the *different* thing that happens, happens at the right point. For the bent-rule follower's position to be symmetrical with ours it was important that *for the bent-rule follower* there be no sense in which that which happens after 186 ('add 7' as we see it) is any different from what happens before 186 ('add 2'). On the second option this symmetry is lost.

Consider also the bricklayer who, after 186, struggles with 7 bricks and shows *no awareness* that anything is different. What if the bricklayer is only strong enough to carry 2 bricks? Does he still show no awareness that he is not 'going on in the same way'? At this point we would be unlikely to ascribe the bent-rule follower's behaviour as due to his following an alternative and equally 'correct' interpretation of the 'add 2' rule. We would just say that the bent-rule follower had *failed* to perceive what we regard as differences, and *what are in fact differences*; the bent-rule-following bricklayer just does not know what is going on in the world. If we would say this here, would we not say the same in *any* instance of a putative case of bent-rule following?

Even is we overlook these problems, we might take objection to the *solution* found to the problem set up. The solution to the bewilderment about what constitutes the correct following of a rule was found in public practice and custom. We found that an appeal to practice and custom led to our having no resources from which we could claim that a democratically supported belief or utterance is *false*. From this we might conclude that the notion of a practice is an insufficient source of standards of correctness for rule following and meaning. Rather than persuading us to be relativists, the fact that practices do not lift sayings into a normative dimension – in which they are susceptible of falsity and therefore truth – might equally lead us to conclude that practices are not fulfilling the role that is demanded of them.

Further we find that, even if we allow the claim that a truth is relative to language games, rather than being decided by non-epistemic state of affairs in the world, there would be no positive characterization of religion which we could draw from this conclusion. The 'Wittgensteinian characterization of religion' we remember looked like this:

(i) religious beliefs are epistemically autonomous, subject to internal criteria only, (ii) we hit epistemic bedrock in the justification of our religious beliefs very early on, such that natural theology is irrelevant, and it is needless to provide reasons or justifications for one's beliefs, (iii) philosophy cannot adjudicate between different belief systems.

The claim that truth is relative to language games is neither necessary nor sufficient for establishing this sort of characterization. That it is not necessary can be seen in that many realist theologians (in my sense) would endorse some or all of (i) to (iii). So Alvin Plantinga[22] has a realist view of truth (he could endorse A–D), but claims that religious beliefs are 'basic' and do not require any justification or philosophical adjudication, thus endorsing (i), (ii) and (iii) above.

That the relativization of truth to the procedures of language games is not sufficient to establish (i) to (iii) can be seen when we attend, as in the last chapter, to the scope of what is being designated as the 'religious language game'. Just as it is vacuous to insist that one does not apply 'external standards' to religion, so truth being 'relative to the procedures of a language game' is not helpful in fixing what those procedures are.

The Wittgensteinian claims to arrive at their characterization of religious discourse by attending to the actual practice of religious believers. But now we are on familiar territory. If by 'actual practice' we mean the diverse and variegated empirical practice of actual believers, we must admit that the framing of hypotheses, the making of judgements and the adjudication of arguments are sometimes relevant features of the 'religious language game' (that is, practised sometimes by actual religious believers). We can only arrive at the proscriptive Wittgensteinian characterization of religion given above if we are prepared to reify our notion of what the 'actual practice' of religion is. On this approach, religious believers who engage in the framing of hypotheses, the making of judgements and the weighing up of arguments must be considered as 'non-religious/superstitious' when engaging upon these illicit activities. It is just not defensible for the Wittgensteinian to make these heavy judgements about what is within the scope of the religous language game to which truth is relative, without offering any authority for these proscriptions except the ‘actual practice’ of the very constituency, large parts of which it proceeds to excommunicate.

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[22] A. Plantinga, 'Is Belief in God Rational?' in C.F. Delaney (ed.), *Rationality and Religious Belief* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

It must be clear that just as the Wittgensteinian has to drop the expressive thesis (the denial of A), so must he abandon the notion of a ‘religious language game’. Such a notion can only do any work if its scope is narrower than just a description of what people actually do; but when what people actually do is the only resource that the Wittgensteinian allows himself to characterize the language game, it is difficult to see how its scope can be restricted at all.

There are other ways of denying the claim that statements are made true or false by non-epistemic states of affairs. In the following chapter I will consider a claim that truth is dependent upon epistemic factors, although not actual contingent human practices at any one time (so avoiding empirical questions of scope). On this approach, to which a Wittgensteinian such as Phillips can be shown to be committed, truth (in any area at any time) is exhausted by our conception of an ideal epistemic practice.

CHAPTER 4

Truth in Italics

A paid-up Wittgensteinian such as Phillips would never stoop so deep as to give his philosophical account of the nature of truth: but that in itself tells us quite a lot. Phillips considers that no general philosophical account of truth can be given, because what can be said to be 'true' or 'real', and what is being said of it when it is said to be 'true' or 'real', is determined by the particular criteria and rules of epistemic practices.

> The distinction between the real and the unreal is not given prior to the use of various language games. There is no Archimedean point outside all language games by which we assess the adequacy of language in relation to reality. Such a relation is a chimera.[1]

In a passage criticizing reformed epistemology, Phillips comments: 'Wittgenstein, far more radically, insists that the distinctions between the real and the unreal get their sense within epistemic practices.'[2] Later on Phillips turns his attention to the concept of truth: 'the very possibility of speaking about truth or falsity is rooted in contexts where active responses are taken for granted in relation to the subject being discussed'.[3]

Phillips can be seen again to be echoing his mentor Rhees who wrote:

> If someone asks what is meant by 'real' or 'unreal' in connexion with the work and discoveries of science, then we might begin by asking: 'Well, look at the ways in which, in this or that particular science, the scientist tries to *find out* what is real and what is not' ... the expressions 'real', 'unreal', 'exists', 'does not exist' ... show what they mean by it when they show what they take as a criterion of it.[4]

Behind these comments we can detect an epistemizing of truth. The truth of a statement or belief is taken to be not vulnerable to how things are in a metaphysically independent reality, but rather as an ideally positive epistemic status of that statement or belief.[5] This position is of course the denial of B, the claim that statements are made true by a non-epistemic state of affairs (the way the world is, rather than by standards of ideal justification).

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[1] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.xi.

[2] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.xiv.

[3] Ibid., p.90.

[4] D.Z. Phillips (ed.), *Rush Rhees on Religion and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.107. Rhees, at this point, is expounding and endorsing Winch's argument in 'Understanding a Primitive Society', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, I, 1964, pp.307–24.

The more or less true thing to say is that Phillips has an epistemic conception of truth, as set out above. He commits himself to such a conception at several points. In one passage he is responding to a criticism of Plantinga's that we should not concern ourselves with 'mere moves in language games' (Plantinga's gloss on what Phillips is doing), but should attend to 'the sober truth about the world':

> we should not take Plantinga's advice and exchange talk of what he calls 'mere moves in language games' for talk of 'the sober truth about the world', since until we know what games we are engaged in, we have no idea what is meant by 'the sober truth' ... Determining *what is so* involves *doing* something, but what that comes to cannot be appreciated apart from the context in which the question arises. To think otherwise is to sublime the logic of 'what is so', and to create a metaphysical realm in which the question 'But is it really so?' *does* become a mere move, an idle abstraction. A move is a 'mere move', not when it is in a language game, but when it is said to be outside all language games.[6]

It seems that Phillips is committed to the view that the 'truth' about 'what there is', about what is 'real' is to be identified with what can be said to be true within certain epistemic practices. Any other conception of truth, such as 'that which corresponds to what there is in a metaphysically independent realm', is considered to be idle, if not nonsensical. I have taken this as being tantamount to holding an epistemic conception of truth. At this point it would be useful to state what I take to be at the heart of an epistemic conception of truth (in the terms of the Introduction, the denial of B). *An epistemic conception of truth* is the conviction that the truth of a proposition (or any truth bearer) consists, not in its relation to some transcendent state of affairs, but in the epistemic virtues that the proposition displays within our thought, experience and discourse.

On this conception the truth value of a proposition is a matter of the extent to which a belief is justified, warranted, rational or well-grounded. This claim is fairly neutral between choices of what constitutes justification or warrant for a belief. Phillips, with his characteristically Wittgensteinian linguistic turn, fleshes out his particular epistemic conception of truth in terms of ‘acceptable moves within a language game’, or of what ‘can be said to be true’ within a certain practice.

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[5] W. Alston's work, in particular 'Taking the Curse off Language-Games', *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1995), ed. T. Tessin and M. von der Ruhr, led me to reflect on the epistemizing of truth in Phillips's thought. In this and the following section I attempt to pin the elusive Phillips down on this issue, and establish either that he is inconsistent, or that he does indeed subscribe to an epistemic conception of truth (as suggested by Alston).

[6] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.15. For other relevant passages from the same work, see the following pages: 19, 25–6, 29, 35, 81, 232–3.

The qualification is needed in that I am almost certain that Phillips would deny that he is holding an epistemic, or any other, conception of truth – simply because it is not the job of the philosopher to hold ‘conceptions’ of anything. The job of the philosopher is the much more humble one of clarifying our everyday usage of certain fundamental concepts such as ‘true’ and ‘real’. Phillips has strong views on the vocation of the philosopher:

> In elucidating the surroundings in which belief in God is held fast, the philosopher is not doing something called Christian philosophy, any more than he is doing non-Christian philosophy in elucidating the surroundings which hold certain forms of atheism fast. He is simply doing philosophy. Certainly, he is not embracing a religious or atheistic perspective by elucidating its grammar. His concern is with their conceptual character, not with their truth. Indeed, clarity about their conceptual character will bring one to see why philosophy cannot determine truth in such matters. Of course, the philosopher will be interested in what it means to speak of truth in such contexts, but that interest is not itself a desire to embrace those truths.[7]

Phillips's approach begins to seem disarmingly innocent, certainly not one that intends to deny anything that is held to be important to our conception of truth: ‘philosophy's task is a humble one. Here, too, we have uses of “real” and “true”. The philosopher must get busy and show what the applications of these terms amounts to.’[8] Perhaps all Phillips is doing is making the innocuous and correct observation that, depending on what we are talking about, there are different criteria determining what can be said to be true. If there is anything controversial about Phillips's approach it does not lie in his ‘conception of truth’, but in his ‘non-interventionist’ brief to the philosopher (‘simply describe when people apply these concepts’). I could be accused of doing what Phillips denigrates as ‘*philosophy by italics*’:[9]

> In objecting to Wittgenstein's remarks on religion, philosophers are prone to say, ‘After all, God *exists*’; ‘God is *real*’; ‘God is *there*’ ... but what these philosophers seem not to realise is that *no* grammatical work has been done simply by italicising these terms.[10]

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[7] Ibid., p.233.
[8] Ibid., p.26.
[9] Ibid., p.29.
[10] Ibid.

Similarly I might be doing philosophy by italics when I insist that there is some sort of distinction between *truth* (of the metaphysically robust variety) and truth (in the flabby Wittgensteinian sense of 'what we are allowed to say'). I think that part of the elusive charm of Phillips's position can be put down to his starting from *obvious* points about how our application of the concept of 'truth' is tied up with linguistic and epistemic practices. Certainly any brand of realist could accept that 'what it is to be true' is fixed within language, in that truth and falsity pertain to sentences of a language (insofar as any sentence expresses a true proposition). I consider that Phillips slips at times from this obvious position to holding a controversial epistemic conception of truth, which in turn fuels his epistemological strictures about truth being internal to practices, and the needlessness of giving justification for beliefs that belong within a practice. The trick is, first of all, to catch Phillips as he makes this slip; and secondly to do 'the grammatical work' of showing that it is intelligible to hold out for a more robust conception of truth, which amounts to more than simply putting the word in italics.

The sheep's clothing of the obvious and uninteresting observations about 'truth being a concept within a language', clearly reveal the epistemic wolf within when it comes to understanding what Phillips considers his 'harmless' observations to be incompatible with. Phillips clearly denies a non-epistemic conception of truth; he considers it to be unintelligible, or confused. For our purposes here the vital feature of a non-epistemic conception of truth is as follows. *A non-epistemic conception of truth* holds that, no matter what the epistemic virtues which a proposition (or any truth bearer) displays within our (where we are cognitively normal human beings)[11] thought, experience and discourse, it is almost always possible (with a few rare examples)[12] that the proposition will be false. The truth of a proposition consists in its relation to a transcendent, non-epistemic state of affairs.

Phrased in Wittgensteinian–linguistic terms, a non-epistemic conception of truth allows for the possibility of language games failing to grasp or accurately describe a transcendent reality. First of all, it allows for propositions that enjoy a justified status within an epistemic practice to be wrong. Secondly, in as much as truth is fixed by transcendent, non-epistemic states of affairs and not epistemic practices, it is possible for a *whole* epistemic practice to be wrong. So, for instance, the epistemic practice of speaking about God and the provenance and purpose of the universe is *wrong* if there is no God, and if the universe has neither divine provenance nor purpose.

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[11] This qualification is called for so as to make room for an infallible being. If a proposition enjoyed an ideal epistemic status within the thought of an infallible being it could be identified as true. As I will go on to argue, this is only because we know the infallible being is able to grasp the non-epistemic, realist truth of the matter.

[12] I add this qualification to allow for putative infallible beliefs such as 'I think therefore I am', beliefs about necessary truths and narrow content beliefs.

Phillips denies the possibility of whole practices being wrong very clearly: 'the notion of external justification is a confused one ... it makes no sense to call our epistemic practices innocent or guilty.'[13]

> In order for that worry (concerning whether human epistemic practices reflect how things are) to be expressed we need a conception of 'how things are' which is independent of *all* human practices ... We need a relation to reality of the epistemic practices outside any context where we could speak of checking whether something is real or not. Wittgenstein says, 'Forget this transcendent certainty'.[14]

In denying the possibility that whole epistemic practices can be wrong, Phillips is – I would maintain – denying a non-epistemic conception of truth, and affirming an epistemic conception.

The way I have characterized the epistemic conception of truth (see above) is neutral in such a way that denying a non-epistemic conception of truth *is* tantamount to adopting an epistemic conception of truth. I make this point to block a favourite move of Phillips: to claim that he neither holds nor denies a position, but has somehow risen above the confused terms of the debate.[15] To make it credible that he is not adopting an epistemic conception of truth, Phillips needs to show that he does *not* deny a non-epistemic conception.[16]

If he really does not intend to deny a non-epistemic conception of truth, then he should take more care before denying the possibility of epistemic practices being wrong in the way he does in the two quotes given above. Other comments made by Phillips add to the impression that he does deny a non-epistemic conception of truth. For instance, he suggests that what can be said to be 'real' or 'unreal' is not answerable to a transcendent, non-epistemic state of affairs, but is rather a matter of what can be asserted to be real within certain epistemic practices: 'The distinction between the real and the unreal is not given prior to the use of various language games';[17] 'the distinctions between the real and the unreal get their sense within epistemic practices'.[18]

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[13] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.25.

[14] Ibid., pp.59–60. The Wittgenstein quote is from *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), para. 47.

[15] This is what Phillips does in the case of realism: 'realism and anti-realism are equally confused', *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993) p.34.

[16] The point being made is that, although it might be coherent (in the case of nonsense, category mistakes or bad grammar) to deny (P or $\sim P$), it is not coherent to insist on ($\sim P$ and $\sim\sim P$), which would be Phillips's position as regards P, where P is interpreted as 'truth is non-epistemic'. I maintain that Phillips clearly implies, in the quotes supplied, that $\sim P$ (it is not the case that truth is non-epistemic) and that it would be incoherent of Phillips to distance himself from the assertion of 'truth is epistemic' (which is just an alternative statement of the meaning of $\sim P$) and the denial of $\sim\sim P$ (truth is non-epistemic).

I will now take it as established that Phillips denies a non-epistemic conception of truth, and so adopts an epistemic conception. The task before us now is to consider what arguments we might present for adopting such a conception. Phillips does not provide us with anything more than clues or suggestive comments, and in the sections to come I depart from the exegesis of Phillips to provide the best case I can think of for the epistemizing of truth. My second task, as I outlined above, is to show that the alternative to an epistemic conception of truth is intelligible. I will do this, mainly indirectly, by showing that the epistemic conception of truth is either blatantly false, or entirely parasitic on a non-epistemic conception. Finally I will consider what the real dangers are (for the practice of religion) of holding an epistemic conception of truth. They are not what they might seem to be.

An Argument Arising from the Redundancy of Truth

The first approach, which is designed at least to 'soften us up' to an epistemizing of truth, is one which Phillips might be sympathetic to: drawing as it does on Wittgenstein's comments about the transparency of truth, based upon observations as to how we use the concept of truth in ordinary language.[19] The line of thought goes as follows.

1. Truth never marks a property of judgements. Although we say that propositions (what is believed in a belief/what is asserted by an assertoric sentence) are true, we should compare what we can say about the predicate 'is true' in contrast to predicates such as 'is conscious' and 'has rights'.
2. In the case of predicates such as 'is conscious' and 'has rights' we can investigate these and look for principles which determine whether something is conscious, or has rights. We use these principles to get a unified class of conscious things, or things that have rights. Each item will be in that class because it satisfies some condition; or, if we prefer more Wittgensteinian terms, we find a 'family' of related conditions or criteria.
3. Contrast the case of the predicate 'is true'. We know individually what makes this predicate applicable to the judgements/assertoric sentences

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[17] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.xi.

[18] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.xiv.

[19] I am indebted to the very perspicuous account of this approach set out by S. Blackburn in *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), ch.7.

expressing propositions[20] of an understood language. So we know that the proposition that sugar is sweet is true, *iff*, sugar is sweet, and the proposition that snow is white is true, *iff*, snow is white. Universalizing this, we know that the following equivalence schema holds: the proposition that p is true, *iff*, p.

We know this for an entirely different reason than in the case of knowing when a predicate such as 'is conscious' should apply. In the case of 'is true' there is no single account, or family of accounts, in virtue of which each of the listed propositions deserves the predicate. The equivalence schema says all there is to say about truth.

4 There are as many different things to do in deciding whether the predicate applies, as there are judgements to make. There can be no unified, common account of the 'property' which these different procedures determine. With any proposition whose truth one is interested in, just by disquoting and removing the reference to truth, one is able to determine what is to be judged in order to determine the truth of the proposition. We can do this without any analysis of the notion of 'truth': so the idea that there is such a common property is an illusion.

5 Phillips could make use of these observations in the following way.

i There is nothing general to be said about the property of truth, about when propositions are true. The metaphysical realist needs to be able to say something general along the lines, 'a claim about any sort of reality (divine/human/scientific) is only true if it in some sense "hooks onto" an independently and objectively existing something'. We see, though, that nothing so general can be said about what makes different sorts of propositions true.

ii All we can do if presented with a truth claim is to judge in each case what criteria determine whether what the proposition claims does indeed hold ('is true'). The resources we use to make such a judgement will be grounded in features of our use of such propositions: what we take them to mean, and what criteria we use in deciding when to apply them. This links up with Phillips's understanding of the task of philosophy, where he quotes Searle approvingly:

> What (Wittgenstein) is anxious to insist on … is that if we have expressions in our language like 'real world', 'reality', 'truth', then they must have a use in language games which is just as humble, just as ordinary,

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[20] For convenience, and because I consider it plausible, I will talk of propositions as being the bearers of truth. Truth attaches to beliefs and statements (assertoric sentences) inasmuch as it attaches to *what is believed, what is asserted by the sentence*. In other words to propositions. For a full defence of this position see W. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp.9–23.

> as the use of the words ‘chair’ and ‘table’, or ‘dog’ and ‘cat’ . . . our task as philosophers is not to sit back and contemplate the sublime nature of reality and truth, but rather to get busy and describe how we actually use expressions like ‘real’ and ‘true’.[21]

The truth of a proposition is not to be construed as vulnerable to how things are in a metaphysically independent and objective reality, but rather as an ideally positive epistemic status of that proposition. If we gloss ‘independent and objective reality’ as ‘a non-epistemic state of affairs’, we have a denial of a non-epistemic conception of truth, and so, in effect, an epistemic conception of truth.

iii Some propositions will be similar to each other. So the domain of all propositions will break up into smaller domains of ‘propositions as used in religious practice’, and ‘propositions as used in scientific practice’. The criteria used in each smaller domain will be distinct to that domain. So we have the desired relativization of epistemic standards to different language games.

I will not concern myself with the relativization move (point iii above), having argued in the last two chapters that criteria are not so insulated to different domains. I shall concern myself with the claim that, thanks to the transparency of truth, all that is ever involved in judging whether a statement is true, is a judgement as to whether it satisfies certain ideal epistemic standards.

There are two principle objections to the argument presented above. First of all, even if we accept that ‘the proposition that p is true, *iff*, p’ captures the concept of truth, we should contest whether this has any metaphysical or epistemological consequences whatsoever.[22] Although ‘the proposition that p is true *iff*, p’ might capture the concept of truth, this in no way rules out there being a further property of truth. We can seek to identify the property of truth by using the concept by which we grasp it to discern those propositions which are true; we might then find that all true propositions (identified by our grasp of the concept) – in virtue of their being true – have the property of ‘corresponding with the facts’ or of ‘cohering with one another’. In an analogous way we can possess the concept of the number 3 and go on to find out that this number has the non-contingent property of being the square root of 9.

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[21] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993) p.26. The Searle reference is from B. Magee, ‘Wittgenstein: Dialogue with John Searle’, in *The Great Philosophers* (BBC Books, 1987), pp.331–2. I do not mean to suggest that Searle has an epistemic conception of truth; it takes a particular construal of ‘how we actually use expressions like “real” and “true” ’ to take us to an epistemic conception. Such a construal *is* suggested by D.Z. Phillips.

[22] I have drawn this point from P. Horwich, ‘Realism and Truth’, in J.E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives, 10, Metaphysics* (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1996), pp.188–94.

In fact it is just such a move from the concept to the property of truth that our idealized Phillips would need to make. Phillips would need to go from observing that the *concept* of truth is given entirely by ‘the proposition that p is true *iff*, p’ to arguing that truth has the *property* of being radically epistemic. Unfortunately from the concept of truth nothing so substantial and particular follows; neither is anything so substantial ruled out.

To avoid making this jump from the concept to the property of truth, Phillips would need to locate the epistemic nature of truth in the very concept of truth, by interpreting the equivalence schema in an epistemic way, as follows: ‘the proposition that p is true, *iff*, p, where by asserting p we mean that p enjoys an ideal epistemic status’. This would stand against a non-epistemic construal of the equivalence schema: ‘the proposition that p is true *iff*, p, where by asserting p we mean that p describes a non-epistemic state of affairs which obtains in the world’. Simply observing that the concept of truth can be captured by the equivalence schema does not endorse any particular conception of truth (epistemic or non-epistemic).

The second objection is one raised by Blackburn.[23] It builds on the observations made above concerning the distinction between the concept and the property of truth, and re-inforces the claim that the wrong conclusions have been drawn from the apparent redundancy of truth. We can remove the mention of truth from any judgement, just because truth is *internal* to judgement. To make or accept a judgement is to have truth as an aim. Just as in a game there is an equivalence between making a move to win and judging that the move is a good one, so there is an equivalence between making a judgement and holding that the judgement is true. This ‘redundancy’ does not suggest that we have no conception of what it is to win/make a true judgement. Since truth *counts* as success in judgement, making a judgement and describing it as true are evidently equivalent. We may still have a substantive conception of what that success is, of what the property of truth is.

So, on this account, we can concede that discussing, proving and querying p is the same as discussing, proving and querying whether p is true; but this is not because ‘is true’ is vacuous, but because the governing conception of success in judgement is already involved in discussing, proving and querying p. It is this conception of success in judgement which it is the philosopher’s task to try to explain. Another way of putting this point would be to ask of the formula:

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[23] *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.230–31.

The proposition that p is true, *iff*, p,

why it is that the 'equivalence' privileges the right-hand side rather than the left. Why does it show that truth is redundant in this formula, rather than showing that the notion of truth (success in judgement) is internal to asserting p?

I conclude that observations concerning the apparent redundancy of truth do not help the Wittgensteinian reach an epistemic account of truth. We found that the most that could be said – for the redundancy theory – was that the concept of truth is such that it is possible to drop explicit mention of truth, in that 'the proposition that p is true' is equivalent to 'p'. This in itself does not mean that there cannot be a property of truth, especially considering that the explicit mention of truth could only be dropped because it is already contained in the conception of success in judgement when asserting that 'p'. Phillips would not be able to go from the equivalence thesis of truth, without any further arguments or considerations, to any serious metaphysical or epistemological conclusions concerning truth. It is to these further arguments and considerations that I now turn.

An Epistemic Conception of Truth

Some of the most interesting and plausible arguments, in recent literature, for an epistemic conception of truth are given by Hilary Putnam.[24] In attempting to give arguments to sustain Phillips's assumption of an epistemic conception of truth, I will be drawing on two of Putnam's arguments: first of all the model-theoretic argument, and secondly the argument from conceptual relativity.

There are, of course, other important epistemic accounts of truth, most notably those of Dummett and Wright. I consider Putnam to be much closer to Phillips than accounts along a Dummettian vein. This can be easily shown. I think it would be uncontroversial to characterize Dummett's[25] approach in the following way:

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[24] Putnam tends not to lay out his views systematically in one place, but to give shorter, different presentations of them in a number of places. I have gleaned my account of Putnam's views from the following works: *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987); *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990) and *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

i The realism/anti-realism issue centres on whether statements have realist (evidence-transcendent) or only verificationist truth conditions.
ii The dispute about truth conditions is a general dispute about what the understanding of a language consists in. In other words, it is a dispute about whether competent speakers have realist (evidence-transcendent) or only a verificationist understanding.
iii Dummett is convinced that the competent speaker's understanding is only verificationist: 'an understanding of a sentence consists in a capacity to recognize whatever is counted as verifying is, i.e., as conclusively establishing it as true'.[26]

Consider, in each case, how different the concerns of Phillips are.

i Phillips is largely unconcerned about verificationist truth-conditions. In some cases verification and the possession of evidence will be necessary to assert a 'true' sentence;[27] in others it would be to import an 'alien grammar' to demand evidence and verification in order to assert true sentences. This is the whole force of his demand that religious utterances and belief do not need justification, verification or evidence.
ii A general and universal theory of what constitutes a competent speaker's understanding of the language will be quite inimical to Phillips. Phillips insists on the impossibility of generalizing, on the internality of criteria of meaning and justification to epistemic practices (including the criteria governing the application of predicates such as 'is true' and 'is real') and on the claim that we hit epistemic bed-rock much sooner than many of us are prepared to realize. It is not clear that Dummett's approach engages with any of these concerns.
iii Phillips would want to insist that competent speakers frequently assert as true – with understanding – sentences which they have no means of verifying, or no evidence for. Sometimes it is even vital, for understanding a sentence, that we realize exactly that there is no means of verification, or rooting the meaning of the sentence to *evidentially immanent* truth-conditions. Consider the case of God: 'when we pay

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[25] My account of Dummett is based mainly on his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978) especially the essays 'Truth', 'Realism' and 'The Reality of the Past'. For this three-part summary of Dummett's position I am indebted to the exposition and critique given by M. Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.259–61.

[26] M. Dummett, 'What is a Theory of Meaning?', in *Truth and Meaning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), ed. G. Evans and J. McDowell, pp.110–11.

[27] I am breaking my policy of talking of propositions as truth-bearers simply to respond to Dummett's outlined approach. Dummett, of course, speaks of sentences as truth-bearers.

> attention to concept-formation, we see that, far from hiding God from us, the conception of God in the language is of a hidden God. Thus, to say "God is beyond mortal telling" is not to report an epistemological failure to praise God. On the contrary, the expression is one form such praise takes.'[28]

In what follows it should become clear that Putnam's internal realism, with its conceptual relativity and broadly epistemic approach (not focused on verification and evidence), is much closer to Phillips's central concerns. Putnam considers that one of the most objectionable consequences of what he calls 'metaphysical realism' is 'that *truth* is supposed to be *radically non-epistemic* ... and so the theory that is "ideal" from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, "plausibility", "simplicity", "conservatism", etc. *might be false*'.[29] Putnam is convinced that this is wrong and that truth should instead be identified with 'an *idealization* of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement "true" if it would be justified under such conditions'.[30] Putnam argues for an alternative 'internal realism' where truth 'is some sort of ideal coherence of our beliefs with each other and with our experiences *as those experiences are themselves represented in our belief system* – and not correspondence with mind-independent or discourse-independent "states of affairs" '.[31] I will now consider the arguments for this position given by Putnam.

The Model-Theoretic Argument

The model-theoretic argument is supposed to combat the view that 'the theory that is "ideal" from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty, and elegance, "plausibility", "simplicity", "conservatism", etc., *might be false*. "Verified" (in any operational sense) does not imply "true", on the metaphysical realist picture, even in the ideal limit'.[32] The argument goes as follows.

1 T_1 is, by our lights an ideal theory. We are to imagine that T_1 has every property we like to recommend it as a theory, except objective truth. So T_1

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[28] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.xvii.

[29] *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.125.

[30] *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.55.

[31] Ibid., pp.49–50.

[32] *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.125.

might be complete, consistent, able to predict all observation sentences (as far as we can tell) and able to meet whatever 'operational constraints' there are, such as beauty, elegance and simplicity.

2 To hold a radically non-epistemic account of truth, it must be held that T_1 could satisfy everything listed in (1) yet *still be false*. If Putnam can show this not to be possible then he will have established that truth is radically epistemic.

3 Assume that THE WORLD can be, or has been, broken into infinitely many pieces. Call this set of infinite pieces (things and events) S.

4 In our ideal theory we have a model M of THE WORLD. The model has an infinite number of terms to be mapped onto the infinite number of pieces.

5 The result of this complete mapping of the observation terms of M onto THE WORLD is a satisfaction relation SAT – 'a "correspondence" between the terms of L (the language in which the theory is stated) and sets of pieces of THE WORLD – such that the theory T_1 comes out *true*, true of THE WORLD, provided we just interpret "true" as TRUE (SAT)'.[33]

6 We see then that there will be a way of assigning singular terms of T_1 to individuals, and general terms of T_1 to sets of individuals, such that every sentence of T_1 comes out true (this is the force of (5)). From (3), (4) and (5) above, then, we can conclude that we have failed to make sense of the intelligibility of an operationally ideal theory being false. From (2), we can conclude that we can make no sense of a non-epistemic notion of truth.

Critique

There are at least two strands to the above argument.[34] The first strand is the claim that, if the operational and theoretical constraints allow an interpretation in which all the sentences of a theory come out true, then we have shown that truth must be epistemic. The latter simply does not follow from the former.[35] All that the former amounts to is that there is an admissible interpretation on which the theory is true: but this is not something which any realist

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[33] Ibid., pp.125–6.

[34] For commentary and critique on Putnam I have found the following works to be invaluable: W. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), chs 5–7; M. Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), ch.12; P. Clark and B. Hale (eds), *Reading Putnam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), especially 'Enchanting Views' by S. Blackburn.

[35] I have drawn this point from W. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp.137–9.

(metaphysical or otherwise) would wish to take issue with. All that has been shown is that it is *logically possible* that the theory is true. Equally it is logically possible that the theory is false.

If there being an admissible interpretation that makes the theory true *makes* the theory therefore true, does the existence of an admissible interpretation that makes the theory false *show* that the theory must therefore be false? The answer would seem to be that the model-theoretic argument establishes neither the truth nor the falsity of the theory: it merely shows that it is *logically possible* that the theory be true (false).

It is at this point that the second strand of the argument comes in. It seems that we have some possible interpretations of a theory on which it is true, and some on which it is false. Perhaps Putnam's claim should be taken as being a challenge concerning the indeterminacy of reference. We can never be sure which interpretation is the correct, 'intended' one: which putative SAT relation is being offered between the terms of M and the pieces of THE WORLD. So we can never be sure that what seems to be a theory that, according to our interpretation, comes out false, is not in fact a theory that comes out true if differently interpreted; and who is to say that this different interpretation is not the correct one?

There are three things to be said about this.

a Once the issue is put in terms of the indeterminacy of reference, the considerations about 'operational constraints' and ideal features of a theory (elegance, simplicity, beauty and so on), can go out of the window. Even with an irrational, complex and inelegant theory, there is a possible interpretation on which the terms of L have an extensional SAT relation to the pieces of THE WORLD.

b If we have not got past the problem of the indeterminacy of reference, we do not have as yet anything which is capable of truth or falsity. It is *because* it is an open question which of a wide variety of interpretations is the correct one, that it seems possible that the correct interpretation *might* always be one on which the theory comes out true. But the issue of truth and falsity should not be raised until we have a determinate reference: until we have a determinate proposition which is capable of truth value.

c If it is the case that it is never possible to determine reference, this is a case for not evaluating theories for truth or falsity, rather than for adopting an epistemic conception of truth. It is not at all obvious that reference *is* indeterminate in the way that Putnam thinks (wrongly) will be of assistance to his epistemic claim. It is open to someone to claim that the intended reference of a term is whatever stands in the appropriate causal relation to the term.[36]

Putnam's response to this is to object that it is as much a puzzle how 'causes' uniquely refer, as it is a puzzle how 'cat' can uniquely refer on the metaphysically realist picture. So if we claim that 'term x is causally related in a way A to object y and to nothing else', then Putnam responds, 'but *what* determines the reference of "causally related"?' The realist replies back that ' "causally related" is causally related in way B to causal relations and to nothing else'. The critic can still ask another question along the lines of 'but what determines the reference of "causally related" is causally related in way B to causal relations?' But the mere fact that it is possible that an answer will be questioned in this way does nothing to show that it was not a good answer to the question.[37] We might also worry about a conflation of *fixing the reference* and *showing that the reference has been fixed*.

To conclude, the model-theoretic argument establishes nothing more than that on some interpretations a theory comes out false, and that on others it comes out true. The conception of truth involved here is unproblematically realist. Even if we have (probably unfounded) worries about the indeterminacy of reference, we are still not taken to an epistemic conception of truth, but to the irrelevance of evaluating theories for truth/falsity. We have not yet shown that truth is radically epistemic. We need to turn to Putnam's second argument, which draws in the putative 'interest-relativity' of all explanation.

Conceptual Relativity

Putnam's argument for conceptual/ontological relativism is aimed against the metaphysically realist view that 'the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects',[38] and that there is 'exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is'.[39] Putnam insists that there is a variety of incompatible ways of dividing the world into objects, and that there is nothing 'in the world', apart from us and our cognitive activity, that makes one of these the 'right way'. The argument goes as follows. What constitutes an object, individual or entity is relative to our cognitive carving up of the world. There

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[36] For a defence of such a view, see M. Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp.226–9.

[37] As Devitt comments, ibid., p.227.

[38] H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.49.

[39] Ibid. Putnam characterizes the realist's position in this way ('one true and complete description'), although it is not clear that any realist needs to be saddled with this demand. It would be open to the realist to allow different descriptions, but insist that every true complete description entails every other. This point is explored later on, in Chapter 5, under the 'First Temptation: the Rich Diversity of Possible World-views' section.

are several possible examples to show this. Putnam is fond of the mereology example:

World 1	World 2
x 1, x 2, x 3	x1, x2, x3, x1 + 2, x1 + 3, x2 + x3, x1 + x2 + x3
A world à la Carnap	Same world à la Polish logician

The question 'how many objects are there?' can be answered according to two different and incompatible conceptual schemes: 'three' if we are working on a Carnapian conceptual scheme, and 'seven' if we are working on the Polish scheme. Once a conceptual scheme has been chosen, it is a matter of 'objective' fact that there are three/seven objects. The number of objects there are is not a matter of convention once we have selected a conceptual scheme, but there is an element of convention in our choice of conceptual scheme. We find Putnam saying remarkably Phillipsian things:

> Concepts may be culturally relative, but it does not follow that the truth or falsity of everything we say using those concepts is simply 'decided' by the culture ... (there is though) ... no archimedean point, or use of 'exist' inherent in the world from which the question 'how many objects *really* exist?' makes sense.[40]

Replace 'culture' with 'language game' and Phillips seems to say something about the predicates 'real' and 'unreal' exactly paralleling Putnam on 'truth' and 'falsity'. Consider this quote from Phillips:

> The distinction between the real and the unreal is not given prior to the use of various language games. There is no Archimedean point outside all language games by which we assess the adequacy of language in relation to reality. Such a relation is a chimera.[41]

Other juicier examples of conceptual relativity might include the following 'rival' schemes for describing the world: ordinary objects and scientific objects; an Aristotelian substance ontology and an event or process ontology; and, more to our purposes here, a divinely guided and ordered universe, and a naturalistic secular universe.

In each case Putnam wants to insist that because there is no possibility of any rational settlement of conflict in the case of classical ontological oppositions, the best diagnosis is simply to say that the differences amount not to differences in the world, but to disagreements in our conceptual frameworks.

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[40] *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle Ill.: Open Court, 1987), p.25.

[41] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p.xi.

Putnam is suggesting that what happens in the simple mereological example in fact can be extended to cover *every* true statement we make. In so universalizing the phenomena of conceptual relativity, Putnam blocks any natural way of specifying the fact that is being represented in different ways. In response to the traditional metaphor of dough and cookie-cutters, Putnam insists that there is no conceptually neutral way of displaying the 'dough', the logical primitives that we carve up into objects:

> To talk of 'facts' without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing: the word 'fact' no more has its use fixed by the world itself than does the word 'exist' or the word 'object'.[42]

Putnam has come remarkably close to providing an argument for something that Phillips more or less assumes. We can see Phillips assuming conceptual relativity in the following passages:

> in the context of the religious language game, reference *is* made to the reality of God. This is certainly true. There is a conception of an independent reality in religion. Yet, to see what this conception of an independent reality amounts to, we must pay attention to the grammar of the religious concepts involved.[43]
>
> We cannot first identify our world-picture and then go on to describe the ways on which we think, because it is only in terms of how we think that we can speak of our world-picture. We are not talking of any priority over the ways we think, logical or temporal, when we speak of our world-picture.[44]

When Phillips talks of 'distinguishing the grammar of X from Y', it is not difficult to read this along the following lines: 'realizing that the reality of X, and the reality of Y, cannot be appreciated unless one understands that the type of reality that is being spoken about is relative to a conceptual scheme – is conceptually relative'. Or in Phillips's own words that 'it is in the contexts in which (statements that have to do with the real) are made that inform us of what the distinction between the "real" and the "unreal" comes to'.[45]

The status of the examples that are supposed to lead us to accept conceptual relativity is problematic. The examples could be intended in two ways:

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[42] H. Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989), p.114.

[43] D.Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1993) p.25.

[44] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.41.

[45] D.Z. Phillips, 'At the Mercy of Method', in *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1995), ed. T. Tessin and M. von der Ruhr, p.5.

i as a demonstration that we are always subject to conceptual relativity,
ii as an example of something already demonstrated or considered obvious: that all our representations of reality are relative to a conceptual scheme.

It seems clear that Putnam intends the examples to serve as (i): we have no other arguments proffered to compel us to accept conceptual relativity. We need to look carefully at what the arguments are supposed to establish, and at what they actually establish.

We might be doubtful about that which Putnam takes to be the importance of his observations concerning conceptual relativity for our conception of truth. We remember that Putnam intends to oppose the view 'that *truth* is supposed to be *radically non-epistemic* ... and so the theory that is "ideal" from the point of view of operational utility, inner beauty and elegance, "plausibility", "simplicity", "conservatism", etc. *might be false*'.[46] Putnam takes it that conceptual relativity and an epistemic conception of truth go hand in hand. He considers that once it is recognized that any reality we cognize is partly what it is by virtue of our conceptual activity, then there is nothing left for truth to be except idealized rational acceptability:

> If objects are, at least when you get small enough, or large enough, or theoretical enough, theory-dependent, then the whole idea of truth's being defined or explained in terms of 'correspondence' between items in a language and items in a fixed theory-independent reality has to be given up. The picture I propose instead is ... that truth comes to no more than idealized rational acceptability.[47]

Unfortunately the examples (of conceptual relativity) that Putnam offers really do seem rather banal and easily handled by the metaphysical realist. I consider that one could accept what Putnam says about conceptual relativity, and yet still hold a non-epistemic account of truth.

Within a scheme it is the case that what makes a statement true is whether, within that scheme, what the statement is about is as the statement says it to be. The relativity comes in, not at the level of truth evaluation, but at the level of *what the statement is about, what proposition is being expressed.* So in the mereological example provided above the answer 'there are three objects' is true *iff* there are three objects in the world (whatever anyone thinks about it). The 'relativity' comes into play when we consider whether the proposition about objects is about Carnapian-objects, or Polish-objects. There is nothing 'epistemic' about truth here. At most there is some indeterminacy about meaning, which can be quickly cleared up. It is hardly perspicuous to talk in terms of ‘conceptual relativity’ here. The situation actually seems to be that we have one word ‘object’ which is ambiguous between two concepts ‘OBJECT^{carnap}’ and ‘OBJECT^{polish}’. Once we have decided which concept we are using, and not until then, we can start talking about the non-epistemic truth of the matter about how many objects there are.

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[46] *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.125. For the distinction between the issues of conceptual relativity and realism, I am indebted to William Alston's *The Realist Hope*, c.6.

[47] *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.41.

We seem to arrive again at a sort of ‘indeterminacy of interpretation’ anxiety. Perhaps the worry is that we can never be sure which concepts our words express, or that there is a crippling vagueness in our concepts. As before, if this were the case, it would not be an argument for adopting an epistemic conception of truth, but would rather be a reason for not talking of any sort of truth or falsity at all. Before there can be any possibility of truth, there must be some stable bearer of truth/falsity. Truth belongs to sentences or propositions; indeterminacy concerns which proposition is being expressed by a sentence.

There are two factors which make me unconcerned about the so-called possibility of this indeterminacy of meaning and interpretation. First of all, I just do not think it is correct to say that meaning and interpretation is so indeterminate. That meaning and interpretation is not so indeterminate seems to be *prima facie* obvious (upon common-sense practice). Although some of our concepts are vague, and most of our ordinary language concepts are, we find that they are mostly determinate enough to cope with the world. So I might not be sure whether the steep inclination of land I am climbing is a mountain or a big hill, but I am sure that it is not a table. When greater determinacy is required I can make a *decision* about what will count as an instantiation of my concept (say of ‘mountain’). This is a decision about what I am going to *mean* when I talk about ‘mountains’: *not* a decision about what is true. I realize that the above has the status of an assertion, rather than an argument. The conviction that meaning is not radically indeterminate is one reason for my lack of concern, but I have not given my *reasons* for having this ‘reason’ here. I deal much more extensively with this issue in Chapter 5, where indeterminacy becomes a threat to an aspect of realism, rather than being, as it is here, a threat to both realism (a non-epistemic conception of truth) and anti-realism (an epistemic conception of truth).

The second, and at this stage more compelling reason why I am unconcerned about the possible indeterminacy of meaning is related to my immediate task of trying to make the strongest case possible for the Wittgensteinian, in order to evaluate and critique it. I consider that throughout this discussion I have been closer to accepting, if not an indeterminacy of meaning, then at least a greater flexibility about what does, and how we can, determine meaning. If meaning and interpretation really is indeterminate, or even just terribly vague, the Wittgensteinian will be up to his neck long before reaching this point. Consider a summary of some of the Wittgensteinian claims made so far.

a Religious language is expressive, not factual. We can tell this by looking at the depth grammar of certain concepts. By attending to the depth grammar we see that the rules for the use of certain concepts are *even more* determinate and restrictive than is originally obvious. So, for instance, the claim that 'colours are sensations in the brain' and that 'God might or might not exist' are really nonsensical, according to the 'depth grammar' of the concepts of colour and God, respectively.

b Discourse-limited language games have their content determined by what cross-discourse language games run through them. By attending to features of the use of language we can draw up a definitive list of which activities belong to certain language games (for instance, expressing thanks in the religious language game), and those that do not (forming hypotheses in the religious language game).

c Meaning and epistemic criteria are relative to practices. To know what something means, and how an assertion is to be justified, one needs to determine, with great particularity, the context and rules of grammar surrounding a practice.

In each case the Wittgensteinian has certainly not been drawing on the indeterminacy of meaning and interpretation. Rather the claim seems to be, in each case, that meaning and the rules which govern the interpretation of different practices are *much more determinate and particular* than most philosophers realize. In each case I have tended to object that meaning and the rules by which we interpret different practices are not anything like as determinate or carved in grammatical stone as the Wittgensteinian considers.

To conclude this discussion, I find that Putnam's pronouncements about conceptual relativity are no more than the dressed up observation that some of our words are ambiguous as to which concept they express, and that some of our concepts are rather vague – until, for some reason, we need to tighten them up. In itself, I have argued, this observation provides no grounds for worrying that all meaning and interpretation is indeterminate. Even if we are convinced that meaning and interpretation is indeterminate, this takes us not towards an epistemic conception of truth, but rather towards a situation where no proposition is stable enough to be able to bear truth or falsity. Finally, if anyone should be worried about the indeterminacy of meaning and interpretation, it should be the Wittgensteinian, who constantly needs to determine, in quite a particular and surprising way, the *real* meaning and rules for interpreting religious language.

Identifying Truth with Ideal Epistemic Conditions

We have been unable to argue our way to an epistemic conception of truth. Perhaps we had better just assert an epistemic conception of truth in the strongest possible form, and evaluate it for plausibility. At the heart of an epistemic conception of truth is the conviction that the truth of a proposition (or any truth bearer) consists, not in its relation to some transcendent state of affairs, but in the epistemic virtues that the proposition displays within our thought, experience and discourse. So the truth value of a proposition is a matter of the extent to which a belief is justified, warranted, rational or well-grounded.

As I commented earlier, this claim is fairly neutral between choices of what constitutes justification or warrant for a belief. This neutrality is a strength for two reasons. First of all, it will give this discussion a wide scope of relevance over different fleshings-out of an epistemic conception of truth (in terms of coherence, pragmatic value, rational assertibility). Secondly, there is an advantage in staying close to a fairly neutral position, in that we can avoid some of the well-rehearsed problems with spelling out justification in, for instance, exclusively coherentist or pragmatic terms.

A clear implication of an epistemic conception of truth is the impossibility of a proposition being ideally justified, yet still mistaken. Another way of putting this – in Phillips's words – is that it rules out 'the fear that the (human epistemic) practice as *such* does not reflect how things are'.[48] If we are in any doubt that Phillips's views on truth are adequately captured in terms of ideal epistemic conditions, consider again the quote given above (p.46):

> In order for that worry (concerning whether human epistemic practices reflect how things are) to be expressed we need a conception of 'how things are' which is independent of *all* human practices ... We need a relation to reality of the epistemic practices outside any context where we could speak of checking whether something is real or not. Wittgenstein says, 'Forget this transcendent certainty'.[49]

In brief, the epistemic conception of truth is represented in the following formula:

The proposition that p is true, *iff*, p is ideally justified.

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[48] D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (Oxford: Westview, 1995), p.59.

[49] Ibid., pp.59–60. The Wittgenstein quote is from *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), para. 47.

The flaw in this conception of truth can be stated very simply.[50] There is a problem with how to construe the right-hand side of the formula. 'P is ideally justified' can either be taken in a weak sense, as 'p has the property of being justified for some cognitive agent of more-or-less human limitations', or in a strong sense, 'p has the property of having whatever ideal justification it takes to guarantee the truth of p – for instance, it is justified for an omniscient being to believe that p'. In the former case the epistemic conception of truth is not at all plausible. In the latter case, it is plausible, but only because we have defined ideal epistemic conditions in terms of 'whatever it takes to arrive at *truth*', where what is *true* is understood in a realistic 'relating to a transcendent state of affairs' sense. I should perhaps argue for this in more detail, dealing with increasingly strong construals of the epistemic formula.

We could envisage a spectrum of construals of the notion of 'ideal epistemic conditions', going from the weakest to the strongest. At the far left of the spectrum we have the claim that truth is to be identified with a belief being justified for someone at some time. This is clearly not plausible. The epistemic status of beliefs varies enormously over different epistemic situations. Also there might be many true propositions that are never believed by any human being: such an example would be 'it was snowing in this spot at time *t*' where *t* is over 10 000 years ago. Equally many false propositions can be justified for someone at some time. So pre-Columbus, it would be quite justified – but false – to believe that the earth is flat.

We can try travelling a little to the right on our spectrum, by demanding that the *ideal* in '*ideal* epistemic conditions' must do more work. So now we identify truth with what is justified in a situation in which *all* relevant evidence (reasons, considerations) is readily available to a competent cognitive human agent. But still there seem to be counter-examples. Even if we concede that a proposition's having ideal justification is a good indicator of its truth, its truth is not to be identified with this ideal justification, not least because there are true propositions that are not ideally justifiable. Some candidates might be those such that nothing that counts for or against their truth is cognitively accessible to us human beings, or those truths that are not even conceivable for beings of limited human cognitive abilities.

The belief that reality extends beyond the reach of possible human thought is closely analogous to something which we know to be the case.[51] There are plenty of ordinary human beings who constitutionally lack the capacity to conceive of some of the things that others know about. So people who are blind or deaf from birth cannot understand the concept of colours or sounds, and people with a mental age of nine cannot understand the general theory of relativity or Goedel's theorem. We could imagine a species, all of whom have the mental age of a nine-year-old, who are able to think and know about the world in some respects but not others. If such a species could co-exist with us there could equally be such a species if we did not exist, which is to say, if there was no one capable of conceiving of those things which the nine-year-old species cannot understand.

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[50] In this section I am indebted to W. Alston's *A Realist Conception of Truth* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp.188–208.

[51] The examples in the following few paragraphs are taken from T. Nagel's essay, 'Thought and Reality', in *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp.95–8.

If we elaborate the analogy we could imagine higher beings related to us as we are related to the nine-year-olds. Such beings are capable of understanding aspects of reality that are beyond our comprehension. In this situation we would not hesitate to say that there are certain things about the world that we cannot even conceive. Now if we imagine that the world is the same, except that these higher beings do not exist, we would still say that what the higher beings *could* say if they did exist remains the same; which is to say that there are certain things about the world that we cannot know, and cannot even conceive of.

It seems rather artificial to insist that there is no conceptual space for the notion of evidence-transcendent truth, or for truths about the world that we cannot conceive. We should allow that a philosophically inclined member of the nine-year-old species (and children can be very philosophical) might wonder whether there were things about the world that he and others like him are incapable of ever finding out about or understanding. Such a speculation would be not only significant but true. I can think of no good reason why we should not consider as equally significant, and likely to be true, a similar consideration in our own case. If such a speculation in our own case is at least significant (not nonsensical) it is enough to establish that the concept of truth (about what the world is like) is at a qualitative remove from the property of being ideally justified for cognitively competent humans.

It seems the plausibility is slipping away from the view that truth can be defined as justifiability for human beings in the most ideal situation possible for us. This view might be captivating in one respect; certainly if a proposition is indeed ideally justified for us, then we are likely to consider that it is true – indeed, it is likely to be true. The problem with *identifying* truth with ideal justifiability becomes clear when one considers the asymmetry of the truth–ideal justification induction. That a proposition is true (say about the origins of the universe) does not at all indicate that it will be ideally justifiable for some human.

The next move on the spectrum is to gloss 'ideal epistemic conditions' less anthropocentrically. So one says that truth is identical with being ideally justifiable 'for some cognitive agent' (perhaps one of our higher beings above). The problem for this suggestion is that, to ensure that *every* true proposition is ideally justifiable for this cognitive agent, we would need to have something approaching an omniscient being as our cognitive agent. But then no realist, with a non-epistemic conception of truth, would have any problems in recognizing that a necessary condition of any proposition being true is that it would be known by an omniscient cognitive agent (with worries about indexicality aside for the moment).

In order to render our 'epistemic' conception of truth plausible, we have defined ideal epistemic conditions in terms of 'whatever it takes to arrive at *truth*', where what is *true* is understood in a realistic 'relating to a transcendent state of affairs' sense. The concept of an ideal epistemic situation presupposes a non-epistemic conception of truth, *if it is to be at all plausible*. The justification in 'ideal justification', when we are interested in identifying this notion with truth, must be truth-conducive, something along the lines of: 'one is justified in believing that p only if one's situation is such that it renders one's belief likely to be *true*'. The 'ideal' in 'ideal justification', when we are interested in identifying this notion with truth, must be not only truth-conducive, but truth-entailing: 'one is *ideally* justified in believing p only if one has everything it takes epistemically to be *certain* that p is true, and p is true'.

The Theological Dangers of an Epistemic Conception of Truth

The danger involved in adopting an epistemic conception of truth, when it comes to the practice of religion, is not quite what it seems. First of all it does not lead to an 'anything goes' position, or an obvious subjectivism or relativism about truth. As we have seen in Chapter 3, even if 'truth' and epistemic standards are relative to human practices, the variegated and – at least partly – rational nature of these practices ensures that we do not need to abandon our usual ways of justifying, or arriving at, our beliefs. Truth may be identified with an ideal human practice, but the human practice need not presume (and will not if it is to be plausible) that 'relativism is true'.

Neither does it seem that someone who holds an epistemic conception of truth could be said to 'not really believe in God' or in 'the essential truths of the Christian faith'. They would believe in the truths of these things in as much as they could believe that anything at all is true. At least if we do want to say that they do not *really* believe, we need a way to distinguish this sort of general non-adherence to a certain conception of truth, from someone who holds a realist conception of truth, but does not *really* believe in the truth of the Christian faith (although they might be a Cupittian non-realist, who holds that the faith is 'true' in an attenuated, 'fruitful way of life', sense).

Once the difference between the Wittgensteinian and the realist is put in terms of which conception of truth one holds, the debate becomes more fundamental and perhaps less serious. Whether or not you believe in God is a serious matter. What you believe belief is, or what you believe that which you believe in is ('truth'), seems a little more rarefied and philosophic.

Having said this, there are still dangers in holding an epistemic conception of truth, although they are not what one would initially expect. It might appear that an obvious danger of holding such a conception is a type of anthropocentric hubris: truth is 'brought back home' in a way that is particularly inappropriate in the case of religion. The practice of the Christian religion presupposes an ontologically transcendent being God, who is what God is quite independently of any of our most noble epistemic pursuits. The truth about God is bound to feature as a robust example of the type of truth that is *not* to be identified with what is justifiable within any of our human practices. It is precisely if one thinks that there are realms of reality such as God that one is less likely to form an epistemic conception of truth.

I think such an epistemic hubris *might* be the result, or the cause of, an epistemic conception of truth as applied to religion, but that in fact it is seldom likely to be. If one is serious about making an epistemic conception of truth at all plausible, the anthropocentric sting has to be all but removed. To make the identification of truth with 'ideal epistemic conditions' at all plausible we needed to make the idealization so formidable as to remove it from human hands altogether. Consider the consequences of adopting either of the two options: an epistemic or a non-epistemic conception of truth.

On an epistemic conception of truth a proposition is true *iff* it satisfies ideal justification conditions. I have argued that the only way of making such an identification plausible is by reading 'ideal justification conditions' as (non-epistemic) truth entailing (such as we would have in the case of an omniscient agent). Effectively then, if we make the truth/ideal justification conditions identification, we have a realist, non-epistemic conception of truth *plus* the demand that we have in place ideal justification conditions (which are parasitic on the non-epistemic conception of truth).

What happens when we do not attempt any such identification between truth and ideal justification conditions? We still have a realist, non-epistemic conception of truth; *what we do not have is the crippling demand that to identify a proposition as true there must be ideal justification conditions in place*. A robust, non-epistemic conception of truth really does seem to 'set us free' from an insatiable demand for beefed-up 'ideal justification conditions'. At least on such a non-epistemic account something is true if it just does relate to a transcendent state of affairs, whatever our epistemic position *vis-à-vis* that state of affairs. So on such an account we could arrive at the truth through a lucky guess, a partial hunch, or revelation. This would not seem plausible on an epistemic conception of truth, unless one moved exactly in the wrong direction (from the point of view of truth conducivity and entailment) by spelling out 'ideal epistemic conditions' in very idiosyncratic ways.

If anything the Christian religion, which (depending on your tastes) depends more-or-less heavily on revelation and paradoxical elements (the incarnation, for instance, if one is Kierkegaard), would seem to come off rather badly in terms of an epistemic conception of truth which demands 'ideal justification'; coherence, rationality, elegance, verifiability are not terms which sit easily with a Protestant emphasis on faith, the limitations of reason (think of Barth's 'NO!' to natural theology, and implicitly human reason) and revelation.

In fact it begins to seem that Phillips of all people both *needs* an epistemic conception of truth, in that he considers that such a conception ensures the relativization of epistemic criteria and meaning to certain differentiated practices, and *needs not to have* an epistemic conception of truth in that he wants to get away from the demand for epistemic factors such as 'elegance, rationality, reasonableness, verifiability' which, we have seen, are essential if the equation of truth with certain epistemic conditions is going to be at all plausible. That Phillips does want to get away from such epistemic demands seems clear from the way he rejects the search for justification, the weighing up of hypotheses and the meshing of one's religious beliefs in a coherent whole with scientific and metaphysical beliefs (see Chapters 2 and 3).

So, interestingly, the danger for the Christian religion of adopting an epistemic conception of truth is that it will make truth too precious, too hard to obtain, too rare because limited to human resources (in the sense of being identified with highly idealized human epistemic practices). The alternative to this is to spell out an epistemic conception of truth in a way that is just not plausible, by linking 'ideal justification conditions' with the sorts of everyday processes by which religious people actually do come to their beliefs, such as revelation, religious experience, tradition, religious and/or moral instinct, feeling or pragmatism. So an epistemic conception of truth is either death to a religion such as Christianity, which calls all people and not just epistemic super-heroes, or death to all rationality, because it is so flatly implausible.

The second consideration as to why an epistemic conception of truth is unlikely to lead to a sort of hubris involves some arm-chair diagnosis of the motivations for adopting an epistemic conception of truth. It does not seem that such a conception is arrived at because of a great sense of pride at what human reason and cognition is capable of. In other words, it is not that the scope of what can be known is so vast that there is a suggestive extensional equivalence between what is known and what is ideally justifiable for somebody.

Rather it seems quite the opposite. There is an underlying sense of the limitations of our cognitive capacities and thought. We are unable, it is intuited, to 'get outside our own skin', where 'skin' is glossed broadly as 'conceptual schemas, language games, epistemic practices and perceptual limitations'. On a 'strict'[52] reading, this 'inability' to ever step outside of the means by which we express our thoughts, directly to access that which we claim to be thinking about, is taken to be so crippling that it affects even our ability to come to *any* conception (to frame any meaningful concept) of what it is we are unable to access directly. So even our very conception of 'truth' must be non-transcendent, not making ostensible reference to what is 'outside our skin'. In other words, we are so limited as to what we can conceive that any non-epistemic conception of truth is really confused. Hence we have an epistemic conception of truth. Although 'truth has been brought home', this is only achieved by reducing our house from being 'THE WORLD' to being 'our world'.

Showing that an epistemic conception of truth is not at all plausible, and so by default perhaps recommending a realist, if minimal, conception of truth, takes us only so far. I may be able to persuade (probably I might not) someone who is troubled by the 'getting out of our own skins' problem that an epistemic conception of truth is not plausible or helpful; but in doing this I will not have said anything at all helpful to counter her fear that she cannot even conceive what it would be to 'get out of her own skin'. The anxiety would still remain *either* (i) that the 'world-in-itself' (including, and perhaps in particular 'God-in-Godself') is an illegitimate concept, with reality being thoroughly mind-dependent (the 'strict' denial of C[53]), *or* (ii) that mind-independent reality, although perhaps real-in-itself, is completely inaccessible to us (the 'indulgent' denial of D).[54]

Now the last sentence above is ambiguous between two readings. On a 'strict' reading, the 'impossibility' of the concept of 'the world-as-it-is independent of our conceptions of it' means that we *really are not able* to frame *any* such concept. We must say that there *is no world* outside of our conceptual frameworks, no world independent of our cognitive activity. In as much as this is the case we can be said to 'construct' our world(s), in that the way-things-are is constructed by the organizing activity of our minds, rather than being given by the nature of the way-things-are independently of the organizing activity of our minds. On the other hand, an 'indulgent' reading of the 'impossibility' involved here equivocates or relents on the issue of whether *there is* a world-independent-of-our-cognitive-activity, and perhaps hints of a 'noumenal' realm of things-in-themselves. What is now 'impossible' is that we should have true beliefs about such a realm (were it to exist).

In other words, I might stop my imaginary subject being a certain sort of Wittgensteinian, but, unless her philosophical anxieties are dealt with, they could easily transmute into other contortions, such as the belief that, even if truth is fixed by the ‘way things are’, the ‘way things are’ is at a non-empirical level (beyond the realm of empirical evidence and beliefs) mind-dependent. As I have commented in the introductory chapter, a religious sensibility combined with sympathy for the denial of C tends to move fairly rapidly into a Kantian or a contemporary ‘apophatic’ denial of D. Although God might be independent of human cognition, the claim is, we cannot have true beliefs about God in as much as God is so independent.

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[52] See above, ch.1, p.7.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid.

The remainder of the book deals with the momentum of thought sketched out above. In the next chapter I attempt to remove the aura of urbane and contemporary inevitability which tends to surround the vague claim that reality is not mind-independent (the denial of C). I make explicit the arguments for such a globally anti-realist position, and show them to be defective and sometimes devious. Such therapy is not geared specifically *at* anti-realist philosophical theologians, who tend not to support their sympathy of C with much argument, but is supposed to be *for* anti-realist philosophical theologians in that it might (but probably would not) help stop the slide into epistemic conceptions of truth, as well as into Kantian and contemporary ‘apophatic’ approaches, which deny that we can have true beliefs about a mind-independent God.

CHAPTER 5

Worldmaking

This chapter deals with philosophical temptations to deny that 'what is the case is independent of human cognition' (criterion C). So as to avoid having to use the circumlocution 'the denial of C' throughout this chapter, I will stipulate a technical term 'global constructivism' to stand for this denial. By 'global constructivism' I mean (by way of unpacking the denial of C) the doctrine that the way things are is exhaustively and completely constructed by the organizing activity of our minds (individually or collectively), rather than being given by the nature of the way things are independently of the organizing activity of our minds. Although my interest is in constructivist approaches as they infect theology and philosophy of religion, my concern in this chapter is with such approaches as they arise from general philosophical considerations.

A brief qualification is in order before proceeding. It should be clear that the realist is not committed to the claim that any proposition would be true even if there were no minds. Obviously some true propositions are mind-dependent in that they are about the mind (such as 'X believes p'). The realist has no trouble with such truths. Non-constructivism in this area involves the claim that the truth of claims such as 'X believes p' is independent of whether *it* is believed by any particular individual, including X herself where X has no second-order beliefs.

I will at times mirror the terminology of the thinkers I am discussing, and use phrases such as 'serious world-making' and 'conceptual idealism'. Unless I state otherwise these are to be understood as synonymous with 'global constructivism'. When I use the term 'constructivism' this should be read as 'global constructivism' unless I specify otherwise.

In all I will explore five temptations to global constructivism, roughly in order of ascending power. They draw on concerns such as the rich diversity of possible world-views; the contingency of language; the extent of mental organizing of our experience; the inability to give a substantial account of the correspondence relation, and the ability of relativist-constructivism to give a powerful and charitable explanation (where realism fails) of the wide variety in belief systems.

First Temptation: the Rich Diversity of Possible World-views

We must be clear from the start that the two following claims are quite distinct and separable:[1] (1) there is not one and only one correct way completely to describe the world (or any part of it); (2) there is no world independent of our description.

There is no logical connection between (1) and (2), although we often find the two viewpoints run together, or one used in support of the other. We find a typical example of this in T.E. Wilkerson when he writes,

> what *really* is ... is largely a function of the way we *describe* what really is. It is grossly misleading to suppose that the world comes to us in fairly obvious pieces. It is only by describing the world that we carve it into pieces.[2]

The first sentence here ('what *really* is ... is largely a function of the way we describe what really is') is a bare statement of (2) above, and the following two sentences are presented as if they are evidence for this conclusion. But the second and third sentences here *only* make the point that there is not one and only one correct way to carve up the world, which is point (1). They are not evidence at all for (2).

(1) has the ring of obvious truth. We can describe things in different ways, and some of those ways will seem as good as each other. In such a case it will seem pointless to privilege one way of describing things over other ways. The only reason someone might have for denying (1) would be because they are worrying about (2) which they also wish to deny. But it should be realized that a commitment to (1) is in no way a commitment to (2). (1) is quite compatible with there being many different conceptual schemes for describing the way things are, rather as we might adopt different co-ordinate schemas to describe the same reality of a black and white chequered pattern (a chessboard).

Wittgenstein asks rhetorically of the chessboard example whether it is not 'obviously and absolutely composite?'[3] such that there is one true and complete description of its composite parts. Wittgenstein suggests that, if we offer such a candidate as an absolute description, we 'are probably thinking of the composition out of thirty-two white and thirty-two black squares'.[4] But of course this is only *one* possible complete description of the components of that

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[1] The importance of labouring this obvious distinction was brought home to me by John Heil, who makes this point in 'On Saying What There Is', *Philosophy*, vol.56, April 1981, 242–7.

[2] T.E. Wilkerson, *Minds, Brains and People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp.166f.

[3] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), sec.47.

[4] Ibid.

segment of the world which is the chessboard. Other possible complete descriptions of the component parts of the chessboard would include 'that it was composed of the colours black and white and the schema of squares',[5] or that it consists of four large squares, each of which has a chequered black and white square pattern. But it should be clear that these alternative true descriptions of the composition of the chessboard in no way push us towards doubting that there is a world (a segment of the world that is the chessboard) that is independent of our alternative and various descriptions.

Equally, just as there are people who will deny (1) because they are worried about having to affirm (2), there might be those who affirm (2) simply because they are keen to uphold (1). Again, in the absence of further considerations, there is no intellectual momentum from (1) to (2). Of course if we have well-developed worries about relativism, *there may be a movement from (1) to (2)*. I discuss these issues in the last sections of this chapter. For now it suffices to conclude that, in the absence of further considerations, the world could be independent of our descriptions, and yet describable by a number of different descriptive systems.

Second Temptation: Word and Concept Contingency

There is an obvious arbitrariness concerning which words we use to pick out concepts, and which concepts we use words to pick out. A case for constructivism from the arbitrariness of words and concepts can be made along the following lines.[6]

1 Language is arbitrary, in that we are free to take any sound and make it mean anything we like. 'What it does come to mean depends on what we have freely done with it. So it is what English speakers freely did which gave "rose" its meaning'.[7]
2 For realism to be true it must be the case that the truth of 'item b is a rose' be independent of how I conceptualize and categorize my experience.
3 But (from 1) the truth of 'item b is a rose' is within my control (or within the control of previous language users) and dependent upon how I conceptualize and categorize my experience.

Therefore,

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[5] Ibid.

[6] I am drawing here on M. Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp.242ff.

[7] Quoted from Devitt, p.243. Devitt is setting up the argument to knock it down.

4 (from (1) to (3)) the truth about the world (generalizing from the roses example) is dependent upon my conceptualizing and categorizing experience. A constructivist anti-realism is correct.

Something like this movement of thought may be behind Wittgenstein's comments that any meaningful justification of explanation requires the very language it purports to have got outside: 'you can't get behind the rules (meaning) because there isn't any behind'.[8] There is an arbitrary constructive quality to our language, that makes talk of the world beyond language problematic. So: 'How do I know that this colour is red? It would be an answer to say: "I have learnt English." '[9]

Or, as David Pears puts it:

> It is relatively easy to see that we have no standpoint from which to assess the relation between the experienced world and a reality which is supposed to lie behind it. But it is far less easy to see that we have no standpoint from which to assess the relations between our words and the things to which we apply them.[10]

For Felicity McCutcheon, this is the heart of Wittgenstein's thought, the conviction that we cannot step outside of language (or thought) in order to gain a clear view of its limits. When she finds Roger Trigg wanting to follow the metaphysical urge and 'break free of language and speak of reality',[11] McCutcheon comments:

> First, I do not know what anyone means if they claim there is nothing outside language. If this means that there are only words and not things, then it is completely nonsensical. As if there is the word 'chair' but not the object that I am sitting on as I write this sentence ... If there are people who can make sense of claims like this then I would like to meet them.[12]

But then McCutcheon betrays herself with an intriguing footnote: 'I do not mean people from other tribes with completely different sets of concepts. I am talking about those who share my concepts.'[13] But then we might wonder, what on earth does *this* mean? That the truth of the claim that there is a chair *is* (or might be) dependent upon whole conceptual schemes? The claim that the truth of whether or not there is a chair has something to do with my conceptual scheme seems to rely upon the sequence of thought articulated above: Trigg's realism is untenable because of the arbitrariness of language. But the sense in which language is arbitrary is trivial, in that it is contingent and arbitrary that the thing so named is called a 'chair'.

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[8] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. R. Rees, trans. A. Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), p.244.

[9] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. E. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), para. 381.

[10] David Pears, *The False Prison, Volume One* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p.13.

[11] Roger Trigg, *Wittgenstein and the Social Science*, in A.P. Griffiths (ed.), *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p.127.

[12] McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001), p.22.

[13] Ibid.

It is obvious, we might say, that lots of things 'free' of language can be spoken of, just simply by saying this: 'the chair exists, independently of language'. We must make some sort of distinction to capture the obvious truth that 'the word "chair" ' depends upon language in a way that is quite different from any dependence that the objects themselves may have. Is it true that this distinction must be made in language, but this simply shows that articulated distinctions depend upon language, not that chairs do. You can, if you like, say that 'the chair cannot be talked of independently of language': but it would be wrong to draw any controversial results from this (a relativism about truth, or an epistemic conception of truth); the claim means just what it says, that we cannot *talk* (about anything) without language, but amongst the things we can talk about are those things that do not need to be talked about in order to exist.

To nail this down in more detail, it is useful to look at Michael Devitt's[14] account of the constructivist as one who fails to distinguish between a word's *conditions* of reference, and its correct reference at a time in certain conditions. The conditions of reference of the word 'rose' are given as follows.

1 'Rose' refers (in English) to something in virtue of its being R (where R is a set of botanical properties).

The conditions of reference, in this sense, are fully controlled by speakers of a language. The correct reference at any time of the word 'rose' is a different matter, and of the following form.

2 'Rose' refers to *b* (where *b* is an item in the world).

For (2) to be true we need the further claim:

3 *b* is R.

(3) it should be clear, is completely outside our control. Something could not be a rose, and so referred to by 'rose' unless it had the properties specified by R. The constructivist's freedom is restricted to (1). Making the word 'rose' refer in

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[14] Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p.243.

conditions R is not to make those conditions obtain, and so is not in any interesting sense to 'make roses'; (3) is controlled by the world, and (2) by a combination of the world and us.

The constructivist is correct to point to an element of freedom, but there is no pill here too bitter for the realist also to swallow.

Third Temptation: the Extent of Mental Organizing

It is a frequently cited mantra that 'our minds organize our experience of reality'. From here it is argued that our experience of reality is heavily and pervasively mind-dependent and that as we cannot have any experience of reality that is not 'ours', we can never have an experience of that which is mind-independent. If we add to this an aversion to positing realms of reality that are in principle inaccessible to any experience, we arrive at a thorough-going constructivism. The realm of 'reality' can be no larger than the realm of what is in principle experienceable, and this realm is always *a priori* mind-dependent.

There are two claims which need teasing apart here. The first is the unhappy argument that because we cannot *conceive* of something without *conceiving* of it, everything *that we conceive of* (reality as we know it) is a mind-dependent construct (the argument is similar to the trivial argument above that we cannot talk without talk). The second claim is the more interesting one that we cannot perceive without conceiving, and that all our experience is heavily mediated by the conceptual organizing activity of our minds. I will discuss each of these in turn.

The Impossibility of Conceiving without Concepts

Berkeley at different times trades on both these claims, perhaps sometimes using the first 'argument' (the conceiving-of-concepts argument) – unjustifiably – as support for the second (the perceiving-dependent-upon-conceiving argument). There is a clear case of drawing on the first claim in his 'Principles of Human Knowledge', where Berkeley boasts that in order to believe that 'the object(s) of your thought may exist without the mind ... *it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy*'.[15]

That we 'cannot conceive of a tree unconceived' should be unpacked in terms of the trivial impossibility 'of conceiving of a tree without conceiving of it', impossible in the same way as 'drawing a tree without drawing it' or 'pruning a bush without pruning it'. From here there are no ontological implications to the effect that the tree depends upon conceivers for its existence, any more than a tree being drawn requiring drawers implies that trees may not exist if they are not drawn.

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[15] G. Berkeley, 'Principles of Human Knowledge', ed. M. Ayers, *George Berkeley: Philosophical Works* (London: Everyman, 1975), part I, secs 22–3, p.83ff.

A similar mistake is made by Rescher when he puts forward his 'conceptual idealism'. Gordon Kaufman, whom we will be looking at in Chapter 8, cites Rescher at the end of *Essay on Theological Method* as giving a philosophical defence of the position underpinning Kaufman's own system.[16] Rescher moves from the trivial observation that 'whenever and however we conceive of part of natural reality, we do so by means of specific conceptual mechanisms that we *bring* to the cognitive situation',[17] to the exciting claim that 'the concepts we standardly employ in constituting our view of reality – even extra-mental material reality – involve an essential reference to minds and their capabilities'.[18]

It is simply false to claim that because we must use concepts in order to conceive of a tree we must therefore make an implicit reference to mental operations when talking about trees. Talking about trees involves mental operations, but talk about trees is not talk about mental operations. Similarly drawing a tree involves drawing, but there is no temptation to think that we must include in our picture an (implicit) illustration of someone drawing.

Finally we might dwell on what it is that thinkers such as Berkeley and Rescher would allow as a non-constructed experience of reality. Because anything experiential/mental is a mind-dependent construction, in order to experience reality as it is, and not just reality as we construct it, we would need impossibly to have a non-experiential experience. What the likes of Berkeley and Rescher have discovered we may not have is something we could never be sane to ask for – non-experiential objects somehow entering our consciousness in such a way that we directly non-mentally intuit them. I can give no content to this possibility, which seems to demand that we have an experience of the world which is non-mental, or non-experiential: a non-experiential experience! Bizarre notions come to 'mind' of objects (extended, material, coloured) somehow 'entering' consciousness in a *direct* way, 'as they are in themselves'.

Of course showing the impossibility of the realist's demand might look a trump in the hand of the conceptual idealist. On the other hand it might begin to look as if the main constructing being done is on the part of the conceptual idealist's portrayal of what realism involves. We should be suspicious of a victory to the idealist that is won by characterizing realists as culpable of such gross error as to think we could have a non-experiential experience. Further, through skirmishes with radical scepticism, we might have learnt to ignore demands and questions when the question or demand is framed so that there is in principle no answer. In this case the demand put on the realist is for a non-experiential experience. In the example of radical scepticism the question is 'how do you know' *ad infinitum* long after all the usual canons and criteria for knowledge have been satisfied.

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[16] G. Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), p.76.

[17] N. Rescher, *Conceptual Idealism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), p.2.

[18] Ibid., p.3.

Substantial Organization of Experience

The claim that all experience, including seemingly 'raw' data of perception, is dependent upon the conceptual activity of our minds, is of more interest. There seems to be a natural movement of thought from this claim to the position that reality (for us) is through and through a construct of the mind, rather than a matter of 'what is there anyway'. The claim being made here, in broad terms, is something like the following: (i) every perception involves concepts (is dependent upon concepts), therefore (ii) we only know the world as it is constructed by these concepts *rather* than the world-as-it-is-in-itself.

The only type of experience that could be otherwise is something like Kant's unconceptualized perception, which he makes available to God. At this stage I will introduce a point which will be developed more, and repeatedly found of use, in Chapters 6 to 8. Even if we accept (i) that perception involves concepts, there is no necessity to accept that (ii) it reflects the way we construct the world *rather than* the world-as-it-is-in-itself. The flaw with this claim is the powerful *neglected alternative* that we have the concepts we do because they are good at reflecting the way the world-is-in-itself. This is not to say that we have compelling evidence that they do, just that there is no necessary reason, as thinkers often assume, to rule out this alternative.

In Chapter 6 I will consider Kant's distinctive brand of ignoring the 'neglected alternative' above. In this section I will be looking for the constructivist to give an account of (i) the sense in which, if any, perception is dependent upon concepts, and (ii) compelling reasons as to why, even accepting (i), the 'neglected alternative' should be ruled out. The constructivist will need to show that owing to the dependence of perception on conceptual activity, we know the world as we construct it *rather than* as it is.

There needs to be some caution in stating this claim. The constructivist must find a way to state the necessity of our *conceiving* that which we *perceive* ((i) above), which does not draw its strength from the trivial necessity of our *conceiving* that which we *conceive*. So the constructivist must not draw on a notion of 'perception' that is already elliptical for 'perceptual judgements', where by 'judgement' we have in mind a conceptualization of our perception such as we have when we judge 'I believe that there is a red patch'. Such a case would be precisely a trivial instance of the necessity of our conceiving (using concepts such as 'red') that which we conceive ('red'). Rather the constructivist needs to make a deeper claim that our perception is through-and-through constructed by the mind, even before any explicit judgements are made concerning that experience. What is needed is a radicalized version of the frequent claim that there is no ‘such thing as a raw, uninterpreted experience’, to the effect that the mind begins its constructing activity long before we make a start explicitly conceptualizing our experience in language.

The claim that the mind constructs our experience in this deeper sense must be an empirical argument. The constructivist can only have the impregnability of a necessary argument in this case if she trades upon such unimpressive trivialities as concepts needing conceivers. Nelson Goodman, in *Ways of Worldmaking*,[19] rises precisely to this challenge to provide evidence for the mind’s constructive work in perception. I will attempt to do justice to this evidence, while showing that they point in the opposite direction to constructivism, by which I mean that even in as much as we accept (i) that *some* perception may be shown to be dependent upon a conceptualization, this does not lead to the global constructivist conclusion that we know the world as we construct it rather than as it really is in itself.

One of the ways in which Goodman suggests our minds construct reality is by ‘deletion and supplementation’[20] in which

> we find what we are prepared to find (what we look for or what forcefully affronts our expectations), and that we are likely to be blind to what neither helps nor hinders our pursuits, (these) are commonplaces of everyday life and amply attested in the psychological laboratory. In the painful experience of proof-reading and the more pleasurable one of watching a skilled magician, we incurably miss something that is there and see something that is not there.[21]

Goodman finds the ‘most spectacular cases of supplementation … in the perception of motion’.[22] The most basic type of ‘apparent motion’ occurs when a spot is flashed very briefly against a contrasting background, followed after an interval of from 10 to 45 milliseconds by the flashing of a like spot a short distance away.[23] If the time interval at the same distance is shorter, we see two spots flashed as simultaneous. With a longer time interval, we see two spots flashed successively. Within the specified interval we see one spot moving from the first position to the second.

Goodman cites further interesting features of phi-perception, which I list here for brevity and reference.

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[19] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992).

[20] Ibid., p.14.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., p.15.

[23] Ibid., p.73.

i Apparent motion of shape and size: two successively flashed spots, where the spots are different shapes, will appear to be one spot growing/ shrinking or transforming;[24]

ii Movement in front of a barrier: in the case where a fixed barrier is placed between the locations of the two flashes, there appears to be one spot coming forward around the barrier;[25]

iii Unpredictable group movements: successive exposures were made of the two four-figure groups below:

○□○□ □○□○

Although it might be expected that each individual square would become a circle and vice-versa, what actually happens is that the right three figures of the first group, without any change in shape, move as a unit to become the left three figures of the second group, with only the left-most circle of the first group moving around to become the right-most figure of the second group.[26]

iv Colour transformation: when the successively flashed displays differ in colour, rather than there being (as with shape) a smooth transformation, the colour changes abruptly around mid-course.[27]

I suggest that it is these sorts of examples which John Hick, the subject of Chapter 7, has in mind when he writes that

> the mind's own positive contribution to the character of its perceived environment, has been massively confirmed as an empirical thesis by modern work in cognitive and social psychology and in the sociology of knowledge.[28]

Hick's comment here is typical of the sort of broad and urbane appeal to 'science' and 'social science' which is often to be found in those with constructivist leanings. Goodman draws a similar, if more colourfully stated, conclusion to Hick from the evidence collected: 'the visual system is persistent, inventive, and sometimes rather perverse in building a world according to its own lights'.[29]

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[24] Ibid., p.76.
[25] Ibid., p.77.
[26] Ibid., p.77.
[27] Ibid., p.84.
[28] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.240.
[29] Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p.78.

Evaluation of Substantial Considerations

Goodman bases his case for constructivism on the following ‘fact’ (and others like it):

> Fact: when a spot against a contrasting background is exposed very briefly, followed by an interval of from 10 to 45 milliseconds by exposure of a like spot a short distance away … within the specified time-interval, we see one spot moving from the first position to the second.[30]

Now is this ‘fact’ a member of the class of ‘fabricated/constructed reality’, or outside that class (does it tell us how things are independent of the mind’s constructive activity)? If the former is the case, then the ‘evidence’ presented to us is already understood as ‘fabricated’ and ‘constructed’. In as much as it is being offered as an instance of a more general and previously accepted constructivism, it is not an argument for constructivism, meant to persuade those who are not yet convinced. If, on the other hand, the evidence is being offered as unconstructed fact, then we do have a substantial case for local constructivism *but only because it is based upon unconstructed facts.* In such a case the evidence tells us that in carefully specified conditions the mind constructs an illusion of motion.

The most the constructivist can bargain for is to insist that the phenomenon of phi-perception is an unconstructed fact, riding on the back of a distinction between the way things seem and the way things are, which points to a certain amount of determinate local constructivism. If she allows the phi-perception to become another fabricated construction, she loses the right to compel us to accept this phenomenon if we demand, completely within our rights, independent reasons for buying the whole ‘world-construction’ package in the first place.

So although the constructivist has given specific examples of (i) perception being dependent upon the activity of the mind (broadly ‘conceptual activity’), we do not have anything like (ii) compelling reasons as to why we should say that we know the world as we construct it rather than as-it-is-in-itself. We do not have (ii) because in order to claim (i) we need to use a notion of how the world-really-is as distinct from how it appears-to-be.

Fourth Temptation: the Inability to give a Substantive Account of the Correspondence Relation

Constructivism, the view that we construct reality rather than encounter a world-in-itself is not, for many of its adherents even, a natural position. It is possible to feel moved to constructivism out of a sense of reluctant intellectual integrity, when the problems with realism just seem too great. We need to pay attention to these 'philosophical reasons that seem to rule out the natural picture'.[31]

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[30] Ibid., p.72.

Realism tends to live with the constant threat of scepticism. Realism is committed to there being a gap between our best efforts to arrive at the truth, and the truth itself. The only possible exception to this, for the realist, is where the 'truth itself' or the 'way things are' refers merely to our own sensations and beliefs, where the realist might allow infallible beliefs. This goes no way to closing the sceptical gap, which is drawn between our beliefs and sensations (the contents of which we may have infallible beliefs concerning, if we have beliefs about our beliefs) and what it is that those beliefs and sensations are *of*, which is to say the world-independent-of-our-beliefs. Into this gap the sceptic is able to insert a question-mark concerning what justification we can have for crossing over from our beliefs to the world-independent-of-our-beliefs. In the rest of the discussion I stipulate that 'the way things are' excludes reference to how our own sensations and beliefs really are, and so that we can speak in this qualified sense of there being a gap between our best beliefs and the way things are.

One way in which the anti-sceptic might try to close this gap is by relying on ideas that are verified by experience, by confrontation with the world. Now the trouble begins. Is the 'direct' confrontation with the world itself a cognitive state with propositional content?[32] Either it is, or it is not. If it *is* a cognitive state with propositional content then *it is just another kind of belief*, and of course the heart of the realist commitment is that there is a gap between even our best beliefs and the way things are. So the threat of scepticism is unvanquished. If, on the other hand, we say that the confrontation with reality is not a cognitive state with propositional content, then it can have no impact on the justification of our beliefs, and so we are still unable to answer the sceptic.

It looks then as if our inability to give an account of how our beliefs 'latch onto' or correspond to a non-epistemic reality dooms us to sunder truth and justification by analyzing them in disparate terms.[33] We attain justification by attending to the coherence that obtains between the content of cognitive states with propositional content, whilst the truth of our beliefs is fixed by something categorically different and mysterious ('the world').

A solution can then present itself to close the sceptical gap between our beliefs and reality, which involves making reality a matter of what we do in fact believe. So truth becomes explained in terms of coherence and ideal epistemic properties. So as to ensure that there is no extra-epistemic realm on the horizon, to which we would feel our epistemically ideal systems were a poor relation, we make the short step to constructivism. Reality is through and through and without remainder mind-dependent, and constructed by our conceptual activity.

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[31] T. Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.92.

[32] I am indebted here to M. Williams's, *Unnatural Doubts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), ch.6.

[33] Ibid., p.233.

I will demonstrate that this constructivist solution is a poor one. It both fails to do what it sets out to do and is gratuitous in setting out to do what it does in the first place.

The sceptic is someone who challenges and doubts the justification we have for our beliefs. So the sceptic asks what justification we have for positing that our best beliefs describe the way things are. In response the constructivist insists that this question of justification does not arise, just because *there is no reality above and beyond the realm of what the mind constructs*. But this is an extremely bold claim about the way things are, much bolder than the humble admission that there may be a reality that we do not know about. Further it is this bold claim that the sceptic *should* attack as one variant of the claim that we have true beliefs about the way the world is, with in this case the claimed truth about the 'way the world is' being that 'there is no reality above and beyond the realm of what the mind constructs'.

The constructivist solution is gratuitous for two reasons. First of all, we might be quite happy with, perhaps even committed to, the sceptical gap – the possibility that all our beliefs are false. As I will argue in Chapter 12, it is only if we have such a gap, especially in an area such as religious faith, that we are given the opportunity to be courageous in risk-taking, relationship-enhancing and life-transforming ways. There may well be no answer to the sceptic except to believe and hope that she is wrong. Any attempt to foreclose on the sceptic inevitably involves closing the gap between belief and truth, and deserves to incur the re-asserted ire of the sceptic, who should ask how we know that there is no reality above and beyond the realm of what the mind constructs.

At any rate, the sceptic's sting can never be very strong in that she can only suggest the possibility that all our beliefs are false. The moment the sceptic attempts to assert scepticism she is in trouble. The sceptic cannot say, without paradox, that 'we are *justified* in saying all our beliefs are false'.

The second respect in which the constructivist solution is gratuitous becomes clear when we consider that this whole train of thought arose because of the putative problem with realism, that it could give no account of how beliefs corresponded to a reality that was not also belief-shaped. Scepticism kicked in partly because realism was felt to be associated with an esoteric correspondence theory of truth.

But realism need not be associated with any particular or substantial doctrine of truth and how we arrive at truth. All the content we need for the notion of an objective world, 'what is there anyway', is a difference between an objective proposition's being true and our believing it to be true. M. Williams[34] points out, correctly, that although the idea of reality as what is there anyway may go naturally with talk of 'truth fitting the facts', there is no compulsion on the realist to flesh out this metaphorical talk with any detailed articulation of 'truth as correspondence'. Realism can be stated without invoking any explanatory or substantial notion of truth. As we saw in the last chapter, realism is quite compatible with minimalist and deflationary accounts of truth. For a deflationary account of truth to slide into a constructivist account we would need an illegitimate move from 'there is no "property" of truth' to 'nothing is really true' to 'there are no objective truths'.[35]

Ironically it turns out that it is the constructivist or anti-realist who either gives the more substantial account of truth, or attempts to replace 'truth' with a more substantial notion (such as Dummett's verification-conditions). The anti-realist attempts to give an account of truth in substantial terms such as ideal epistemic conditions, an enterprise we have found as fraught with difficulties as correspondence notions. The constructivist takes anti-realism in an idealist direction, and tries to give a number of substantial accounts of what truth is in terms of the conceptualizing activity of our minds. It becomes clear that it is the constructivist who is fixated with attempting to give substantial theories of truth, not the realist. It is the constructivist who dismisses the realist on the grounds that she cannot come up with an adequate explanation of the correspondence relation, and it is the constructivist who attempts to claim that truth is a human creation, by giving explanations and examples of how truth and reality are constructed.

Once again, as with the demand for a non-experiential experience above, we might be suspicious of the demand put upon the realist to supply 'an adequate explanation of the correspondence relation', when in principle nothing could possibly provide such an explanation. Anything with propositional content will be denounced as 'just another belief', whilst anything without propositional content will be considered to have no contribution to make to the justification of our belief that 'our beliefs correspond with reality'. The constructivist is nailing the realist's colours to the absurd search for a mysterious entity that is both propositional and non-propositional, both belief-shaped and world-shaped, but neither exclusively. The desire for an 'adequate explanation' from the realist at this point is as suspect as the implicit request for a non-experiential experience.

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[34] Ibid., p.242.

[35] A point made by M. Williams, ibid., p.242.

Fifth Temptation: the Explanatory and Charitable Power of Relativist Truth

If truth is relative, it would be impossible to resist the slide towards constructivism. The relativist claims that something could be true in one system and false in another, or that we can frame two (or more) absolutely incompatible but true statements. This sits naturally with a constructivist account of truth, where truth is constructed by human minds (individually or collectively) through the ciphers of language, culture, symbol and so forth. A relativist view of truth without constructivism looks so odd that I doubt it is possible, let alone plausible. The non-constructivist relativist would have to insist that something's being true in one system but false in another was somehow given by the nature of the world independent of all human cognition; such a non-constructivist relativist would need a fascinating paradoxical ontology, where something 'out there' really is non-constructively true *and* non-constructively false (in an irreducibly incompatible way) independent of all human cognition.

Although the relationship between relativism and constructivism may not be logically water-tight (allowing for paradoxical ontologies), it is clear that relativism (if established) makes constructivism the overwhelmingly plausible account of how something is true. I will conclude this chapter by evaluating the plausibility of relativism, given that a successful defence of relativism would be a good argument for constructivism. It should be clear, of course, that the momentum of argument is not so strong the other way. One could be a constructivist (for instance, because of the inability of the realist to give a substantial view of the correspondence relation) without being a relativist; perhaps, like Kant, one considers that the human cognitive conditions that structure reality are universal and invariant. Much will depend here on one's anthropology. For this reason, and because constructivism is our target, we are not arguing from constructivism to relativism, but from relativism to constructivism.

My discussion of relativist views of truth will be divided into three sections. In the first section I look at the motivation for relativism, and why relativism actually frustrates the intentions behind this original motive. I will then explore one possible route into relativism, which attempts to frame a relativist example by finding the same statement S which is true in system A but false in system B. I will argue that this route is incoherent. Finally I will refute an alternative route into relativism, which attempts to frame a relativist example by devising two incompatible but equally true statements. We will see that the statements, if both true, must be not really incompatible, either because they are about different subject-matters, or because they assert truths in different (but compatible) systems.

The relativist thesis in its most vital form is a direct attempt to give a charitable and effective explanation of the fact that beliefs and standards of rationality are diverse at a time, and changing over time. It is felt that the only way of breaking an imperialist model, whereby only one system can enjoy the truth, is to admit that truth is as diverse as the belief systems and standards of rationality to which it is relative. In this *prima facie* case against relativism, I will be discussing this 'vital' form of relativism, which makes truth relative to *actual historical human communities*.[36]

My argument would not work against a relativist who claimed that truth was relative, but not to actual belief-systems and standards of rationality, but relative to an ideal projection of what a human belief system or standard of rationality should look like. I am not inclined to consider such an ideal relativism to be a problem, for two reasons. First of all, if we accept such as ideal relativism, all the so-called problems that afflict realism re-assert themselves. So whole human practices could fail to be ideal, and some could be more ideal than others, and some could be completely hopeless. When it comes to being judgemental and dismissive of other belief systems, one has as much leverage with the notion of an 'ideal rationality' to which one could be close, and others hopelessly distant, as the most arrogant realist ever did with the notion of 'truth independent of our beliefs'. The claim is an *ad hominem* point that a vital relativist, motivated as she is by the desire to be charitable and pluralistic, would find these motivations to be just as frustrated by an 'ideal' relativism as by traditional realism.

The second explanation of my sanguine attitude to ideal relativism is that I spent the previous chapter arguing against the coherence of any such epistemic conception of truth (of which ideal relativism is a re-statement). In Chapter 4 we found that, on any plausible rendering of the 'ideal' in 'ideal justification (rationality) conditions', the term has the force of 'non-epistemic truth entailing'.

So the phenomenon supposed to be that relativism is able both to explain and to be charitable about is the fact that beliefs and standards of rationality are diverse at a time, and change over time. The relativist explanation consists in claiming that truth is relative to actual human epistemic practices: *truth just is what is rational within an actual human practice at a time and place, in such a*

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[36] The 'vital relativism' here and the 'language game' relativism discussed in Chapter 3 are similar positions. The difference between the chapters lies in my interest in the positions, and the relative weight being given to different subtleties. So in Chapter 3 the main interest was in independent considerations which supported the autonomy of epistemic practices, with the main perceived fruit of this being the immunity of the religious practice from the demand for justification. In this chapter, the focus of my opponent's attention is to be found in his determination to give a charitable explanation for the diversity of beliefs, with the autonomy of epistemic practices being adopted only in as much as it can facilitate this. So in 'language-game relativism' and 'vital relativism' we have similar substantial positions, but very different motivations, which merit a variegated treatment in different contexts.

way that it is not in principle possible for x (where x ranges over beliefs) to be rational yet false. Compare the realist's explanation: *truth and what is rational in a human practice at a time and place are distinct, in such a way that x can be rational yet false.*

The relativist is in trouble with respect to her motivation (i) to offer a good explanation of diverse beliefs at a time and over time, and (ii) to do so charitably. When it comes to offering an explanation of diverse beliefs at a time, and over time, what is the relativist actually going to say when the beliefs of a community change? Take the straightforward example: (i) the world is flat, (ii) the world is round. If the relativism is to do any work, it must be said that (i) was 'true' for pre-Columbus thought, but 'false' for us. All sorts of difficult questions now arise. When did (i) stop being 'true'? Is there a quota of the number of people who must believe (i), or a bench-mark of evidence that must be available? What happens when there is diversity of opinion within a culture? Perhaps we have a balkanization of truth, so that there are truths within a culture ('true for you'/'true for me'); in which case there arises the question as to how these 'truths' interact.

Perhaps the relativist could find answers for these questions, but the whole system would be much more contorted than it need be under a realist analysis. The realist is used to distinguishing rationality (and all other human virtues for that matter) from the holding of true beliefs. Consequently the realist has no difficulty in accounting for the interaction of different or changing views about what is true, all of which may be rational, but only a compatible sub-class of which can be true.

As well as being a problematic explanation of diverse beliefs, relativism fails to achieve its boasted of charity towards different belief systems. The relativist approach is defined by the following two commitments:

a Truth is exhaustively constituted by that which is rational within an actual human practice.
b No-one has access to a concept of 'truth' over and above what is rational within the practice in which they are located.

This means that, if the relativist analysis is accepted, there will be no conceptual space in which to say the following:

(1) although x (where x ranges over beliefs) is rational within my practice, and y (a belief held within another practice) is not rational, x might still be false and y true.

If relativism is correct, and truth just is what is relative within a practice (A), we must say rather:

(2) given that x is rational within my practice, x must be true, and given that y (held within another practice) is not rational within my practice, it must therefore be false.

Of these two (1) is clearly the more charitable, yet (1) is only available to the non-relativist, in that it demands a conceptual gap between being rational-within-a-practice and being true. The relativist cannot even find the resources to say what the relativist wants to say, that 'X is false within my practice but true within yours' because to do so would violate (B), the claim that no-one has access to a concept of 'truth' over and above that which is rational within the practice in which they are located. If (B) is the case, then no-one could ever articulate the charitable relativist sentiment above, which relies on the speaker having an access to a notion of truth that is not exhausted by 'what is rational within my practice'. If X is not rational within my practice, it is false within my practice; if there is no available conception of falsity over and above what is false-within-my-practice, I cannot countenance the suggestion that X 'could be' true in 'another practice'.

If the relativist considers that (A) and (B) apply self-reflexively to their own grasp of truth, they will not be able to articulate the charitable thought that 'X is false in my practice but true in yours'. If (A) and (B) do not apply self-reflexively to the relativist, then they are not true, in that (not A) truth is *not* exhaustively constituted for the relativist–theorist by what is rational in their practice, and (not B) there *are* some people (relativist–theorists, for example) who have access to a concept of truth over and above that which is rational within their practice.

A vital relativism is not shown to be incoherent so much as dogmatic and uncharitable, in that it leaves no conceptual space for humility before a concept of truth that is not exhausted by the epistemic resources of the practice in which one lives. Consequently relativism is, I conclude, a poor and uncharitable explanation of the diversity of beliefs at a time and over time.

First Route to Establishing Relativism

Having dismissed one typical motivation for moving towards relativism, I will now look at an argument for the truth of relativism. The argument proposes to find an example of something, S, which is true for system A, and at the same time false for system B.[37] We need to ask what sort of thing S could be. At this point, it will be useful to introduce E.J. Lemmon's distinction between sentences, propositions and statements.[38] Two sentences can be tokens of the same type-sentence, such as: 'the King of France is bald', and 'the King of France is bald'. Two sentences express the same proposition if and only if they are intertranslatable (whether or not they are of the same type). So 'il re di Francia e calvo' expresses the same proposition as 'the King of France is bald', although it is clearly a different sentence. Two token sentences express the same statement if and only if they assert the same properties of the same individual at the same time. So different sentences could be used to express the same statement ('Bill Clinton has caused a scandal' and 'the President of the USA has caused a scandal'), or different statements could be expressed by a sentence of the same type: 'the President of the USA is the cause of a scandal' used first in 1980 and again in 1999.

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[37] For this argument I am indebted to W. Newton-Smith, 'Relativism and the Possibility of Interpretation', in M. Hollis and S. Luckes (eds), *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), pp.107ff. I have modified Newton-Smith's formulation of the argument by using Lemmon's distinctions. Where I use Lemmon's 'statement', Newton-Smith uses a looser notion of a 'proposition'.

Now S could be true in system A and false in system B if S is a token in each case of a different sentence-type proposition. So the sentence 'grass is good to smoke'[39] might be true in a student commune, but not amongst Welsh hill-farmers where it expresses a different proposition. Equally 'the King of France is bald' might express a true proposition in 1690, but the same proposition would be false in 1725. This sort of relativity of truth to context would not trouble a realist, who will be quite sanguine about truth varying according to which proposition a sentence expresses, and propositions having different truth-values depending upon variations in the properties being ascribed to various things at different times.

For truth to be relative in an interesting sense S must be a *statement* that is true in system A and false in system B. But to say that two token sentences express the same statement just is to say that they ascribe the same properties to the same individuals at the same time; or in other words that the two token sentences have the same truth-conditions. A token sentence only ever expresses the same statement as another token sentence if it has the same truth-conditions. There can necessarily be no instance of the same statement being true in one system and false in another. This route to establishing relativism, and so constructivism, is not successful.

Second Route to Establishing Relativism

The second approach to establishing a variation of constructivist relativism tries to frame pairs of statements that are incompatible yet both true. This approach differs from the above in that no attempt is made to show that the *same statement* can be true in one system and false in another. Rather the second relativist approach tends to present cases where we may be talking about the same individual at the same time, but are ascribing *different and incompatible properties* to the same individual. So we do not have, as above, two instances of the *same* statement S, where S is true in system A but false in B; rather we have two *non-identical* statements, which are both true, but supposedly incompatible. When presented with two statements that are supposedly incompatible and yet equally true, the realist will assume that one of the following is going on:

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[38] E.J. Lemmon, 'Sentences, Statements and Propositions', in B. Williams and H. Montefiore (eds), *British Analytical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp.87–107.

[39] Example given by Newton-Smith, 'Relativism and the Possibility of Interpretation', p.107.

i The statements are equally true, but not incompatible, either because (a) they are about the same subject-matter, but there is no real incompatibility, as any conflict can be eliminated by the explicit relativization to a background system which governs the conditions-of-reference, or (b) they are about the same subject-matter, but there is no incompatibility as a further higher-level statement can be found that accounts for the truth of both the seemingly incompatible statements, or (c) they are about different subject-matters (they are ascribing irreducibly different but compatible properties);
ii Only one of the statements is true, the other being false;
iii Both of the statements are false.

The crucial battle-ground between the constructivist and realist will be (i), in that (i) provides the problematic set of seemingly true but incompatible statements. Nelson Goodman objects to all three realist strategies listed as (ia), (ib) and (ic). I will now defend in turn each of these realist strategies from Goodman's attack.

First Realist Strategy: Relativization to Systems

The problem with (ia), according to Goodman, is that the explicit relativizing of statements to background theories involves changing the meaning of the original statement, from being assertoric about the world, to being assertoric about the content of systems. Take the following pair of statements.

Pair one: (assertoric)
T(thesis): The earth always stands still.
AT(anti-thesis): The earth dances the role of Petrouchka.

The realist will try to remove the incompatibility by explicitly relativizing the truth of each statement to a background system, in something like the following way.

Pair one (system-relative)

T: In the Ptolemaic system, the earth always stands still.

AT: In a certain Stravinsky–Fokine-like system, the earth dances the role of Petrouchka.

But Goodman claims that in the case of pair one the difference between the assertoric and system-relative versions is analogous to the difference between the assertoric and system-relative versions of the following:

Pair two (assertoric)

T: The kings of Sparta had two votes.

AT: The kings of Sparta had one vote.

Where force of the above is quite different from the following.

Pair two (system-relative)

T: According to Herodotus, the kings of Sparta had two votes.

AT: According to Thucydides, the kings of Sparta had only one vote.

The system-relative statements are entirely non-committal as to how many votes the kings of Sparta had in a way that the assertoric statements are not. This difference is supposed to illuminate a general pattern of difference between the assertoric and system-relative versions of statements.

Full justice can be done to Goodman's insights, without adopting his conclusions. We can illuminate the problem by remembering the analysis Devitt gave of the importance of concept contingency. Devitt showed that we only get constructivist conclusions if we fail to distinguish between the conditions of reference and the correct reference at a given time. The analysis went as follows:

1 'Rose' refers (in English) to something in virtue of its being R (where R is a set of botanical properties).

The conditions of reference, in this sense, are fully controlled by speakers of a language (some speakers at some time, or by any speakers at any time if we allow any amount of re-stipulation and non-standard uses). The correct reference at any time of the word 'rose' is a different matter, and of the form:

2 'Rose' refers to *b* (where *b* is an item in the world).

To establish the truth of (2) we need the further claim:

3 *b* is R,

where the truth of (3) is entirely fixed by the world.

Now I might say at any point, 'this is a rose', and assert something of the world; (1) to (3) are not a translation of what I say, but they are a good explanation of it. (1) to (3) give a fuller statement of the context and truth conditions of my utterance. They certainly do not remove the assertoric force of my utterance. Now we can imagine someone disagreeing with us and saying, 'no, this is a dandelion'. Then it would be entirely in order to give a fuller explanation along the following lines.

'When I say "rose" I intend to refer to something in virtue of its being R, and as *b* is in fact R, *b* is a rose', or 'according to the standard English system, roses are R, and this is R, and so a rose'. Then we will find out whether our disputant's disagreement is a superficial matter of a linguistic difference in conditions of reference (replace 'rose' with 'dandelion' in (1) to (3) of Devitt's analysis) or a real disagreement concerning whether or not *b* has property R.

Goodman is correct to say that his system-relative statements (T) and (AT) do not carry the force of the assertoric statements. But that is no one's fault but his own. Goodman has done the equivalent of explaining the meaning of 'this is a rose' *simply by spelling out the conditions of reference, along the lines of point (1) in Devitt's analysis, and then omitting to go on to points (2) and (3) where the substantial reference claim is made*. This omission is entirely reprimandable and gratuitous. To put the system-relative statements right we need to offer a full analysis along the following lines:

Pair one: full analysis

T: According to the Ptolemaic system, 'the earth always stands still' is true by virtue of its having the property E, and as the earth does have property E, it does in fact always stand still.

AT: According to a certain Stravinsky–Fokine-like system, 'the earth dances the role of Petrouchka' is true in virtue of its having the property P, and as the earth does have the property P, it does in fact dance the role of Petrouchka.

It is clear that T and AT above are both more than adequate as explanatory renderings of the simple assertoric T and AT, and that it would be quite possible to hold both to be true without any tension. The only source of disagreement here does not threaten the notion of an unconstructed world. The disagreement would arise if I understood the conditions of reference in each case, yet thought that respectively the earth does not have property E or P. This is a simple difference in opinion, where it must be the case that either the earth has property E/P or not, just as the *b* (above) either does or does not have the property R making it a rose/dandelion. There is no movement of thought here towards relativism or serious worldmaking.

Second Realist Strategy: Giving Higher-level Explanations

The second strategy open to the realist who wishes to disperse the impression of there being incompatible but equally true statements is to claim that a further higher-level statement could be found which accounts for the truth of both the seemingly incompatible statements. Goodman examines this strategy using the following example.[40]

Pair three
(1) The earth rotates, while the sun is motionless.
(2) The earth is motionless, while the sun revolves around it.
The realist might re-express as follows:
Pair three: relative version
(3) The earth rotates relative to the sun.
(4) The sun rotates relative to the earth.
These are non-conflicting truths.

Goodman observes that

> what must be noticed ... is that (3) does not quite say, as (1) does, that the earth rotates; and (4) does not quite say, as (2) does, that the earth is motionless. That an object moves relative to another does not imply either that the first one moves or that the second one does not. Indeed, where *f* is an appropriate formula, (3) and (4) alike amount to the single statement
>
> (5) The spatial relationships between the earth and the sun vary with time according to formula *f*;
>
> and this does not attribute motion or rest to the earth or the sun but is quite compatible not only with (3) and (4) but also with the statement that the earth rotates for a time and then stops while the sun moves around it. The reconciliation of (3) and (4) is here effected by cancelling out those features responsible for any disagreement; (3), (4), (5) dispense with motion in any sense such that we can ask whether or not or how much a given object moves.[41]

Goodman draws the general point that attempts to find a statement from a more absolute point of view, which explains the incompatible pair of statements, will lose much, if not all, of the meaning of the incompatible statements: ‘When we strip off as layers of convention all differences among ways of describing *it*, what is left? The onion is peeled down to its empty core.’[42] Goodman has mistaken what is involved in framing a higher-level explanation that explains the apparent truth of the two incompatible statements. The higher-level explanation does not need to favour symmetrically both the incompatible statements. It can favour one statement (and so the framework within which that statement is made) and account for the truth of the other statement *within its framework* while giving reasons for regarding this framework as false. To take head-on the example provided by Goodman, we can admit that in a sense, relative to the earth, the sun moves relative to the earth and, relative to the sun, the earth moves round the sun: (3) and (4) above. We can admit this, and to the extent that we do, we allow that the two statements (1) and (2) are true.

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[40] Ibid., p.113.
[41] Ibid., pp.113–14.
[42] Ibid., p.118.

But we can explain the truth of (1) and (2) in terms of the following higher-level explanation, which looks quite different from Goodman's own (5):

(6) In that the Ptolemaic framework is less basic than the Copernican framework, the earth really does move and is responsible for the change of position, whereas the movement of the sun is merely relative.[43]

By one framework being 'more basic' I have in mind its being 'simpler' in the precise sense offered by Swinburne: 'to say that one proposed set of laws L is simpler than another set L′ is to say that on balance L uses a simpler mathematics or other symbolism than L′, contains fewer mathematical terms, postulates fewer and less mysterious unobservable entities, and forms a more coherent system, so that odd coincidences and exceptions allowed by L′ find a neat and natural explanation by L, whereas the converse does not so much occur'.[44] It is obvious that the Copernican framework, as developed by Kepler, is much simpler in this sense than the Ptolemaic, replacing, as it did, the thirty to forty spheres of Ptolemaic astronomy with Kepler's three accurate laws of planetary motion.

The greater simplicity of a law (given that it is a different law and not an alternative formulation of the same law), as with the Copernican–Kepler system, is evidence that it is more likely to be true, thus enabling us confidently to frame (6) above. We can see this if we consider that, with any set of finite data, there will be an infinite set of possible laws that are compatible with those data, and which differ in respect of predictions they make about unobserved and future phenomena. If we suppose that a complex theory is just as likely to be true as a simple one, and if both theories are equally adequate at accounting for all phenomena up to time *t*, then we could have no grounds for making one set of predictions concerning future phenomena over another. This is so in that any of the more complex theories could posit that after time *t* the observed phenomena would behave radically differently from how they did before time *t*.[45]

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[43] R. Swinburne, *Space and Time*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), p.45.

[44] Ibid., p.43.

[45] This paragraph is paraphrased from Swinburne, *Space and Time* (1981), pp.43–4.

Goodman presents his case as being successful because the realist is 'restricted to describing changes in relative position'[46] when accounting for the seeming truth of (1) and (2) on p.92 above. We have seen that the realist has a lot more in her armoury that can explain the seeming truth of (1) and (2). Goodman's only option against the realist now is to offer arguments to the effect that simplicity is *not* evidence of truth. But Goodman would be ill-advised to challenge this principle, which we have seen to be indispensable to all our inductive practices.

Goodman, in particular, should feel uncomfortable with rejecting the simplicity principle, in that it is central to the practice of the natural sciences, which he is keen to co-opt as evidence into his constructivist argument. He himself uses the presumption of the truth of more simple explanations when talking about phi-perception (we do not consider the more complex theory that people always lie, or mis-remember, when reporting what they perceive in phi-perception tests, or that people from a future-time onwards will cease to undergo phi-perception).[47]

Third Realist Strategy: Seemingly Incompatible Truths Concern Different Subject-matters

In this section I will consider the last strategy available to the realist when presented with seemingly true but incompatible statements. When presented with such statements, Goodman considers that the only way the realist can reconcile the assertion of both statements is to reduce both statements to a neutral statement which can explain the relative truth of both of them. This conviction would seem to be behind his comments, above, that higher-level explanations evacuate meaning from originally incompatible statements to such an extent that 'the onion is peeled down to its empty core ... when we strip off as layers of convention all differences among ways of describing'.[48] This strategy he criticizes for abstracting out of the 'world' all the that which generated the original conflict, and so failing to translate adequately the original statements. The strategy necessarily involves a stripping away of world features, as being a reduction it attempts to explain a problematic thicker-ontology discourse in terms of a thinner-ontology discourse. So in the case of the relative movement of the sun and the earth, Goodman considered wrongly that we reconciled the conflict by thinning our world-picture in such a way that ‘movement’ gave way to ‘relative spatial relationships’.

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[46] N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), p.114.

[47] Goodman also explicitly argues for the irreducible importance of simplicity as a guide to choosing between theories in 'Safety, Strength and Simplicity', in P. Nidditch (ed.), *Philosophy of Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp.121–3.

[48] Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p.24.

But there is another strategy open to the champion of an unmade world. Rather than holding out for an unmade world by whittling away at our ontology until nothing is left, could we not hold out that the world is much thicker ontologically than any of our versions of the world? The world admits of description under different categories, relative to the interests of different enquiries. This is a familiar truth. If I was challenged to give a comprehensive account of ‘the world of an Oxford college’, I would have to consider the same ‘unmade reality’ under a number of ontologies, classifications and emphases. As a social historian I would consider the daily life-style and attitudes of the members and staff of the college as they change over time; as a sociologist I would consider the people and the institution as producers of a symbolic world framed in culturally saturated terms; as an alumnus I would consider the various buildings in terms of their symbolic, peer-group and academic functions (a complete account of the college would include the meaning attached to buildings by students); as the clerk of works I would strip away these classifications and focus on wiring, rising damp and fire-alarms; as an art-historian I would consider that the chapel as the first classical chapel in the university represented the growing renaissance spirit; as a hard-nosed physicist I would consider the chapel as a complex collection of molecules, atoms, electrons and so on.

It is clear that the life of the Oxford college is ontologically thick enough to cope with two statements such as (1) the chapel is no less than a sacred place for worshipping God, and (2) the chapel is no more than a complex collection of molecules, atoms, electrons and so on. Now if we were committed to reconciling these statements by a third statement which explained both of them, we would have a hard time of it. There is no ontologically thinner statement which encapsulates them both, or explains how both could be true. If we were to be dense we could claim that the two statements are incompatible, and yet equally true. But we can easily cope with the two statements once we admit that the reality they describe is ontologically thicker, and more multi-layered than our home-made conceptual worlds. Our different descriptions of the world focus on different aspects of the world depending on our interests and abilities. The force of ‘no more than’ in (2) above is just ‘has no more physical components than’; and the phrase ‘no less than’ in (1) can be read as drawing attention to the necessity of making reference to the chapel’s religious significance, when attending to the intended function of the chapel in the life of the community.

Goodman fails to provide a route into relativism by framing examples of incompatible but equally true statements. Where statements are equally true they are never incompatible. Their seeming incompatibility can be removed by explicit relativization to a background system, the framing of higher-level explanations, or the admitting of an ontologically multi-layered reality, where we are talking about different aspects of that reality.

Final Remarks

In this chapter I have found no justification for anxieties about the impossibility of 'getting-out-of-our-skins' to access the unmade world. We have been able to acknowledge and do justice to all the concerns within a realist framework. That there is more than one correct way to describe the world does not tell us that there is no world independent of our descriptions. That a word's conditions of reference are a contingent and arbitrary product does not carry over to render the world a contingent product. We saw that our mental organizing of the world was either trivial (the necessity of conceiving concept) or a claim that rides on the back of *non-constructed facts concerning that very activity of construction.*

Further we were not troubled by the inability to give a substantial account of the correspondence relation. Such an account impossibly demands a non-experiential experience, is gratuitous; and we found that it was the anti-realist who tends to demand over-substantial accounts of truth. Finally we did not find that having a relativist–constructivist view of truth was helpful in formulating a charitable explanation of different beliefs; nor was it necessary in order to explain 'true but incompatible statements', just because we found that there were none.

Constructivist arguments get, for the most part, an easy time from thinkers such as Hick and Kaufman, who are happy to nod in the direction of constructivist sentiments without much interrogation. Perhaps one reason for this sanguine attitude is their sense that, although 'the way things are' (as far as we can ever have true beliefs) is constructed, there is outside this cave of shadows a dimension of reality that is not something about which we can have true beliefs, but which can nonetheless play an important role in forming and nurturing our religious hopes and longings. In other words, the likes of Hick and Kaufman compromise on any complete commitment to global constructivism, sanctioning at least the rumour of a non-constructed reality. But they fail to pull themselves into realism in that they deny D, the claim that we can have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition.

The following three chapters evaluate this balancing act (drawing on non-constructed reality without claiming true beliefs about it) a venerable routine that dates back to Kant. The next chapter provides a survey of interpretations of Kant, and objections to Kant on these interpretations; Chapter 7 deals with John Hick, and Chapter 8 attends to Gordon Kaufman.

CHAPTER 6

Rumours of Kant[1]

Much contemporary philosophical theology is infected with a condition that could be characterized as 'transcendentitus'.[2] God is not only ontologically transcendent, but conceptually so, such that we can say nothing true at all about God-as-God-is-in-Godself (or only the most schematic truths). The most we can do is to talk about the phenomenal God (Hick) or the 'available referent' of God (Kaufman), which is our imaginative God construct.

In *God the Problem*,[3] Kaufman denies that the real referent of 'God' can be directly known or experienced:

> The religious significance of the unspecifiability of the real referent for 'God' is precisely this sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery and meaning. … this implies that the real referent can never be more than a limiting concept for us, a strong reminder that our ideas and experience are far from adequate: for all practical purposes it is the *available referent* – a particular imaginative construct – that bears significantly on human life and thought.[4]

In his most recent work the 'real referent' seems to drop out entirely, and is replaced by 'mystery', which is not to be thought of 'as descriptive of some object of theological awareness or knowledge'.[5] Mystery 'refers to bafflement of mind',[6] and is 'a grammatical and linguistic operator by means of which we remind ourselves of something about ourselves: that at this point we are using our language in an unusual, limited and potentially misleading way'.[7]

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[1] Extracts from this chapter (pp.97–100, pp.103–113), along with a slightly adapted version of Chapter 8 have been published in my article, 'Gordon Kaufman and the Kantian Mystery', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 47(2), April 2000, 101–19.

[2] A characterization I have taken from W. Alston, 'Realism and the Christian Faith', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 38(3), July 1995, 53.

[3] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1972).

[4] Ibid., p.85. See also pp.84, 88, 97, 113.

[5] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.61.

[6] Ibid., p.60.

[7] Ibid., p.61.

Throughout Kaufman's work it is clear that Kant and Kantian assumptions are important. In an *Essay on Theological Method*[8] Kaufman has the following to say on Kant:

> the importance of Kant was his discovery that the concepts or images of God and the world are imaginative constructs, created by the mind for certain intra-mental functions, and, thus, of a different logical order than the concepts and images which we have of objects of experience.[9]

Any anxiety felt by Kaufman's choice of the word 'discovery' (rather than claim, conviction, argument and so on) is strengthened by his declaration:

> We need not explore here the elaborate argument with which Kant buttressed his analysis, nor examine the insights or the problems that arose from his attempt to work out the details.[10]

John Hick also draws heavily on Kant, but with different consequences. Hick focuses on Kant's distinction between reality-as-it-is-in-itself and reality-as-it-is-for-us. God-in-Godself, or the Real *an sich*, is conceptually inaccessible to us. Nevertheless it has a vital role in religious faith:

> the Real *an sich* is postulated by us as a pre-supposition, not of the moral life (as with Kant), but of religious experience and the religious life, whilst the gods, as also the mystically known Brahman, Sunyata and so on, are phenomenal manifestations of the Real occurring within the realm of religious experience ... one can say that the Real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, for Kant, we experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted by the mind in terms of its own categorial scheme and thus coming to consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience.[11]

Hick is remarkably similar to Kaufman in his lack of interest in Kant's argument (as opposed to his conclusions):

> I do not however propose to enter into questions of Kantian exegesis: for to do so could only divert attention from the application of the basic Kantian insight to an area to which he himself did not apply it, namely the epistemology of religion. For Kant's broad theme, recognising the mind's own positive contribution to the character of its perceived environment, has been massively confirmed as an empirical thesis by modern work in cognitive and social psychology and in the sociology of knowledge.[12]

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[8] G. Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975).

[9] Ibid., p.25.

[10] Ibid., p.24.

[11] J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.243.

[12] Ibid., p.240.

Two broad Kantian themes already emerge: (1) the mind makes a positive contribution to reality as we perceive it; (2) reality *an sich* (including God) is not accessible to us (we cannot refer to it with our concepts, or enjoy any knowledge about it). Kaufman and Hick are perhaps distinctive in the extent to which they draw on these broad Kantian themes, but plenty of other theologians make important use of them. So Sallie McFague has the following to say:

> no metaphor or model refers properly or directly to God … All are inappropriate, partial, and inadequate; the most that can be said is that some aspects or aspect of the God-world relationship are illuminated by this or that model in a fashion relevant to a particular time and place.[13]

It then turns out that *all* talk about God is metaphorical in nature:

> Predicates such as omniscience, infinity, omnipotence, and omnipresence do not properly apply to God … for the meaning of all such language – knowledge, finitude, power, presence – applies properly only to our existence, not God's. All such predicates represent is an attempt to make human qualities limitless. In other words, how language, any language, applies to God we do not know; what religious and theological language is at most is metaphorical forays attempting to express experiences of relating to God.[14]

Re-Kanting Kantianism

One can certainly sympathize with the aversion that Hick and Kaufman have to grappling with any exegesis of Kant. It is just too hard. In a sense I will not be attempting an 'exegesis' of Kant, if by that one means a definitive interpretation of the text of the First Critique. On the other hand there is a difference between scholarly agonizing over textual interpretations (which a *Kantian* need not pursue) and evaluating the different (sometimes incompatible) arguments that Kant can be interpreted as giving at certain points, *which Kantians have a duty to do if they are to capitalize on the positions which are the conclusions of those arguments.*

The bulk of my discussion will follow the main interest of Hick and Kaufman in Kant, and will concern his transcendental idealism. Having considered the relationship between their positions and transcendental idealism I will briefly consider Kant's views on the regulative nature of the idea of God.

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[13] S. McFague, *Models of God* (London: SCM Press, 1987), pp.38–9.

[14] Ibid., p.39.

There are two camps into which interpretations of Kant's transcendental idealism must fall: the two-realm camp, and a one-realm camp. Briefly the two-realm position posits two sets of objects (phenomenal and noumenal) and the one-realm position posits only one set of objects, which can be referred to in two kinds of way (with or without regard to human epistemic conditions). There is a large variety of subtly different positions one could occupy in either of these camps.

I take it that the distinction as drawn above is fine enough grained for my purposes of evaluating Hick and Kaufman, for three reasons. First of all, the two camps between them are exhaustive;[15] the question, 'are there two realms of reality, one phenomenal and one noumenal?' must be answered – by the Kantian – one way or another (or in both ways only with respect to different aspects of reality). Secondly, the types of problem that affect one variety of transcendental idealism are general enough to affect subtly different varieties of that kind. Thirdly, the 'Kantian' insight that Hick and Kaufman draw on is perhaps cruder, less qualified and less variegated than even the account (admittedly simplified) that I give. Even if my effort here is not definitive in bringing an understanding of Kant to their work (and it is not likely to be), it advances the issue in so far as it improves on what they have done for themselves.

Misunderstanding Kantian Incoherence: Alvin Plantinga and Peter Byrne

When doing philosophy, one can work from a number of motivations. One can either want to persuade someone else of your position, or one can simply want to demonstrate to someone else that their position is incoherent. Admittedly these two approaches will often go together – but not always. A case of the latter being done, without much concern for the former, is I think to be found in Alvin Plantinga's discussion of Kant, Kaufman and Hick in *Warranted Christian Belief*.[16] So Plantinga's typically impressive treatment consists, for the most part, of taking the developed positions of Kant, Kaufman and Hick, and showing that they generate such incoherence that they must be abandoned. So of Kant's approach (on the two-realm interpretation) he writes that 'arguments for this view' are 'distressingly scarce. It is extremely difficult to find much that could pass muster as an argument', suggesting that perhaps those who adhere to it are 'simply overwhelmed by what they see as its sheer intellectual beauty and power; they don't feel the need of argument'.[17] He goes on to comment that, if you find this Kantian picture so 'overwhelmingly attractive, then (incoherence aside) I guess you'll have to go with it. Then again, that doesn't constitute much of a reason for the rest of us – those of us more impressed by the incoherence of the picture than its beauty – to accept it'.[18]

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[15] I take solace from the following comments found in an extremely learned and fine-grained survey of interpretations of Kant: 'most recent discussions of Kant's distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves fall into either one of two large groups. First there are those who deny the distinction is meant as a distinction between two different objects ... Secondly, there are those who believe Kant did mean his distinction to refer to different objects.' (Karl Ameriks, 'Recent Work on Kant's Theoretical Philosophy', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 19(1), Jan. 1982, 1).

[16] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Kaufman is made, by Plantinga, to look slightly ridiculous. Taking Kaufman's claim that 'God is a symbol – an imaginative construct',[19] Plantinga effectively kicks sand in Kaufman's face by asking how, if God is a human construct, 'did it manage to create the heavens and the earth … a symbol, an imaginative construct, may have properties: *being a construct*, for example, or *being a symbol* … it certainly won't have such properties as *being omniscient* or *creating the world*'.[20] Although quite amusing, and as far as it goes correct, one gets the sense that this cannot possibly be addressing that which motivates Kaufman, or the many sincere people convinced by Kaufman (the 'symbols create the world' hypothesis). It turns out that the slightly satirical tactics employed are motivated by Plantinga's manifest fury at Kaufman's position, where he describes this as a 'nauseating brew, fit for neither man nor beast', which 'at best' is 'confusing and deception', and more likely to contribute 'vastly … to misunderstanding, dishonesty and hypocrisy'.[21]

Well Plantinga may be overstating the case here. I know what it is like (at the risk of sounding both confessional and patronizing) to be convinced by Kaufman, or rather to find Kaufman powerfully articulating something that one considers true, just because I was once so convinced. And being so convinced has nothing to do with believing that human constructs, absurdly, can create universes, but everything to do with a range of considerations – perhaps not rigorous enough to be considered by Plantinga 'arguments' – that deserve a little more sympathy and attention. Plantinga's discussion in its own terms is brilliant, but it must be said that there is little *understanding* of his opponents, if by that one means a more therapeutic conception of what sort of anxieties drive thinkers to adopt them. It is almost as if, for Plantinga, these full-blown systems of thought dropped quite uninvited and without any provocation from the sky, and simply need to be demolished.

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[17] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.21.

[18] Ibid. The only arguments that Platinga does concede there to be are Kant's *antinomies*, where Kant tries to establish that, as there are equally powerful arguments to support pairs of contradictory assertions about the world, if the world is treated as being a thing-in-itself rather than a thing-for-us, the world must be understood as something that conforms to our knowledge, as transcendentally ideal. Plantinga is correct to say that the antinomies do not work as arguments, but quite wrong to suggest that they are the only, or the most important, considerations likely to convince one of a Kantian position.

[19] Kaufman, *God the Problem*, p.109.

[20] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.37.

[21] Ibid., p.42.

A similarly unsympathetic approach to 'global anti-realism' is provided by Peter Byrne, who constantly talks about the pre-constructed 'noumena', of which the anti-realist is supposed to be so enamoured, as 'cosmic porridge'.[22] It may be reasonable enough to describe *some* anti-realists as being opposed to the view that 'there is some differentiation in the world before we came to experience it'[23] (although this hardly captures any of the more sophisticated versions of anti-realism discussed in this book). But could it possibly be the case, as Byrne repeatedly suggests, that the anti-realist is therefore committed to a notion that, prior to our construction of the world, there is a sort of 'cosmic porridge' (porridge presumably – depending upon your tastes – 'lacking differentiation', 'cosmic' indicating that it is the stuff from which worlds, which include actual porridge, are made).

As Byrne says, 'talk of constructing reality from a cosmic porridge is (a) hard to understand and (b) at odds with common sense'.[24] Indeed, but the imposition of this puzzling metaphor is nothing to do with the anti-realist, and is not the best way to persuade any sort of anti-realist that their position has been described, let alone critiqued. Byrne in fact concludes by endorsing, as he understands it, a 'non-realist' interpretation of theology, although it is clear that by this Byrne means little more than an agnosticism (at best) about theology: 'theology cannot be considered a realist discipline', just because 'it gives no sign of being controlled by real-world influences … It does not add to our stock of reliable beliefs about the world'.[25] This, of course, is not anti-realism in any interesting sense, but a sort of procedural atheism (alongside a metaphysical agnosticism), motivated by broadly verificationist considerations, as discussed in Chapter 2.

If my approach here has any contribution, it is that it tackles anti-realist thinkers more sympathetically and attentively, in a way that might persuade someone who was previously convinced not only that they are wrong, but that the considerations that led them to be wrong are not such that they need to worry about them. All that said, it is time to attend to Kant's motivations for adopting transcendental idealism.

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[22] See, for example, Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp.26ff.

[23] Ibid., p.26.

[24] Ibid., p.32.

[25] Ibid., p.178.

Kant's Reasons for Adopting Transcendental Idealism

We might outline the movement of Kant's thought in the following way:

Cartesian assumption

(1) For something to count as knowledge it must enjoy a high degree of certainty. Anything that could coherently be doubted, or which is 'probable', is not certain enough to be knowledge.

The premise of the argument

(2) We have certain knowledge about physical objective reality (by which is meant the law-governed spatio-temporal world of objects). Although not an instance of logical truths, such knowledge, is established independently of experience. Kant calls this knowledge 'synthetic *a priori* knowledge'.

The task of the argument

(3) Given that we do have synthetic *a priori* knowledge (examples for Kant are mathematics, Euclidean geometry and knowledge of natural laws such as 'every event has a cause'[26]), the 'proper problem of pure reason is contained in the question: how are *a priori* synthetic judgements possible?'(B19).

Humean sceptical assumption

(4) Such judgements (that is, mathematical and geometrical truths, and 'every event has a cause') are not derived from experience; Kant is sufficiently impressed with Hume's scepticism about deriving claims such as 'every event has a cause' from experience to look elsewhere.

Idealist intuition

(5) Further, Kant is convinced that if the objective world is independent of our faculties for knowing about the world, then we could never be confident in claiming certain (infallible) knowledge about this world (synthetic *a priori* judgements). Kant makes this very clear when he writes:

> If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter *a priori*; but if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility. (Bxvii)

Empirical realism and transcendental idealism

(6) Therefore the objective world that we experience cannot be independent of the faculties for knowing about the world; in as much as anything is independent of these faculties, it cannot be known by them at all. The world in

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[26] Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith (London: Macmillan, 1993). See B14–18: '*All mathematical judgements, without exception, are synthetic* … mathematical propositions, strictly so called, are always judgements a priori', and '*natural science contains* a priori *synthetic judgements as principles*'.

as much as it is known is the phenomenal world, and is structured and ordered by the categories of the mind.

The Two-realm Interpretation of Kant's Transcendental Idealism

The first interpretation of Kant offered is that given by P.F. Strawson.[27] The two-realm account can be summarized by four main doctrines.

a There are two sets of objects: phenomena or things-as-they-appear-to-us, and noumena or things-in-themselves.

b Phenomenal objects (things-as-they-appear) are, strictly speaking, 'nothing but a series of my representations', which is to say collections of perceptions. Their existence is dependent on the perceiver. So Kant comments:

> if the subject, or even only the subjective constitution of the senses in general, be removed, the whole constitution and all the relations of objects in space and time, nay space and time themselves, would vanish. (A42/B59)
>
> ... not only are drops of rain mere appearances, but ... even their round shape, nay even the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves, but merely modifications or fundamental forms of our sensible intuition. (A46/B63)

c Knowledge of noumena (things-in-themselves) is impossible:

i things-in-themselves are non-spatial and non-temporal, and none of our categories apply to them,
ii we only have knowledge of a thing in as much as the forms of space and time and the categories of understanding apply to it,
iii from (i) and (ii), we can have no knowledge of things-in-themselves.

d The objective world that we experience is the result of a complex interaction between things-in-themselves and the self-in-itself:

> things as objects of our senses existing outside us are given, but we know nothing of what they may be in themselves, knowing only their appearances, that is, the representations which they cause in us by affecting our senses. (*Prolegomena*, p.289)

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[27] P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966), see Part 4 in particular. This interpretation is also taken up by T.E. Wilkerson, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), especially ch.9. I have drawn heavily on both these works in my account of the two-realm interpretation of Kant.

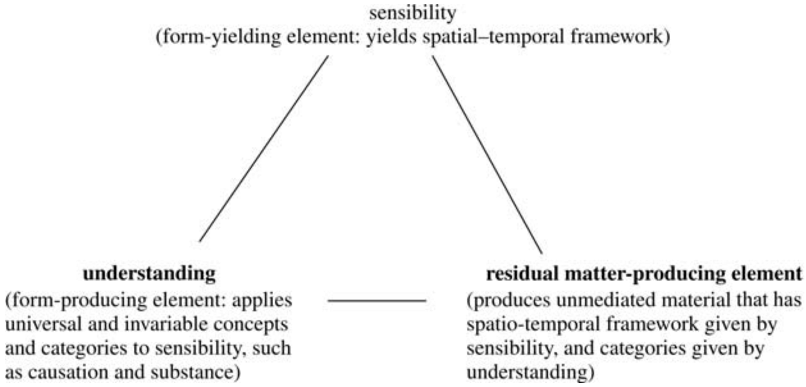
sensibility
(form-yielding element: yields spatial–temporal framework)
understanding
(form-producing element: applies universal and invariable concepts and categories to sensibility, such as causation and substance)
residual matter-producing element
(produces unmediated material that has spatio-temporal framework given by sensibility, and categories given by understanding)

Fig. 6.1 The quasi-causal A-relation in Strawson

Kant gives a complex account of the psychological machinery involved: the passive faculty of sensibility receives intuitions under the forms of space and time (Transcendental Aesthetic B37–B72); the active faculty of understanding organizes the experiences into the objective law-governed world we experience (Analytic of Principles A149–218; B188–B265), and this same faculty of understanding brings diverse experiences into a unified consciousness (Transcendental Deduction B130–B169).

So we have what Strawson[28] calls a three-party A-relation (Fig. 6.1). Although some contribution is made here by the 'residual matter-producing element', it is the form-yielding and form-producing elements together that determine the character of experience in general. We can arrive at *a priori* knowledge of the world in two ways:

> (1) the form-yielding elements can be activated, independently of the matter-producing elements (in 'constructions in pure intuition'), to yield, e.g. geometrical knowledge of space and of bodies in space; (2) the implications of the understanding's requirement of the conceptualizability-in-general of the temporal data of experience can be brought out by critical reflection (as in the Analytic).[29]

According to the Kant of the two-realm account, it is only *because* categories such as causation are imposed on experience by the conceptual activity of the mind that we can have anything like objective certainty about their empirical reality. It is only because the categories of the understanding are constitutive that we enjoy the certainty of 'maker's knowledge'. So when Kant asks how we can have synthetic *a priori* knowledge that the geometry of physical space is Euclidean (as he mistakenly assumes we can), the answer is that such certain knowledge is possible because *we ourselves*, in our pre-experiential conceptual activity, create physical space with all its properties. The faculty of spatial representation exercised in the construction of figures in pure intuition is the very same faculty as that which is exercised in the construction of empirical space. Kant gives an uncharacteristically perspicuous summary of all this : 'we can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them' (Bxviii).

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[28] P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966), pp.238–9.

[29] Ibid., p.239.

It is not important for my purposes to evaluate this interpretation for its faithfulness to Kant's intentions. It is enough that it is an influential interpretation of Kant, which can be evaluated as a position in its own right. I will offer a two-stage criticism of transcendental idealism as interpreted above.

On the present interpretation the broad movement of Kant's argument is as follows: (1) we have experience of an objective law-governed spatial-temporal world, therefore (2) reality-as-we-experience-it must reflect the cognitive structure of the mind *rather than* the structure of reality in itself. Reality-as-it-is-in-itself (the noumenal realm) is not knowable, but is nevertheless ontologically real and independent of us.

The claim being made here, in broad terms, is something like the following: (1) every perception involves concepts (is dependent upon concepts), therefore (2) we only know the world as it is constructed by these concepts *rather than* the world-as-it-is-in-itself. The puzzling feature of (2) is the phrase '*rather than*'; we have no compelling reason not to invoke the neglected alternative that (2′) reality-as-we-experience-it is mediated through the cognitive structure of the mind, *which tells us what the structure of reality itself is*. We experience reality in the way we do because that is the way reality is, and our cognitive faculties are good at perceiving and understanding reality.

Kant's reason for neglecting this alternative can be traced to his attempt to underpin knowledge in the face of Humean scepticism.[30] Kant is convinced

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[30] So in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. G. Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Kant comments that 'no event has occurred that could have been more decisive with respect to the fate of this science (metaphysics) than the attack made upon it by *David Hume*' (p.7). Kant goes on to 'freely admit that the remembrance of *David Hume* was the very thing that many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave a completely different direction to my researches in the field of speculative philosophy' (p.10).

That Kant was concerned to rebut Humean scepticism is disputed by R. Walker, who comments that 'there is no need, I think, to postulate any significant influence of [Berkeley and Hume] upon Kant's views about metaphysics', in *Kant: the Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.6. Walker admits that 'in the *Prolegomena* he ascribed to Hume his awakening from dogmatism, but this may be no more than a rhetorical device in a book written to that knowledge can only be safe-guarded if we limit its scope to the world as-it-appears-to-us (as we construct the world).[31] If Kant allowed that the world-in-itself has these same properties (the neglected alternative), he fears this would allow the Humean sceptic to re-instate his disabling wedge between justification and belief about the properties of the objective world.

The Kantian, as opposed to Kant, *who does not have this same concern for certain knowledge in the face of Humean scepticism*, needs to provide a powerful argument for (2), considering that (2′) is so plausible and that the noumenal implications of (2) are so unpalatable. This is quite apart from the problem that faces Kant here as to (i) why 'knowledge' must meet such stringent Cartesian standards, and (ii) the extent to which Kant's response is a capitulation to the sceptic's demands (concerning the objectivity of the world we experience) rather than a countering response.

The two-realm account has some unpalatable implications. It seems to suggest that there are two types of objects (noumenal and phenomenal) and a sort of mysterious interaction between them. Quite apart from the intuitive strangeness of this notion, it is on Kant's own account impossible. Kant holds that we can only have knowledge of the world in as much as it is spatial and temporal (so capable of yielding an intuition) and organized by the categories of the understanding (so capable of falling under a concept). If the noumenal is that which is non-spatial and non-temporal, and to which none of our categories can apply, then certain implications seem to follow: first, we cannot enjoy any knowledge of the noumenal realm; second, in that all of our concepts are entirely the product of the categories of the human understanding being applied to a spatial and temporal manifold, it is hard to see how we could even coherently say anything at all about the noumenal realm.

Kant seems to be aware of the impossibility of speaking about, or using the notion of, noumena in any positive way, when he writes:

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present the *Critique* as an answer to Hume' (p.6). One can only regret that Kant did not more often consider the rhetorical effect of his work. Not much turns on this controversy for my purposes. Walker claims that Kant's concern was to answer a question set by his contemporary Crassius: 'how can the a priori concept of cause be guaranteed to apply to the objects of experience?' (p.6). Clearly an answer to this question, to be adequate, *would also have to answer* the Humean sceptical challenge – as Kant himself observes – even if psychologically/biographically speaking Hume did not have the stimulating effect that Kant rhetorically claims.

[31] See *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. G. Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.44 (sec.14): '*Nature* is the *existence* of things, insofar as that existence is determined according to natural laws. If nature meant the existence of things *in themselves*, we would never be able to cognize it, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*'.

> The concept of a noumenon is thus a merely *limiting concept*, the function of which is to curb the pretensions of sensibility; and it is therefore only of negative employment. At the same time it is no arbitrary invention; it is bound up with the limitation of sensibility, though it cannot affirm anything positive beyond the field of sensibility. (A255/B311)
>
> The division of objects into phenomena and noumena, and the world into a world of the senses and a world of the understanding, is therefore quite inadmissible in the positive sense. (A255/B311)

This is Kant when he is behaving himself with respect to his own rules. As we have seen Kant does (on the two-realm account) use the positive notion of noumenal objects. So in Strawson's A-relation, we (our noumenal selves) are supposed to be 'affected' somehow by the noumenal realm. The noumenal realm is by definition non-spatial and non-temporal, the whole of the spatial–temporal framework being constituted by the activity of the human mind. But it is only with reference to a spatial–temporal framework that one can talk about a causal notion such as 'affection'.

We reach contradiction and unintelligibility when we try to spell out how the noumenal realm interacts with 'our' cognitive faculties.[32] Space and time are nothing but the forms of our sensibility. A consequence of this is that our awareness of all things in space and time, including ourselves, is awareness of things only as they appear and not as they really are. We are aware of ourselves 'in a temporal guise and hence only as we appear to ourselves and not as we are in ourselves'.[33]

We can go on to ask, what sort of truth is it about ourselves that we appear to ourselves in a temporal guise? Either it is the case that we (the noumenal we) really so appear to ourselves, or it is the case that we only appear to ourselves so as to appear to ourselves (that is, it is not really the 'noumenal we' appearing, only the 'noumenal we' appearing to appear). If we are to avoid the infinite regress of illusion involved in the latter option, we must opt for the opinion that we really do so appear to ourselves. If it is the case that we *really do appear* to ourselves, then we must be talking about a temporal fact, a fact that happens in time. This would immediately invalidate our use of the noumenal 'we', as all that occurs in time belongs on the side of appearances (phenomena not noumena). We are left with the contradictory situation where it is not a fact about what happens in time that we really appear to ourselves in a temporal guise: 'I really do appear to myself *temporally*; but I do not really *temporally* appear to myself.' We find that adopting a two-object imposition interpretation of transcendental idealism leads us to traverse the bounds of intelligibility when it comes to giving any sense to the notion of the self-in-itself.

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[32] P.F. Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966), pp.38–9.

[33] Ibid.

As a short-hand I will refer to the claim against Kant that he both rules out positive talk about the noumenal (an extra-layer of ontology), and relies on it elsewhere (to describe how we come to experience the objective world[34]), the '*fingers-in-the-jam-pot objection*'.[35] A second problem, raised by T.E. Wilkerson,[36] with a two-object imposition account, is that the phenomenalist prong of Kant's idealism is in conflict with (what Wilkerson considers) the main Analytical thesis of the First Critique. The central argument of the Analytic, according to Wilkerson, is against scepticism with regard to the senses. Briefly stated, this argument aimed to show that for cognitive experience to be possible, we must be able to distinguish the inner from the outer, which is only possible if we have a sense of a rule-governed objective world. Kant's phenomenalism undoes any of the good work that he has achieved, as we are then compelled to reduce objects to collections of private perceptions, which could ultimately lead to the solipsism that Kant is trying to avoid in the Transcendental Deduction.

I will refer to this claim against Kant as the 'capitulation-to-scepticism objection'. This objection claims that Kant's response, which is supposed to answer the demands of the sceptic (for a certain standard of knowledge about the objective world), achieves the required standard only by reducing the ontological content of the 'objective world' to something the sceptic would characterize as subjective (and so not knowledge about the objective world).

In summary, we have three principle objections to the two-realm account: the neglected-alternative objection; the fingers-in-the-jam-pot objection and the capitulation-to-scepticism objection. Before turning to our post-Kantian theologians to see the extent that they must share the troubles which burden Kant on this interpretation we should look at a very different interpretation of Kant.

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[34] A more important use of the noumenal realm for Kant (although not immediately concerning as here) is the role it plays in his moral philosophy. The indispensable role of the noumenal realm is shown when Kant discusses the dependence of the notion of freedom on the reality of the intelligible/noumenal realm: 'that unconditioned causality and the capacity for it, freedom, and with it a being (I myself) that belongs to the sensible world but at the same time to the intelligible world, is not merely *thought* indeterminately and problematically (speculative reason could already find this feasible) but is … *cognized* assertorically; and thus the reality of the intelligible world is given to us' (*Critique of Practical Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.88. The reference in the standard German collection of Kant's works – *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften* (ed.) Koeniglich Preussichen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin and Leipzig: de Gruyter, 1922) – is 5: 105.

[35] W. Alston uses this phrase to describe the position of theologians who 'acknowledge an independent but ineffable reality (Tillich, Hick, early Kaufman) … (who) constantly, in spite of themselves, fall back into purporting to speak non-symbolically or non-mythically about that which, according to the official position, can only be spoken of symbolically or mythically': 'Realism and the Christian Faith', *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 38(3), 1995.

[36] T.E. Wilkerson, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), p.195.

The One-realm Interpretation of Kant's Transcendental Idealism

The imposition account of transcendental idealism is unattractive. We have a phenomenalistic account of what is known by the mind with the postulation of an additional set of entities, the hypostasized noumenal realm. On this interpretation Kant is something of an inconsistent Berkeleian: having limited our knowledge to appearances/'mere representations' (like Berkeley) he goes on inconsistently to postulate an inaccessible realm of things-in-themselves.

A rival interpretation of Kant, presented by H.E. Allison,[37] takes seriously Kant's own insistence that his position was not that of the 'good Berkeley', and focuses on two related distinctions: the reality/ideality distinction and the empirical/transcendent distinction. First of all the distinction between reality and ideality: 'ideality' involves mind dependence (*in uns*), being in the mind. If X is ideal it is in some sense mind-dependent; 'reality' involves independence of mind (*ausser uns*), being external to mind.

In the Transcendental Analytic and the Transcendental Deduction Kant distinguishes between the empirical and transcendental senses of ideality and reality: 'empirical ideality' is that which is the private data of the individual mind, the mental content of minds, that which is 'subjective'. An example of the empirically ideal would be Locke's 'secondary properties' such as colour, heat and taste. 'Empirical reality' is that which is inter-subjectively accessible, the spatio-temporal ordered realm of objects of human experience, that which is 'objective'.

With these distinctions we are able to appreciate the force behind Kant's claim that he is an empirical realist. Experience includes an encounter with 'empirically real' objects, by which is meant an intersubjectively accessible, spatio-temporally ordered realm of objects of human experience. The mistake of those who interpret Kant on the imposition model is to suppose that he is an empirical idealist about the spatio-temporal world of objects (identifying the world-as-it-appears-to-us with a world of 'mere representations').

The level at which Kant wishes to be an idealist is the transcendental. The distinctions between reality and ideality on the transcendental level look as follows. Transcendental ideality concerns the universal, necessary, *a priori* conditions of human experience and knowledge. So in the Transcendental

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[37] H.E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

Analytic the transcendental ideality of space and time are asserted in as much as they function as *a priori* conditions of human sensibility. That which is transcendentally ideal is the subjective conditions in terms of which alone the human mind is capable of receiving the data for thought or experience.

Transcendental reality is that which can be characterized and referred to independently of any appeal to these same sensible conditions. Transcendentally speaking, 'appearances' are spatio-temporal phenomenal entities: things in so far as they are viewed as subject to human sensibility. 'Things-in-themselves', on the other hand, are things in so far as they are independent of these conditions.

Kant can be seen to emphasize the importance of the distinction between empirical and transcendental reality/ideality in 'On the Progress of Metaphysics', where he writes:

> Furthermore it is to be noted that appearance, taken in the transcendental sense, wherein it is said of things that they are appearances (phenomena), means something completely different than when I say, this thing appears to me in some manner or other, which should designate appearance in the physical sense, and which can be called semblance and illusion. For although these objects of the senses are mere appearance, since I can only compare them with other sensible objects ... by the language of experience they are nevertheless thought as things in themselves. Thus, if it is said of such a thing that it has the look of an arch, in this context the seeming refers to the subjective aspect of the representation of a thing, which can be a cause for it to be falsely taken in a judgement as objective. And, therefore, the proposition that all sensible representations only yield knowledge of appearances is not at all to be equated with the claim that they contain only an illusion of objects, as the idealist will have it.[38]

On this reading of Kant, it is only at the empirical level that being an 'appearance' and a 'thing-in-itself' designates two distinct modes of being: the mental (as with secondary properties, for instance), and the non-mental (as with primary qualities). At the transcendental level appearances and things-in-themselves concern the same objects considered in two distinct ways, either in relation to the subjective conditions of human experience and knowledge or independently of these same conditions. The relevant notion of 'condition' here is epistemic: an epistemic condition is one that is necessary for the representation of an object or an objective state of affairs. This is to distance Kant from any claims about the ontological possibility of the being of things.

We can now summarize the argument suggested by the one-realm account: (1) human knowledge has certain epistemic conditions that must be satisfied if we are to be able to experience certain objective states of affairs; (2) these epistemic conditions are not transcendentally real. By this it is meant that they are features of the possibilities of knowing things, *rather than* conditions of the possibility of the things themselves; (3) from 1 and 2, 'whatever is necessary for the representation or experience of something as an object ... must reflect the cognitive structure of the mind (its manner of representing) rather than the nature of the object as it is in itself'.[39]

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[38] Kant, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, 20: 269, quoted and translated by H.E. Allison (1982). See also the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A45–46/B62–63, and *Prolegomena*, sec.13, remark II, *Ak*., IV, 289–90.

The second interpretation of Kant removes the burden of an hypostasized second realm of objects; consequently, it evades many of the difficulties of the two-realm interpretation. Even so, the argument on the second interpretation does not escape what we could label 'the neglected-alternative objection':

> Reality-as-we-experience-it is mediated through the cognitive structure of the mind, which although contributing to the nature of our experience *also* tells us what the structure of reality itself is. We experience reality in the way we do because that is the way reality is (in some respects), and our cognitive faculties are good at perceiving and understanding reality (in those respects).

If anything the problem of the neglected alternative is even more intense for the second interpretation in that we have no prohibition on conceiving, experiencing or knowing anything about a non-spatial and non-temporal noumenal realm. We just have an assertion that 'whatever is necessary for the representation or experience of something as an object ... must reflect the cognitive structure of the mind (its manner of representing) *rather than* the nature of the object as it is in itself'[40] (italics mine). Given that there is no longer an autonomous noumenal real, the exclusive nature of 'rather than' appears without motive, and certainly without justification.

We might also note that the virtue of Allison's interpretation is supposed to be that ontologically speaking we only have one world. The transcendental/empirical distinction applies only to the conditions by which humans know about this world. So the transcendentally real world is the *same as* the empirically real world; it is just the *same* world conceived independently of any of the conditions of human knowledge. Now if it is correct that this renders the transcendentally real world non-spatial and non-temporal (these being features of the human conditions for knowing about the world *rather than* the world as it is independently of these conditions), then there arises an initial problem of the identity of the 'same' objects in both worlds. Allison must be committed to the possibility of identifying and re-identifying objects without a spatial and temporal framework.

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[39] H.E. Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p.27.

[40] Ibid.

On top of this Allison also needs to make the case that there can be an identity between non-spatial–temporal objects and spatial–temporal objects. If no such account of identity can be given, then the problem emerges of how to make sense of the claim that the world independent from the conditions for human knowledge is the *same as* the world as it is dependent on the conditions for human experience, *if* the 'independent world' is, in principle, non-spatial and non-temporal. Without criteria for identifying spatial–temporal objects with non-spatial–temporal objects it is unclear what is being claimed when we make identity claims between 'objects' in the world perceived independently of the spatial–temporal framework (non-spatial and non-temporal objects) and 'objects' in the world as we experience it (spatial and temporal objects).

Of course, nothing I have said is a justification of the claim that we *cannot* identify non-spatial–temporal objects, nor that there cannot be identity between spatial–temporal and non-spatial-and-non-temporal objects. But Allison does not seem to recognize the challenge or the issue at all. Remember that a positive point of Allison's interpretation is that he only needs to talk about one world, one set of objects (there is no need for an hypostasized realm of noumenal objects). But this elegance is not properly earnt until Allison fills in the account of identity upon which he can attribute identity predicates such as 'same' when talking of objects^1 (independent of the conditions of human knowledge) and objects^2 (dependent for their identity on the conditions of human knowledge), when objects^1 *qua* being objects^1 are non-spatial and non-temporal.

It is possible to evade the need to respond to the identity challenge by pointing out that objects^1 need not be non-spatial and non-temporal; that although space and time are epistemic conditions for human knowledge about the world, *they are also features of the world as it is independently of the epistemic conditions for human knowledge about the world.* But notice that this resolution is precisely the neglected alternative suggested above, and as such constitutes a dispensing of the thesis of transcendental idealism (on the second interpretation): whatever is necessary for the representation or experience of something as an object … must reflect the cognitive structure of the mind (its manner of representing) *rather than* the nature of the object as it is in itself.

The more plausible the one-realm account is made, the less it has any philosophical bite whatsoever. If the 'noumenal' realm has only an epistemological 'reality' (it is just the world independently of how we experience the world) then it is unwarranted to make the extrapolation that our ways of knowing the world distort or veil the 'real' world. It is fine to draw attention, as Paul Janz does, to the way in which the noumena 'are … posited by reason for the epistemologically *regulative* purpose of holding reason "fully accountable for its own proceedings" ';[41] it is also fine to say that we experience the world as it appears to us *rather than* the world as it really is, as long as we do not load the word 'rather' with more than it can bear. The implication that is read into the term 'rather', if the one-realm account is in any way to surprise us, is that the world does not have the properties that we encounter. Instead we must bring *a priori* these properties to the world. Paul Guyer draws attention to this implication in Kant, where Kant claims that the application of a concept to a manifold of representations can only be explained in *a priori* terms:

> We find, however, that our thought of the relation of all cognition to its object brings along with it something of a necessity, since it is regarded as that which is opposed to our cognitions being determined at will or arbitrarily rather than *a priori* in certain ways, since, insofar as they are to be related to an object they must also necessarily agree with each other in relation to it, i.e. have that unity which constitutes the concept of an object. (A 104–5)

Guyer quite correctly suggests that the 'necessity that Kant describes could just be the *conditional* necessity that *if* a group of representations are to represent, say, a chair, then there had better be among them representations of a seat, back, and legs, or, to use his own example, that *if* a group of representations is to represent a body then there had better be among them representations of extension, shape, and impenatrability'.[42] So although we might say, if we wish, that we experience the world as it is for us *rather* than the world as it is in itself, we can see that the way in which we do experience the world is due to features of the world-in-itself, which it is safe to ascribe to that world.

Plantinga puts the point more robustly, when commenting on the one-realm interpretation, that *if* this interpretation is correct, it is 'a bit difficult to reconcile it with Kant's own view that his thought constituted a *revolution* – his famous second Copernican revolution'. Plantinga points out that most philosophers would agree that there 'is or can be a difference between the world (or any less impressive object) as it is in itself and the world as it appears to us; this is to admit no more than that we can be *mistaken* about the world or things in the world'.[43] Some, such as Aristotle and Aquinas, would even concede that 'the world might have many properties of which we have no conception, so that our way of thinking about the world, the properties we ascribe to it, are not necessarily all and only the properties it has. For Aquinas or any other theist, this would be close to a truism: God, obviously enough, has many properties we don't know about, and presumably many of which we could not so much as form a conception'.[44]

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[41] Paul Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[42] Paul Guyer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.139.

[43] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.13.

As Merold Westphal puts it, the one-realm account, on a plausible reading, seems to amount to little more than 'the tautology that in the absence of human cognition the world as apprehended by human minds would disappear',[45] with no further implications. Plantinga piles in here, observing that 'we could add that in the absence of bovine cognition, the world as apprehended by bovine minds would disappear'.[46]

Summary

For ease and clarity of reference in future chapters I will summarize and label the positions, and problems of the positions discussed so far. The first possible interpretation of Kant was the *two-realm account*: ontologically speaking there are two realms, the noumenal realm (reality as it is in itself) and the phenomenal realm (reality for us). We can know nothing about the noumenal realm: it is a non-spatial and non-temporal realm where our concepts do not apply. We can have certain knowledge of the phenomenal realm precisely and only because the same faculties of our minds that produce (make up/constitute) the spatial–temporal categorical framework in which we think also produce (make up/constitute) the 'objective' physical world (in an interaction between our noumenal selves and the noumenal world).

Briefly the problems with this position were as follows, first of all, *the fingers-in-the-jam-pot-objection*: the position has an irresolvable tension between the maxim that the noumenal is completely unknowable and inconceivable, and the claim that the noumenal plays some sort of causal role, interacting with our noumenal selves and being somehow involved in the production of the objective world. The second problem was *the capitulation-to-scepticism objection*: although the mind-saturated view of reality was supposed to be successful against scepticism, we find that the 'objective world' is reduced in each individual case to a private collection of 'appearances' or 'mere representations'.

The second interpretation of Kant we considered was 'one realm with transcendentally ideal epistemic conditions', or in short the 'one-realm account': human knowledge has certain epistemic conditions that must be satisfied if we are to be able to experience certain objective states of affairs. These epistemic conditions are not transcendentally real, in that they are features of the possibilities of knowing things, rather than conditions of the possibility of the things themselves. There are not two worlds with two sorts of object (noumenal and phenomenal), but one world, which we have to experience and know about under the necessary and universal epistemic conditions that apply to our experience and knowledge. The 'transcendentally real' realm is just a formal, limiting concept for the world independent of these epistemic conditions (a conception of course that we cannot begin to formulate).

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Merold Westphal, 'In Defense of the Thing in Itself', *Kant-Studien*, 59(1), 1968, 170.

[46] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p.9.

Against this position I raised the 'identity-challenge', which was not a refutation, but a claim that the jury must remain out until Allison, or other Kantians, can provide an appropriate account of identity: what are the criteria for identity when (i) talking about a non-spatial and non-temporal object and (ii) how can one talk about the 'same object' seen from both noumenal and phenomenal perspectives, when the noumenal perspective is by definition non-spatial and non-temporal, whilst phenomenal identity claims depend upon a spatial and temporal framework?

Against both positions I raised the 'neglected-alternative objection': it is plausible to suppose that our epistemic conditions (spatio-temporal framework, with a causally law-like objective world) are as they are because they reflect (some of) the features of the world-as-it-is-in-itself. We do not produce the world, but are good at detecting how the world is (in some respects).

Armed with these two exhaustive interpretations of Kant (any Kantian position must fit, in a broad sense, into one of the two alternative accounts, or into both camps in different respects), we can now usefully turn our attention to the work done by Kantian assumptions, arguments and considerations in the thought of Hick and Kaufman, both of whom in different ways use Kantian-style thought to deny D (the claim that we can in principle have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition). I turn first of all to the work of John Hick.

CHAPTER 7

Hick and the Noumenal Jam-Pot

Hick's thought is an interesting hybrid between the two positions discussed in the last chapter.[1] On the one hand God is the ultimate noumenal reality (definitely enjoying actuality in the universe): is healthily other, independent of and interactive with the phenomenal realm. As far as God goes, then, we have a two-realm position.

> The presence of the Real consists in the availability, from a transcendent source, of information that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience. And, as in the case of our awareness of the physical world, the environing divine reality is brought to consciousness in terms of certain basic concepts of categories. These are, first the concept of God, or of the real as personal, which presides over the various theistic forms of religious experience; and second, the concept of the Absolute, or of the Real as non-personal, which presides over its various non-theistic forms.[2]

When concerned with God, the noumenal Real is to be understood as the 'ground' of our concrete religious experiences, which is to say their transcendent source (again, a distinct realm of Being):

> the noumenal Real is such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena. On such a basis we cannot, as we have seen, say that the Real *an sich* has the characteristics displayed by its manifestations, such as (in the case of the heavenly Father) love and justice or (in the case of Brahman) consciousness and bliss. *But it is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics ... As the noumenal ground of all these and other modes of experience, and yet transcending all of them, the Real is so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the various partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes.* (italics mine)[3]

Talk of 'ground' here seems to have quasi-causal connotations, implying an interaction between a transcendent realm (which is 'rich in content') and the phenomenal realm. In the following passage the noumenal Real is referred to explicitly as a distinct reality to which we relate:

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[1] Substantial parts of this chapter (pp.124–134) have been published in an article, 'Why John Hick cannot, and should not, stay out of the jam pot', *Religious Studies*, 36, 2000, 25–33. Hick makes a response to some of my objections in the same issue in his article 'Ineffability', pp.35–46, see esp. pp.43–5; this article appears as c.3 in Hick's Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp.76–89. I will rebut Hick's objections in the text and footnotes.

[2] J. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp.244–5.

[3] Ibid., pp.246–7.

> For we exist inescapably in relation to the Real, and in all that we do and undergo we are inevitably having to do with it in and through our neighbours and our world … true religious myths are accordingly those that evoke in us attitudes and modes of behaviour which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real.[4]

The noumenal Real in the following passage seems a long way from the 'one-world-position' where the noumenal real is just the objective phenomenal world conceived in abstraction from the conditions of human knowledge. Again we seem to have an ontologically hypostasized and distinct order of reality:

> All we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of (religious experience) is that it is the reality whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the human world of our (religious) experience.[5]

When Hick talks in this way of the noumenal divine reality 'grounding' our religious experience, transcending but interacting with our consciousness, we have something closely analogous to Strawson's quasi-causal 'A-relation'[6] between sensibility, understanding, and a 'matter-producing element'. In Figure 7.1 I set the Strawson–Kant model alongside the Hick model. I mark in bold the differences between the two models. These differences come down to the fact that the Strawson–Kant model is intended to be an account of how the objective world-view of empirical perception comes to be, whilst the scope of the Hick model is restricted to being an account of how the religious world-view of phenomenal experience comes to be.

Hick's view is a hybrid in that the *scope* of this independent interactive realm seems to be narrowed to God alone. For other types of reality (the physical world) we are much closer to the one-realm account. So Hick sounds at times, especially when talking about the 'world' rather than 'God', as if he does not intend two separate ontological realms, but one realm that we can regard either empirically (as it appears to us with our epistemic faculties) or transcendentally (as it is independently of any of the conditions that make possible the functioning of our epistemic faculties):

> so Kant distinguished between noumenon and phenomenon, or between a *Ding an sich* and that thing as it appears to human consciousness. As he

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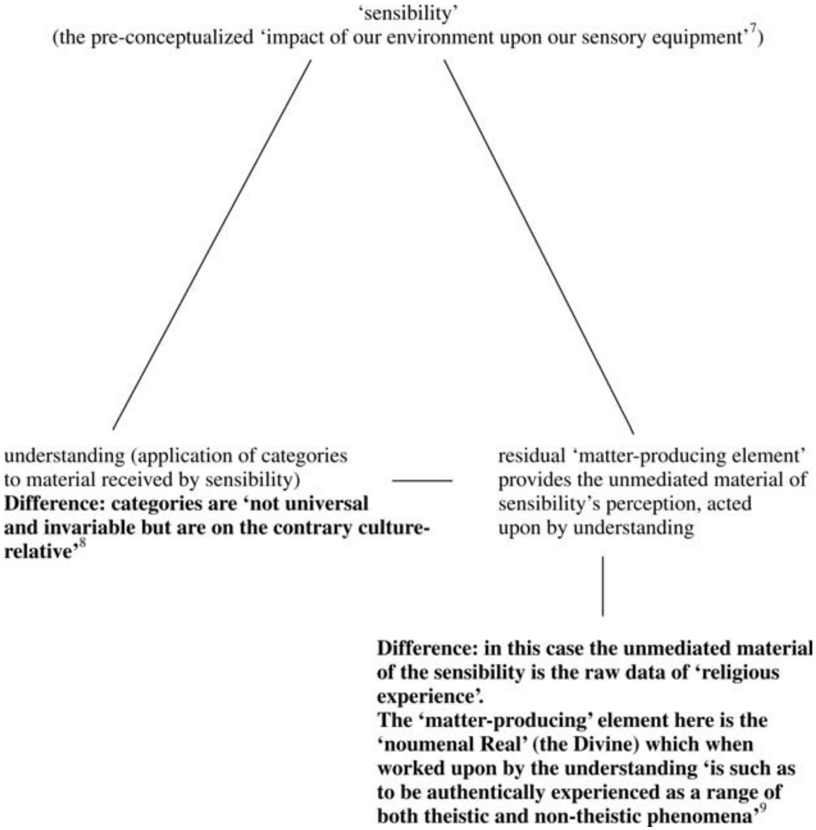
[4] Ibid., p.248.
[5] Ibid., p.243.
[6] Ibid., p.201.



'sensibility'
(the pre-conceptualized 'impact of our environment upon our sensory equipment'[7])

understanding (application of categories to material received by sensibility)
Difference: categories are 'not universal and invariable but are on the contrary culture-relative'[8]

residual 'matter-producing element' provides the unmediated material of sensibility's perception, acted upon by understanding

Difference: in this case the unmediated material of the sensibility is the raw data of 'religious experience'.
The 'matter-producing' element here is the 'noumenal Real' (the Divine) which when worked upon by the understanding 'is such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena'[9]

Fig. 7.1 The quasi-causal 'A* relation' in Hick

> explains, he is not here using the term 'noumenon' in the positive sense of that which is knowable by some faculty of non-sensible intuition (for we have no such faculty), but in the negative sense of 'a thing in so far as it is not an object of our sensible intuition' (B307). In this strand of Kant's thought – not the only strand, but the one which I am seeking to press into service in the epistemology of religion – *the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness*. (italics mine)[10]

The phrase featuring the words 'same world' is particularly suggestive of the one-realm account which is at pains to stress that there is no hypostasizing of an ontologically independent realm, but just one realm of objects to be considered either empirically (as they fit the epistemic conditions of human knowledge) or transcendentally (in so far as they are independent of these same conditions).

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[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., p.244.
[9] Ibid., p.247.
[10] Ibid., p.241.

That Hick is attracted to the one-realm account is further suggested by a passage in which he outlines what he considers to be of importance in Kant's thought. He first of all makes the observation that 'the first *Critique* contains several different strands of thought whose mutual consistency can be questioned and whose relative importance has been variously estimated'.[11] Plausibly this could be taken to include one-realm and two-realm strands of transcendental idealism. Hick then restricts his Kantian allegiances to 'the basic Kantian insight', which is 'Kant's broad theme … (of) … recognising the mind's own positive contribution to the character of its perceived environment'.[12] That this 'broad theme' has nothing to do with the rather elaborate ontology and counter-intuitive implications of the two-realm account is further suggested by the way that Hick considers the 'basic insight': '(to have been) massively confirmed as an empirical thesis by modern work in cognitive and social psychology and in the sociology of knowledge'.[13]

It would certainly be untrue to say that the modern social and cognitive sciences in general accept and confirm two-realm transcendental idealism; the arcane ontological hypostasizing of a transcendent realm cannot be what Hick has in mind here as 'the consolidated development of contemporary understanding',[14] which he intends to apply to 'epistemology of religion'.[15]

Analysis and Evaluation

Hick's approach is a hybrid of two Kantian-type positions: one-realm transcendental idealism as far as his understanding of everything-that-is-not-God goes; two-realm transcendental idealism as far as his understanding of God is concerned. The only Kantian arguments that Hick endorses are very vague ones concerning the extent to which the mind contributes to the character of perception. This leads me to be anxious about the strength of Hick's hybrid. Hick has considerations to support *at most* a one-realm transcendental idealism. In order to sustain the pivotal and realist-but-ineffable role that he desires for God, Hick *must* endorse a two-world transcendental idealism (at least with respect to the divine), *for which he has no arguments, or*

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[11] Ibid., p.240.

[12] Ibid..

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

even relevant considerations in favour of. If Hick sticks to what he is epistemologically entitled to, there can be no noumenal reality (rich in content, grounding our religious experiences, revealing aspects of itself in different cultures).

I commented above that Hick has considerations to support '*at most* a one-realm transcendental idealism'. I consider that Hick in fact does not even produce anything which looks like an argument for one-realm transcendental idealism.

Hick and the World

We saw that the main objections against the one-world position were the identity objection and the neglected alternative objection. As regards the former, how can one talk about the 'same object' seen from a noumenal and phenomenal perspective, when the noumenal perspective is by definition non-spatial and non-temporal, and phenomenal identity claims depend upon a spatial and temporal framework?

As regards the latter, it is plausible to suppose that our epistemic conditions (a spatio-temporal framework, with a causally law-like objective world) are as they are precisely because they reflect (some of) the features of the world-as-it-is-in-itself. We do not produce the world, but are good at detecting how the world is (in some respects).

It is not clear that Hick, when using the one-realm position to talk about everything-that-is-not-God, can be accused of falling to the identity objection. He nowhere claims, as Kant does (on the interpretation offered by Allison), that the epistemic conditions of human knowledge reflect the mind *rather than the world*. Hick seems to endorse a much weaker insight into the role that the mind plays in interpreting experience. He claims that he does not need to go any further than Thomas Aquinas to find his 'basic principle':

> The basic principle that I am adapting from Kant's philosophy had in fact already been succinctly stated long before by St Thomas Aquinas, although without any thought of the kind of application being proposed here, when he wrote that 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower'. (S.T. II/II, Q.1, art. 2.)[16]

That Hick has in mind a really rather uncontroversial thesis about the role of the mind is confirmed in the following comments:

> the distinction between things as they are in themselves and those things as humanly perceived ... arises out of elementary reflection upon our experience. We quickly realise that the same thing appears in either slightly or considerably different ways to different people owing both to their

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[16] Ibid., pp.240–41.

> varying spatial locations in relation to it and to differences in their sensory and mental equipment and interpretive habits.[17]

Hick is also interested, in a way that Aquinas was not, in the role that symbolic and cultural frameworks and expectations play in organizing the world into a world-view (in giving meaning to our experience). So Hick identifies the 'main difference' between his views and Kant's as being that

> the categories of religious experience are not universal and invariable but are on the contrary culture-relative ... when they are employed they tend to change and develop through time as different historical influences affect the development of human consciousness.[18]

In that Hick does not claim that the world *an sich* must be non-spatial and non-temporal, and so that it cannot reflect any of the categories of human cognition, he does not seem to be even a one-world transcendental idealist. It is quite compatible with Hick's general comments about the 'role of the mind' in making sense of our environment to claim that what the mind 'constructs' actually reflects the nature of the world. Hick puts the point himself when he says that he does not need to go to Kant, but only to Thomas Aquinas (or almost any philosopher), to get agreement on the claim that the mind plays a vital role in our conceiving and experiencing the world.

In Hick's response[19] to some objections I make to his position in an article,[20] he invokes an argument along the lines outlined above, drawing on fairly uncontroversial 'contributions' that our minds make to our experience of reality. So Hick asks, 'is it an intrinsic attribute of a mountain that it looks smaller to an observer the more distant the observer is from it, or is it not rather an attribute of we observers that objects look smaller to us the further we are from them?'. But the obvious point that the appearance of reality alters according to our perspective does not even come close to one-realm transcendental idealism.

We need to disambiguate the term 'looks' in the quote from Hick. Phrases such as 'looks', 'seems' and 'appears' are ambiguous between what we might call epistemic and non-epistemic uses.[21] When we use the phrase

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[17] Ibid., p.242.

[18] Ibid., p.244.

[19] J. Hick, 'Ineffability', in *Religious Studies*, 36, 2000, 44.

[20] C. Insole, 'Why John Hick cannot, and should not, stay out of the jam pot', *Religious Studies*, 36, 2000, 25–33. J. Hick p.44.

[21] I have adapted for my own purposes a distinction drawn by R. Chisholm in *Perceiving* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1957), ch.4, between epistemic, comparative and non-comparative use of appearance language. My 'non-epistemic' category corresponds to Chisholm's 'comparative' use. I make no use of Chisholm's third 'non-comparative' category.

'x looks to be small' in an epistemic sense it can be taken as implying that x believes that x *is* small, that the observer is making a claim to have adequate evidence concerning the size of x. When 'x *looks* small' is used non-epistemically, there is a more limited intention, just to indicate that in the observer's visual field x looks the way in which small things tend to look under normal conditions, *without there being any implied claim to the effect that x is actually small.*

We are perfectly competent at using appearance language both epistemically and non-epistemically. So we can say that 'the mountain looks small' (non-epistemically) meaning that it occupies a small area in our visual field; but this would not contradict the 'mountain looks enormous' when presented with the same visual field, because in this latter case we are using 'looks' epistemically. Although non-epistemically speaking the mountain 'looks' to be one inch high (on a 1:1 scale photo of our visual field this is how it would show up), it also 'looks' (epistemically) huge, just because we know that the only explanation for its one-inch non-epistemic 'appearance' in our visual field, is that it is actually huge (otherwise how could it show up given that we are hundreds of miles away?).

So the answer to Hick's question above is that 'looks small' is not an intrinsic property of the mountain *in this case*, for no more substantial a reason than that 'looks' here is being used in a non-epistemic sense. On the other hand, there are plenty of things we could say about the mountain that would constitute substantial claims about the intrinsic properties of the mountain and the wider environment. Even in Hick's own question there is buried an epistemic use of appearance language, in that the mountain might be said to 'look distant'. Here the mountain looks distant from us because it *is* distant.

The non-epistemic use of appearance language is closely inter woven with, and to be explained in terms of, epistemic-appearance language. The mountain looks small (non-epistemically) to us *because* it is further away (it 'appears' distant in an epistemic sense), and its looking the size (non-epistemically) it does as compared with other mountains in the same visual field is to be explained both in terms of its being the size it is (compared with other mountains) and in terms of its (objective) distance from the observer. Reality can look (non-epistemically and epistemically) different from different perspectives because reality is different from different perspectives (it is more or less distant, for instance).

Certainly this example cannot serve for Hick, as he hopes, as an analogy for an ineffable God, about whom we must say that all attributions are really 'human conceptions' *rather than* divine attributes. Rather we should say that they are human conceptions which, when being used with an epistemic intention, either do or do not reflect divine attributes. To say otherwise is a little like saying that the mountain *appears* distant *rather than* being distant; whereas, of course, it appears distant because it is.[22]

In as much as Hick's positive considerations do not commit him to even a one-realm transcendental idealism, he escapes both the identity-objection and the neglected-alternative objection. This escape is not without a cost. If Hick does not adopt Kantian arguments or considerations *at all*, it will cast a shadow over his adoption of Kantian conclusions. Previously I commented that Hick had, at most, considerations that would establish one-realm transcendental idealism, but that when talking about God, he needed to have established two-realm transcendental idealism. Now the situation looks worse. Hick's positive argument threatens to be no more than the trivial observation that 'the mind is vital in *conceiving* our *concepts* in terms of which we describe our experience of the world'. This thesis is certainly plausible, but is so weak and trivial to make it compatible with almost any epistemology and metaphysics. Hick perhaps needs to choose between the plausibility of his starting-point and the ability of his starting-point to get him to his finishing-point.

Hick's Noumenal God

As well as being unsupported by his 'basic epistemological insight', Hick's views on a noumenal God have problems of their own. In as much as Hick has a two-realm transcendental idealism when it comes to God, he is exposed to the criticisms raised against this position. First of all there is the 'fingers-in-the-jam-pot objection': *the position has an irresolvable tension between the maxim that the noumenal is completely unknowable and inconceivable, and the claim that the noumenal plays some sort of causal role, interacting with our noumenal selves and being somehow involved in the production of the objective world.*

The second criticism is the capitulation-to-scepticism objection: *although the mind-saturated view of reality was supposed to be successful against scepticism, we find that the 'objective world' is reduced in each individual case to a private collection of 'appearances' or 'mere representations'.*

Both of these charges seem to have a *prima facie* plausibility against Hick. As regards the first charge, we can see that Hick's God is supposed to be both transcendent and beyond human concepts, and also to play a type of causal, inter active role in our various religious experiences. On the second charge, 'the capitulation-to-scepticism objection', we can see that although Hick's theory is supposed to counter naturalistic reductions of religious experience, by positing a noumenal Real 'grounding' all religious experience, it does so by rendering any particular religious world-view little more than a human activity. In locating the objective ground of religious experience in the noumenal realm (of which we can only make the most formal and schematic claims), Hick has made most of the claims made by most actual religions mere human constructions (rather like the 'appearances' of which we are aware in the phenomenalistic account of objective reality given on the two-world position). He is quite explicit about this implication when he writes: 'as worshipped, the different god-figures (the phenomenal gods of the world religions) exist only in relation to their worshippers'.[23]

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[22] Of course, one way of glossing Hick's whole project would be to say that he claims that it is impossible to use appearance language about God epistemically. But it is no argument at this stage just to assert this, being as it is precisely the claim up for contention. The mountain example has revealed itself to be a damaging analogy for Hick, in that it seemed to emphasize the ease and necessity of using appearance language epistemically as well as non-epistemically.

These preliminary criticisms need careful qualification. Focusing on the fingers-in-the-jam-pot objection, Hick shows himself to be aware of some of the difficulties that his position faces. He considers two challenges to his claim that God *an sich* is unknowable: (1) Does it make sense to say of X that our concepts do not apply to it? and (2) If this does (though in a qualified formulation) make sense, what reason could we have to affirm it?[24] Hick is aware that 'it would not make sense to say of X that *none* of our concepts apply to it'.[25]

> For it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of 'being able to be referred to'. Further the property of 'being such that our concepts do not apply to it' cannot, without self-contradiction, include itself.[26]

To deal with this, Hick distinguishes between 'substantial' and 'formal' properties. Substantial properties, which cannot be applied to God, are properties such as 'being good', 'being powerful' and 'having knowledge'.[27] Formal properties are 'logically generated properties such as "being a referent of a term" and "being such that our substantial concepts do not apply" '.[28] Hick contends that it makes perfectly good sense to say that God has the 'formal' property that 'substantial characteristics do not apply to God in God's self-existent being, beyond the range of human experience'.[29]

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[23] J. Hick, 'Ineffability', *Religious Studies*, 36, 2000, 40.
[24] J. Hick, An Interpretation of Reality p.239.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid.

To avoid the fingers-in-the-jam-pot objection Hick needs to use only formal ‘logically generated’ concepts of the noumenal Real. Because ‘none of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable ground of that realm’ we can only make ‘certain purely formal statements about the postulated Real in itself.’[30]

It is easy to show that Hick immediately violates his maxim only to attribute formal properties to God when he comments in almost the next line that ‘the noumenal Real is such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena’.[31] It is just not clear how being ‘such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena’ is a purely formal property, rather than a substantial one. In particular we might wonder how causation can be a purely formal property, in that the Real causes an authentic range of experiences. Hick tries to observe the conceptual rules he has set up by adding:

> we cannot, as we have seen, say that the Real *an sich* has the characteristics displayed by its manifestations, such as (in the case of the heavenly Father) love and justice or (in the case of Brahman) consciousness and bliss.[32]

But Hick just cannot stay out of the jam-pot. He finishes his thought with the disastrous:

> But it (the Real *an sich*) is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics ... As the noumenal ground of these and other modes of experience, and yet transcending all of them, the Real is so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the various partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes.[33]

So the Real *an sich* has the properties of being ‘authentically manifested within human experience’,[34] of being ‘the noumenal ground of’ experiences of the Brahman and Christ, as well as being ‘rich in content’ and ‘transcending all other modes of experience’. Now either one of two things is going on here. Either Hick is making the sort of substantial claims about God that on his own account are just impossible, and so Hick is committing the classic Kantian error of being caught with his fingers-in-the-jam-pot, *or* Hick considers the statements listed above to be ‘purely formal’ and so legitimately applied to the noumenal Real *an sich*. But if the class of ‘purely formal statements’ is so wide and permissive, I can see no reason to exclude properties such as ‘being good’ and ‘being exclusively revealed in Christ’. After all, the difference between

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[30] Ibid., p.246.
[31] Ibid., pp.246–7.
[32] Ibid., p.247.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.

'being authentically experienced in different human religious experiences' and 'being exclusively revealed in Christ' seems not to be about the difference between formal and substantial statements;[35] both statements look equally formal or substantial (depending on how one carves up these categories), the difference being one of substantial theological and metaphysical opinion.

It begins to look suspiciously as if Hick places those substantial statements about God that he agrees with into the 'purely formal' (that is, correct) class, and those substantial statements about God that he disagrees with into the 'substantial' (that is, incorrect) class. Now Hick is entitled to his substantial views on God, but it is unacceptable for him to make them unassailable by articulating them in terms of a distinction (formal and substantial) which he claims to be independent of his intuitions about God. So Hick is either inconsistent (openly speaking substantially about God), or inconsistent (speaking substantially about God without admitting it, and without allowing others to do so). Hick, in any case, is inconsistent.

The problems that we have encountered so far are serious enough. The criticism levelled is that Hick sets up a distinction (formal/substantial), with a prohibition against speaking substantially about God, which he is unable to obey himself. The implication might be that a more cautious person could respect this prohibition, and make only formal statements about God. I consider that this implication should be eliminated. I think that the formal/substantial distinction is so problematic that there is no possibility ever of making 'purely formal statements about God'.

Substantial and Formal Properties

Restricting what we can say of God to 'purely formal properties' begs some sort of definition, or criteria, for being a 'purely formal property', rather than a

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[35] Hick admits in his response ('Ineffability') p.44, that 'Insole is clearly right in pointing out that "being authentically responded to within different religions is not the same purely formal kind of property as being able to be referred to" '. After this allowance, Hick seems to change the subject entirely when he follows this comment with 'but the question remains, How can the noumenal Real be phenomenally experienced as the gods and absolutes of the different religions without having any of the attributes of those gods and absolutes, since many of these are mutually incompatible?' My point is that if Hick's distinction between the substantial and the formal is arbitrary and unworkable then precisely the question as posed by Hick *does not remain*, just because we can no longer talk about a noumenal Real as distinct from the phenomenal real. The 'remaining question' is only a question for someone who has bought into the Hickian package with its internal difficulties, not a response to a radical critique of the whole approach. Hick has evaded the issue.

'substantial property'. The closest Hick comes to defining what it is to be a 'purely formal property' is to call them 'logically generated properties'.[36] Apart from this clue, he just provides us with a list of examples:[37]

Substantial	*Formal*
'being good'	'being a referent of a term'
'being powerful'	'being such that our substantial concepts do not apply'
'having knowledge'	

From the list of examples Hick gives it would seem a fair surmise that formal properties are those that determine directly and solely what *other* properties can (or cannot) be ascribed to the subject, whereas the substantial properties have no direct bearing on what other properties can be ascribed to the subject. Although it may be possible with substantial properties to work out that some properties must co-instantiate (such as omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipotence), formal properties are distinct in that *the only information that they convey concerns which other properties can (or cannot) be ascribed to the subject*.

Although Hick calls these formal properties 'logically generated' there is nothing particularly 'logical' about them. That God is such that 'none of our substantial concepts apply' is not analytic on any non-controversial understanding of the intension of the 'God' concept. If there are really 'logical' grounds that generate these formal properties, Hick needs to spell them out. The prospects for this sort of activity are not good, though. The only way that Hick could unravel his formal properties from an analysis of the 'God' concept would be in some sense to stipulate that God was by definition such that 'none of our substantial concepts apply'. Such a stipulation would just be a restatement of his controversial view, rather than a support for it.

Of course, Hick might not restrict himself to logical analysis to generate his formal properties. He could turn to other considerations to support his formal properties. But now things get interesting. What 'other considerations' could Hick turn to? There are I think two possibilities. First, we ascribe the formal properties to God because of what we know about God (we know that God is an ontologically and conceptually transcendent being, who is infinitely greater and more perfect than we can conceive). Second, we ascribe the formal properties to God because we are aware of the limitations of our human knowledge. We can ascribe substantial properties to everyday objects and people, but because God is so ontologically and conceptually transcendent

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[36] Ibid., p.239.

[37] Ibid., pp.239, 246.

(who is infinitely greater and more perfect than we can conceive), we know that we cannot apply these same concepts to God.

What emerges on both these possibilities is that the formal properties Hick ascribes to God emerge from *substantial* metaphysical beliefs and claims about God. Even when we turn the focus on the limitations of human knowledge, we need to make some sort of substantial metaphysical claim about God (that is, that God, for reasons pertaining to God's nature, is outside the scope of our human concepts).

My point can be illustrated by looking at the way in which Hick brings Aquinas into his fold, by making the model of 'analogical predication' an alternative and compatible model to the noumenal and phenomenal model. So Hick reads Aquinas as affirming the claim that only formal properties can be ascribed to God:

> Aquinas was emphatic that we cannot know what the divine super-analogue of goodness is like: 'we cannot grasp what God is, but only what He is not and how other things are related to Him'. (*Summa contra Gentres*, I:30:4[38]

The case of Aquinas exactly confirms our point here, in that the reason Aquinas considered that 'substantial properties' such as goodness and power could only be ascribed analogically to God, was that he ascribed the substantial property of simplicity[39] to God. It is precisely because we know that God is simple that we know that properties that are distinct in us (knowledge, power and goodness, for instance) are the same in God; consequently 'goodness' as applied to humans can only be analogous to 'goodness' as applied to God. Hick shows an awareness of the role of the substantial property 'simplicity' in Aquinas' thought, but does not realize the extent to which it damages his distinction between substantial and formal properties:

> Further, the divine attributes which are distinguished in human thought and given such names as love, justice, power, are identical in God. For 'God ... as considered in Himself, is altogether one and simple, yet our intellect knows Him according to diverse conceptions because it cannot see Him as He is in Himself.'[40]

Aquinas realizes, in a way that Hick does not, that 'formal properties' can only be applied justifiably to subjects *when we have substantial reasons to apply those*

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[38] Ibid., p.247.

[39] And of course, prior to this, in 1a. 2. 3, Aquinas ascribes to God the properties of being the 'cause' of many other things.

[40] Ibid. The Aquinas reference is *Summa Theologicae*, part I, Q.13, art. 12, vol. 3 of the Blackfriars edition, (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1969).

formal properties. This makes intuitive sense. Formal properties, as used by Hick, determine solely and directly what other properties can be ascribed to a subject. To know what sorts of properties can be ascribed to a subject we are going to have to know quite a lot about the subject, such as (1) its ontological type (physical entity, fictional entity, divine reality and so on); (2) its ontological nature (simple, composite, personal, transcendent, immanent and so on); (3) our epistemological access to this sort of ontological type; and (4) the types of properties it is appropriate to ascribe to the subject given what we know about (1), (2) and (3).

It almost seems that to ascribe a formal property to a subject, we have to know rather *more* about the subject than we do to ascribe a substantial property. To ascribe a substantial property we only need to know for instance that the 'table is red', or that 'Sherlock Holmes is clever'; we do not have to reflect very systematically on the general ontological type and nature of the subject, or the sort of epistemological access we have to the subject. Before we can do this we have to compile a list of the substantial properties we know different subjects have, and we can go on to generalize about what criteria could describe the sorts of substantial property we are entitled to ascribe to the subject.

In the case of God we have a list of substantial properties that can be ascribed to God. This list can be controversial, and the resources we use to arrive at these properties very different (inductive reasoning, conceptual analysis, revelation, intuition and so on). We can then use this list (tends to include transcendence, power, love, goodness) to work out what formal properties apply to God (that is, what we can say in general about the sorts of properties that can be ascribed to God). My claim is that although Hick does not acknowledge or realize it, he carries out a procedure very much along these lines. On his (admittedly small) list of substantial properties he has things such as ontologically and conceptually transcendent and authentically experienced[41] in not one but many faiths. From these he then derives the formal properties (being such that none of our human concepts apply).

That Hick must be able to say something substantial about God is suggested also by his reasons for accepting the postulation of the Real *an sich*. Although Hick might have a position, when talking about God, which is close to two-realm transcendental idealism, he does not have any of the motivations that

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[41] In my article I used the phrase 'is self-revealing in not one but many faiths'. Hick objected to this formulation in that 'the language of revelation, and of the Real as "self-revealing", which Insole frequently uses, suggests a theistic presupposition which is misleading in this context' (p.43). I am happy to alter my language here to make it clearer that I intend and need no more than Hick's precise claim that the Real is 'authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena' (pp.246–7), *An Interpretation of Religion*.

Kant has for positing a transcendent noumenal realm. Kant, as we saw, arrived at his two-realm transcendental idealism by way of a response to scepticism that attempts to safe-guard the certainty of selected knowledge claims. We have certain knowledge concerning some features of the objective spatio-temporal world because our minds have constructed the spatio-temporal law-governed world we experience; of the world we have 'maker's knowledge'. The world in as much as we did not construct it is the noumenal world *an sich*, of which we can know nothing. Where we do not have maker's knowledge, we must remain silent.

Sensibly, Hick is not interested in the search for certain knowledge in the face of a methodological Cartesian scepticism. Hick offers the noumenal Real *an sich* as a postulation, an hypothesis to explain the evidence of diverse religious experience. When presented with the diversity of religious experience Hick sees two main hypotheses presenting themselves – the naturalistic and the noumenal:

> The naturalistic response is to see all ... systems of belief as factually false although perhaps as expressing the archetypal dreams of the human mind whereby it has distracted itself from the harsh problems of life. From this point of view the luxuriant variety and the mutual incompatibility of these conceptions of the ultimate, and of the modes of experience which they inform, demonstrate that they are 'such stuff as dreams are made on'.[42]

Although such a response is 'reasonable' (not irrational), Hick endorses the rationality of his noumenal hypothesis:

> it is entirely reasonable for the religious person, experiencing life in relation to the transcendent – whether encountered beyond oneself or in the depths of one's own being – to believe in the reality of that which is thus apparently experienced.[43]

Hick spells out the 'pluralistic hypothesis' as the claim that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human.[44] Hick does not spell out the criteria for what a good hypothesis should look like. To fill in this gap, I would claim that the minimal requirements for being a good hypothesis are as follows: a good hypothesis needs to make the evidence it is explaining more likely than it would have been (1) without the hypothesis and (2) with any other hypothesis and (3) as simply as is possible (without positing gratuitous detail, processes or entities). Whether the postulation of the Real *an sich* is a good hypothesis depends on whether it makes the existence of evidence of diverse religious experience more likely than it would have been without (i) the postulation of the Real *an sich* and (ii) with any other hypothesis. Whether it does this or not depends partly on the innate plausibility and simplicity of the hypothesis being presented. Hick shows an awareness of this when he considers the possibility of a large number of 'ultimate realities' to explain the diverse religious experiences had by humankind:

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[42] Ibid., p.235.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., p.240.

> Why however use the term 'Real' in the singular? Why should there not be a number of ultimate realities? There is of course no reason, *a priori*, why the closest approximation that there is to a truly ultimate reality may not consist in either an orderly federation or a feuding multitude or an unrelated plurality.[45]

The consideration that Hick highlights is the greater simplicity of the singular 'Real' hypothesis:

> But if from a religious point of view we are trying to think, not merely of what is logically possible (namely, anything conceivable), but of the simplest hypothesis to account for the plurality of forms of religious experience and thought, we are, I believe, led to postulate 'the Real' ... the postulation of the Real *an sich* [is] the simplest way of accounting for the data.[46]

It should be made clear how distinctive and un-Kantian this use of the Real *an sich* is, and how incompatible it is with the notion that we cannot coherently affirm anything of the noumenal Real. Kant would have no role for the noumenal Real as a 'good hypothesis' for explaining our phenomenal experience. If the noumenal real is an X of which we can assert only that nothing can be asserted of it, how can this begin to be a good hypothesis for explaining a huge diversity of experience? The Real *an sich* would be a good hypothesis for the evidence of religious experience only if we could posit substantial properties to the Real: such as the Real *an sich*'s power, omnipresence, the desire of the Real to reveal itself, the Real's goodness, and that the Real created and sustains the universe. The list of properties that would make the hypothesis a good one could be contested, but one thing is clear: an X of which we can only say that we cannot assert anything of it, is no sort of explanation at all.

We should remember Hick's own questions to himself: (1) Does it make sense to say of X that our concepts do not apply to it? and (2) If this does (though in a qualified formulation) make sense, what reason could we have to affirm it?[47] It is clear by the way that Hick answers his second question that he means ‘what reason could we have to affirm the existence of the X?’, rather than ‘what reason do we have for saying that none of our concepts apply to X?’, which, as we saw, is also a question that needs answering. Hick answers this question (as he construes it) in terms of the considerations we have been discussing, claiming that the postulation of the Real *an sich* is the best hypothesis for the data. It should now be clear that there is no possibility of answering both questions successfully. If we claim that it does make sense to assert of X (God/the Real *an sich*) that none of our concepts apply to it, then we lose the only reason Hick presents to us for affirming the existence of such an X (the reason being that it is the best hypothesis for explaining the evidence). We can only be justified in asserting the existence of X on the grounds provided by Hick, if Hick is wrong about the claim that none of our concepts apply to X.

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[45] Ibid., p.248.
[46] Ibid., pp.248–9.
[47] Ibid., p.239.

Summary

The persistent problem we have found with Hick is that the ‘Kantian’ considerations that he raises are too weak to take him to the Kantian positions which he adopts. So when talking about our knowledge of the world, Hick does little more than observe the trivial truth that the mind has a role in framing our concepts. As we saw, this in itself is quite compatible with our knowing the world as it really is (in some respects).

Hick’s ‘broadly Kantian epistemological insight’ does not support his claims about God/the Real *an sich* being noumenal, and so conceptually transcendent. As well as being unsupported, Hick’s position on the divine noumenal Real *an sich* was seen to be incoherent. He was unable to keep to his injunction not to make substantial claims about God, for two reasons. First of all, the ‘formal’ claims that Hick wished to make relied on substantial metaphysical beliefs. Secondly, Hick’s only reason (distinctly un-Kantian at that) for postulating the Real *an sich* was that it was the ‘best hypothesis to explain the data’. An X of which we can assert nothing is not a good hypothesis.

Hick’s practice is better than his theory, in that he generally does not stick to his unreasonable rules. He does make substantial claims about God, and offer ‘God’ as a reasonable hypothesis to explain the evidence of diverse religious experience. It is clear that Hick has strong positive views about God, for which he has reasons; so he believes that the Real *an sich* is a transcendent divine reality that is experienced authentically (but never fully) in different faiths, and which brings people from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.[48] It is also clear that Hick cannot look to Kantian considerations to support these positive views. The trivial thesis that the mind-conceives-concepts does not lead us to the conclusion that we cannot know reality-as-it-is-in-itself; and it is hard to assert the noumenal ineffability of God without making substantial claims about God (precisely in order to know that our concepts do not apply) and while using God as an hypothesis to explain evidence.

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[48] Ibid., p.240.

In as much as Hick does not abandon the noumenal/phenomenal and formal/substantial distinctions, his realism about God is undermined by the in principle impossibility of arriving at any truths about God that are true independent of human cognition. It is not desirable that the only thing that saves Hick from anti-realism (in that he denies D[49]) is his preparedness to break his own rules and covertly make substantial claims about God.

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[49] See Chapter 1, p.2.

CHAPTER 8

Kaufman and the Kantian Mystery

Kaufman's overarching conviction is that for a variety of persuasive philosophical and theological reasons, we must admit that all our talk about God is an imaginative construction; a construction in which we have considerable liberty.[1] In his earlier work,[2] this conviction is worked out in the claim that although we can consider that there is a real referent of the term God, we can know nothing about this referent, to the extent that this referent has no interaction with the phenomenal God that we construct. In his more recent work,[3] this conviction is expressed in terms of the category of 'mystery'. A certain (highly recommended) construal of 'that-which-we-do-not-construct' can be framed in quasi-religious terms as 'mystery', or 'God'.

Both 'God' and 'mystery' are completely unknowable and unfathomable, and have no interaction with the interpretation and culture-saturated realm with which we have epistemic dealings. Although our imaginative construction of God is not in any way caused by, or interactive with the 'real' God/mystery, the concept of such a reality, such a 'God-beyond-God', has two vital roles. First of all, the notion of an unfathomable real God relativizes any particular human idea of God, bringing home its relative status as a socio-historico-linguisic construction:

> The notions of God's 'transcendence' or 'absoluteness', central to the meaning of the symbol, suggest that (the real) God is to be conceived as not bound by any of the psychological or cultural relativities which obscure our insight and understanding, making these always something less than true or right. Such a reference point 'beyond the world' relativizes – that is, enables us to become sensitive to the relativity of the values and meaning of our culture *in* the world.[4]

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[1] All of this chapter, along with some of Chapter 6, has been published in an article, 'Gordon Kaufman and the Kantian Mystery', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 47(2), April 2000, 101–19.

[2] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), and *Essay on Theological Method* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975).

[3] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993). I will be suggesting that there is no substantial difference between the earlier and more recent Kaufman.

[4] Ibid., p.8.

Secondly, the notion of the real God, or 'the ultimate mystery to which our word "God" points',[5] is supposed to excite us with its profundity, its possibility and its power to defend the constructivist religious thinker from the charge of being a quixotic sort of atheist. The constructivist thinker wants to have his metaphysical pie-in-the-sky, and to eat it. On the one hand, Kaufman can weigh in with secular urbanity:

> The fundamental problem ... [with Christianity] ... (is) the presupposition of a reality other than or 'beyond' this world, the assumption that the eminent reality with which we have to do – God – is somehow 'out there' (or 'up there' or 'down there' or 'in there') beyond the given realities of our experience.[6]

At the same time, Kaufman can make suggestively Kantian appeals to a God beyond our phenomenal constructions:

> The real referent for 'God' is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content. It stands for the fact that God transcends our knowledge in modes and ways of which we can never be aware and of which we have no inkling.[7]

The same appeals are in Kaufman's recent work, although they are, as we will see, given a slightly different flavour:

> This notion of God's ultimate *mystery* implies (and requires) an acknowledgment of our *unknowing* with respect to God – an acknowledgment, that is to say, that we do not know how the images and metaphors in terms of which we conceive God apply ... Only in and with this acknowledgment does the symbol 'God' turn us ... toward that ultimate source and context of our humanity which completely transcends us, our ideas, and our control.[8]

Kaufman, like Hick, can be seen here both to deny that we can have true beliefs about what is the case (about God) independent of human cognition (the denial of D), yet to draw heavily on the concept of such a cognition-independent God. The task of this chapter is to assess the extent to which Kaufman can square two such different, and seemingly incompatible, movements of thought by an appeal to some sort of 'Kantian' insight or epistemology. As with Hick, I will use the discussion on Kant as a way to move quickly around some of the issues which arise. I will not, in this chapter, be concerned with evaluating the force of the constructivist and anti-metaphysical presuppositions adopted by Kaufman, having hopefully despatched these in Chapter 5. I will be dealing with the cogency of Kaufman's Kantian allusions to a 'real' God, or unfathomable 'mystery', *given* his constructivist and anti-metaphysical stance.

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[5] Ibid., p.369.

[6] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.43.

[7] Ibid.

[8] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.56.

Constructing Kaufman

Kaufman's thought is multi-layered and rich. It is hard to extract from it a single 'argument' that can be examined for its rigour. I will attempt to do justice to Kaufman's work by outlining five main strands to his thought, which run through all his works. Although there is certainly more to Kaufman's thought than I represent here, my claim is that there is not *less*.

A: Constructivist Presupposition

All human knowledge involves the use of human language, interpretation and symbolic frameworks. This is particularly true of concepts such as 'God' and 'world', which are used 'for ordering and organizing our conceptions or knowledge'.[9] The depth and extent of mind involvement in all our knowledge lead us to be sure that we can have no knowledge of God from an absolute, unmediated, standpoint:

> We now know that all our perception is heavily colored by the interpretive schemes carried in language and culture, that we never perceive objects immediately, uninterpreted by a conceptual framework created by human imagination. Concepts like 'God' and 'world', which hold together the whole fabric of a culture's understanding of life and reality, are created only over many generations as men and women seek to make sense of their experience in the terms bequeathed by their ancestors.[10]
>
> the complex symbolical structures of meaning, value, and concept, which define and give particular shape to a given cultural or religious orientation of tradition, are produced in the course of the creation of culture ... we begin with an awareness that all talk of God belongs to and has its meaning within a particular symbolical framework ... which emerged in a particular strand of human history.[11]

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[9] G. Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), p.24.
[10] Ibid., p.25.
[11] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.39.

The constructivist implications of God language belonging to an historically evolved symbolical framework are made very clear:

> all talk of God belongs to and has its meaning within a particular symbolical frame of orientation for human life ... The symbol 'God' like the rest of the language ... was created as women and men ... gradually put together a world-picture which enabled them ... to come to terms with the exigencies of life. *This symbol, then (like all others), must be understood as a product of the human imagination.*[12] (italics mine)

B: Anti-metaphysical Presupposition

'Metaphysical dualism'[13] is false: there is no transcendent reality beyond 'this world'. Traditionally God has been conceived as 'beyond this world', but there must be a new footing on which we talk about God:

> our modern conception of the universe ... is of a self-contained intradependent whole, an evolutionary whole, an evolutionary eco-system in which all parts develop in complex interrelationship with one another; not an essentially dualistic order with all real dynamism and productivity found on one side, and the other relegated essentially to receptiveness and passivity. Indeed, the idea of God who is 'outside' the universe is scarcely thinkable today: the universe is all there is, and all spatial relations are found within it; what can it possibly mean to speak of something *outside* it?[14]

C: The Function of 'God' as a Regulative Concept

Throughout all of Kaufman's thought the construct 'God' has an important regulative function. As a limiting concept, designating (in a heuristic fashion) that which is beyond the boundaries of all our knowledge, the concept 'God' is able to bring a unity and orientation to all our experience.

Kaufman stresses that 'God' cannot designate a reality 'beyond' the world of appearances. The idea of 'God' is and always has functioned as 'a *limiting concept*, that is, a concept that does not primarily have content in its own right, drawn directly out of a specific experience, but refers to that which we do not know but which is the ultimate limit of all our experiences'.[15] Traditional (pre-Kantian?) formulations of this concept did have this function, but 'were highly mythological and are no longer acceptable or meaningful to many moderns'.[16]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp.42–5, 47–8, 161–2, 230–33, 252–3.

[14] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.271.

As limiting concepts, 'God' and 'world' are, according to Kaufman, regulative or heuristic:

> Kant saw that ideas like 'God' and 'world' performed a different kind of function in our thinking than concepts like 'tree' or 'man'. While the latter are used to organize and classify elements of experience directly … the former 'regulative ideas' function at a remove from direct perception or experience: they are used for ordering our conceptions or knowledge.[17]

The specific function played by the regulative concept 'God' is described in the following way:

> It functions, on the one hand, as the ultimate unifier of all experience and concepts both subjective and objective ('world' unifies only the concept of 'objects') and, on the other, as the most fundamental postulate of the moral life … Even less than 'world', then, could 'God' be an object of experience, or a reality conceivable on the model of a perceivable object. It is the mind's most profound and highest creation, that by means of which it brings unity and significance into all the dimensions of its life. To regard God as some kind of describable or knowable object over against us (as in the schema on which most theology has been based) is at once a degradation of God and a serious category error.[18]

In that God is a regulative–heuristic concept, there is a certain amount of decision making as to what model is to be preferred in fleshing out the concept. It is with regard to the choice of model that Kaufman has changed his views most between 1972 and the present. Looking at the broad strokes of his work we can see that, in his earlier thought (*God the Problem*, 1972), Kaufman preferred a personal model: 'the ultimate limit is understood on analogy with the experience of *personal limiting* as known in the interaction of personal wills'.[19] In his most recent work (*In Face of Mystery*, 1993) Kaufman explicitly favours an impersonal-process model over a personal model: 'I suggest that … instead of … a conception of God modeled on the human agent, we explore … a model based on the creative development in history of human culture as a whole'.[20] As will become clearer below, under the discussion of 'Practical Predominance of the Available God', if Kaufman is correct about the heuristic function of the concept 'God', he is perfectly at liberty to change his choice of model, if that reaps 'practical' benefits.

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[15] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.47.

[16] Ibid.

[17] G. Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1975), p.24.

[18] Ibid.

[19] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.60.

D: The Possibility of a Real God

Although the concept of 'God' is our imaginative construct, Kaufman makes important use of the notion that there is some unfathomable divine reality. About this divine reality we can know nothing; nor can we have any sort of interaction with the 'real' God. Nevertheless the 'real' God does the important work of filling us with a sense of religious profundity, and of relativizing all of our human imaginative constructs of God.

The way in which Kaufman alludes to this 'real' divine reality differs, depending on the model for the 'available' God being used. In a sense, not much hangs on this, in that we are at liberty to construct the 'available' God; and the 'real' God is unfathomable, and so equally poorly represented by any model. In *God the Problem* (1972) Kaufman considers that the model of selfhood enables us to grasp the distinction between the available self and the real self (both with people and with God), in a way that does not violate the injuction against metaphysical dualism. The 'available' Tony Blair 'is the in as much as he communicates to me'; the 'real' Tony Blair – the deciding, acting, purposing centre of self – is (to an extent) unfathomable. With God the quality of transcendence and otherness is that much greater that the 'to an extent' drops out, and the real God, the 'real referent' of God is completely unfathomable:

> The real referent for 'God' is never accessible to us or in any way open to our observation or experience. It must remain always an unknown X, a mere limiting idea with no content. It stands for the fact that God transcends our knowledge in modes and ways of which we can never be aware and of which we have no inkling. The objects of our experience, particularly persons, also transcend in often surprising ways our knowledge ..., but with God this transcendence and hiddenness is far more unqualified. For other persons are, after all, in many crucial respects accessible to us for observation, encounter, dialogue ... God is never directly available in this sense and has never been. Any supposed knowledge of God always remains unverifiable and controversial and may be completely mistaken ... The religious significance of the unspecifiability of the real referent for 'God' is precisely this sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery and meaning.[21]

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[20] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.273.

[21] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.85.

In the more recent *In Face of Mystery* (1993), the way in which the real God is alluded to reflects Kaufman's choice to move away from a personal model, towards the notion of 'mystery':

> I have been emphasizing the epistemological dimensions of the notion of mystery – that the concept of mystery tells us more about our *unknowing* than it does about some reality with which we stand in relation. But before we leave this issue, it is important to note that more is involved than that. When the ultimate mystery is construed as *God*, our finitude and our unknowing no longer carry simply negative connotations. For this construal implies the belief that the ultimate mystery is trustworthy, that in which we may properly place our faith. The sense of mystery often has an aesthetic dimension, as well as the epistemological one which I have emphasized: it may include awe and wonder as well as bafflement. But when the mystery is apprehended as *God*, it calls forth from us not only wonder and awe and bafflement but trust and confidence as well, and our attempts – as finite creatures in a mysterious world – to live out our lives in faith and in faithfulness are given new support.[22]

Here we have spelled out explicitly the *religious work* done by the notion of the 'real referent' of God. The second function of such a 'real' God, to relativize all human claims to knowledge about God, is made clear later on in the same book:

> The notions of God's 'transcendence' or 'absoluteness', central to the meaning of the symbol, suggest that (the real) God is to be conceived as not bound by any of the psychological or cultural relativities which obscure our insight and understanding, making these always something less than true or right. Such a reference point 'beyond the world' relativizes – that is, enables us to become sensitive to the relativity of the values and meaning of our culture *in* the world.[23]

E: Practical Predominance of the Available God

With the real referent being so, in principle, unfathomable, we have to accept that

> for all practical purposes it is the *available referent* – a particular imaginative construct – that bears significantly on human life and thought. It is the 'available God' whom we have in mind when we worship or pray; it is the available referent that gives content and specificity to any sense of moral obligation or duty to obey God's will; it is the available God in terms

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[22] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.59.

[23] Ibid., p.8.

> of which we speak and think whenever we use the word ‘God’. *In this sense ‘God’ denotes for all practical purposes what is essentially a mental or imaginative construct.*[24] (italics Wine)

In that the available God (the God with whom we have commerce) is a human construct, God is constructed within language, history and culture. In his *Essay on Theological Method* (1975)[25] Kaufman comments that concepts such as ‘God’ and ‘God’s revelation’ ‘have been created and developed in and through human processes of reflection on life and interpretation of experience’,[26] and therefore ‘theology is and always has been a human work’.[27] Essentially the same distinction between the real God and the available God is at work in Kaufman’s recent work *In Face of Mystery*, where he writes that ‘all talk of God belongs to and has its meaning within a particular symbolical frame of orientation for human life ... The symbol “God” like the rest of the language ... was created as women and men ... gradually put together a world-picture which enabled them ... to come to terms with the exigencies of life. *This symbol, then (like all others), must be understood as a product of the human imagination*.’[28] (original emphasis)

The significance of theology being a human work is more than the obvious sense in which theology is carried out by human beings with human brains; its force resides in the fact that there is no extra-human constraint (the revelation of God) on what we say in our theology (*except* that we may not claim absoluteness, to know God-in-Godself). In a sort of conceptual deism, God is entirely detached from our models of God.

Freedom (to construct our images of God) carries with it responsibility to develop responsible and life-enhancing models; this responsibility Kaufman exercises in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* and his more recent *In Face of Mystery*. The criteria we have for constructing theology are entirely humanistic, pragmatic and secular. This is made very clear when Kaufman answers his own question, ‘what sort of cosmic vision should we construct in our theological search for orientation in life?’[29] The answer given is:

> (1) Since it is an orientation for human beings *in the world* that we are seeking, we need a picture or a map of the world (and of ourselves as part of the world), which will enable us to find our way about with some success ...

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[24] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), p.87

[25] G. Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method* (Montana: The Scholars Press, 1975).

[26] Ibid., p.2.

[27] Ibid., p.3.

[28] G. Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985); *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.39.

[29] *In Face of Mystery*, p.257.

> (2) Since it is an orientation *for human beings* in the world that we are seeking, we want a picture or a map which takes into account our specifically human needs ... in this respect our metaphysical/theological construction will necessarily be anthropocentric in its purpose and in its emphases.[30]

Regulative or Noumenal – but not Both

The movement of thought from A to C (above) is unproblematic from the point of view of Kantian transcendental idealism vis-à-vis God. Premise A ('constructivist presupposition') is a straightforward extension of the Kantian claim that our minds to some extent shape reality, fleshed out with historicist and sociological intuitions; Kaufman is not clear whether he intends a *global* constructivism, leaving conceptual space to assert that there is a realm of reality to which we have no cognitive access. Premise B (anti-metaphysical presupposition) is clearly to be found in Kaufman's work, although it does not necessarily follow from A (if, for instance, the constructivism of A is not global). In as much as Kaufman sticks to his denial of a transcendent realm, or at least the intelligibility of building any claims about the transcendent realm into any sort of theory (including a systematic theology), he is clearly not a transcendental idealist on the two-realm model. His use of God as a merely negative, limiting concept C, which helps us as a regulative ideal, is consistent with his constructivism and anti-metaphysical approach.

The sticking point is D, where Kaufman seems to hold out for a religious and meta-theoretical role for the concept of the 'real God'. We have already seen that Kaufman rules out the possibility of a noumenal, transcendent realm, into which this 'real God' could somehow fit. The only alternative to a two-realm model (real God/available God) is a one-realm model, where to talk of the real God is to talk about God in as much as God is not a possible object of experience. It may help to re-cap our account of one-realm transcendental idealism.

One-realm transcendental idealism involves the claim that human knowledge has certain epistemic conditions that must be satisfied if we are to be able to experience certain objective states of affairs. These epistemic conditions are not transcendentally real, in that they are features of the possibilities of knowing things, rather than conditions of the possibility of the things themselves. There are not two worlds with two sorts of object (noumenal and phenomenal), but one world, which we have to experience and know about under the necessary and universal epistemic conditions that apply to our experience and knowledge. The 'transcendentally real' realm is just a formal, limiting concept for the world independent of these epistemic conditions (a conception of course that we cannot begin to formulate).

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[30] Ibid., p.257.

This account of the transcendentally 'real' has remarkable resonances with Kaufman's account of the 'real' God: replace 'the world' with 'God' in the last sentence and you have a summary of Kaufman's position: 'the transcendentally real God is just a formal, limiting concept for God independent of epistemic conditions – a conception of course that we cannot begin to formulate'. In as much as he avoids two-realm realism, Kaufman parts company with Hick, and manages to avoid putting his fingers in the jam-pot. One serious charge that did stick against one-realm transcendental idealism was the neglected alternative. The force of this objection was that it is plausible to suppose that our epistemic conditions (spatio-temporal framework, with a causally law-like objective world) are as they are because they reflect (some of) the features of the world-as-it-is-in-itself. We do not produce the world, but are good at detecting how the world is (in some respects).

Kaufman's one-realm transcendental idealism, when it comes to the 'real referent' of God, is not coherent and cannot survive the neglected-alternative objection. The whole force of one-realm transcendental idealism is that the available (phenomenal) object is the *same object* as the real (noumenal) object, and that the noumenal object is precisely not a mysterious hypostasized entity, but that which grounds our experience of the available object. One-realm transcendental idealism has some powerful implications that would threaten aspects of Kaufman's thought:

i if the available object exists, then so does the real object, as they are the same. There can be no agnosticism about the reality of the object, in as much as it exists independently of human cognition;

ii the object (considered independently of the conditions for human cognition) is what causes and grounds our experience of the available object;

iii the available object (in as much as we can cognize and interact with it), and our relationship to the object, is in every way constrained by and answerable to the nature and behaviour of the real object (the object independent of the conditions for human cognition). This is certain, as the real and the available object are *the same* object: the distinction concerning only whether the object is subject to the conditions of human cognition.

It is clear that Kaufman's 'real' God satisfies none of the criteria given here for being considered transcendentally 'real'. Kaufman is at best non-committal on the actual existence of God, contra (i); and, contra (ii) and (iii), the 'available' God is an imaginative construct that is neither grounded upon, nor answerable to, the 'real' God. Kaufman has, at this point, a number of options open to him.

First, he could give up B (the anti-metaphysical presupposition) and insist, along Hickean lines, that the real God inhabits a separate noumenal realm. This is not an attractive option for Kaufman. His aversion to what he calls 'metaphysical dualism' is too much a defining feature of, and important motive for, his work to allow a noumenal realm in through the back door.

If he were to adopt a two-realm position he would end up with essentially the same problem as Hick: the more reason there is to assert that God is noumenal and, by definition therefore unknowable, the less reason there is to assert, or believe, or act as if, there is a God at all. The more reason there is to believe in God, the less God can plausibly be thought of as noumenal.

Second, Kaufman could accept the implications of insisting that there is a real God along the lines of one-realm transcendental idealism. So God would be *known* to exist and to be the absolute reality to which all constructions were answerable. On this approach we have something like a perfectly orthodox distinction between the aseitical otherness of God, and God's self unveiling to us. God-in-Godself is unfathomable, but God-in-as-much-as-God-reveals-Godself is knowable with some degree of certainty. Furthermore we can also know (or believe in faith) that God is able to reveal Godself, and that God does just this, rendering God's nature no longer unfathomable. Allowing the possibility of revelation here amounts to embracing the 'neglected alternative'.

Kaufman comes remarkably close in places to adopting a position along these orthodox lines:

> The first motif (creator) of the trinity expresses the primary intention of our God-talk to be addressing itself to the transcendent, the mystery or reality beyond anything and everything we know and experience, *God*; other indispensable components of the idea of God are expressed by the second (redeemer) and third (sustainer) motifs of the trinitarian concept. Christian reflection on God has always recognized that unless we can say something specific and concrete about this transcendent 'X' … the intention to speak of God remains utterly empty … God must be presented not merely as transcendent of, but also as significantly related to, the full range of reality(s) available to us in our experience and knowledge.[31]

To the extent that Kaufman does hold or suggest this line, I have no argument with him. It should be clear that this is not by any means the only, or even the predominant strand in Kaufman's thought. Accepting this position would involve dropping E (the practical predominance of the available God) with all the freedom and humanistic criteria for successful theology that follow therefrom.

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[31] Ibid., p.415.

Third, Kaufman could drop the claim that there is any role at all for the enigmatic real God (D), except perhaps as an entirely conscious human construct and no more, which would constitute an explicit endorsement of atheistic humanism. 'Theology' would then be an *entirely* humanistic activity, a thorough-going living 'as-if', in the certain knowledge that we have to live '*as if*' (there is a God) just because we know that really '*there is not*' (a God). There might be questions as to the point of doing this, but – if people really did find it 'fruitful' to practise religion in the same way that they practise poetry, or adopt a New Age 'self-help' programme to enable them to live more successfully or 'holistically', or whatever – there is no conceptual incoherence involved. It is idiosyncratic and philosophically uncompelling, but then so are most hobbies and self-help programmes.

Kaufman's emphasis on the secular and humanistic criteria for judging good theology, and his insistence that we are free to 'construct' our own images of God, would be strands of his thought that would prosper if he were to abandon his suggestive hints of a 'real' God. Of course there would be a loss also too, and one, I suspect, that Kaufman would feel keenly. He would no longer be able to appeal to the notion of a 'real' God to bolster his position with a sense of profundity, or to distance him from an unambiguous atheism. Kaufman himself points to the even more 'deleterious effects' of removing any transcendent reality as a constraint on our theology: 'A God without transcendence and otherness is a God without independence of the human, a God who is simply our creature, the extension of our own wishes and desires.'[32]

There is no easy way to tell which of these three options Kaufman would most tend towards. His thought is so rich and multi-stranded that different aspects of it are compatible with each of these options. What is clear is that Kaufman is going to have either to have his metaphysical pie, or to eat it, but not both. If the notion of a real (unconstructed) God is to appear at all in our thought (even as a limiting concept), we have to accept, certainly, that God is able to reveal Godself to us, and also that we are able to believe some very schematic things about God (that God exists and reveals Godself in various ways). So it is not true that God is unfathomable, or that we have freedom in constructing our theology, or that we should adopt purely humanistic criteria. On the other hand, we can have freedom and humanistic criteria, and not know or believe anything about God, in which case the notion of the 'real' God can play no role at all in our thought. In this case our theology must become, as

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[32] Ibid., p.315.

Don Cupitt puts it, ‘perfectly horizontal … light, resourceful, fast-moving and well able to survive’.[33]

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[33] Don Cupitt, *The Long-Legged Fly* (London: SCM Press, 1987), p.vii.

CHAPTER 9

The New Apophaticism and the Return of the Anthropomorphic

Amongst theologians there is frequently an aversion to a certain philosophical mechanism for arriving at a view of God's properties.[1] The mechanism which people find objectionable can be represented (although this would never be acknowledged by the offending philosopher) in the following four-point schema.

i Dwell on a favoured model of the human subject; this model will be a social and political construct, favoured generally by a cultured bourgeois elite. Almost the definition of being a 'philosopher', according to this critique, is that the constructed and parochial nature of this model is not acknowledged as such, but is held to be a neutral and accurate representation of the 'subject'.
ii According to this favoured model of the human subject, draw up a list of the subject's perfections; thus an 'Enlightenment' list will feature properties such as power, control over nature, rationality, benevolence, autonomy and knowledge.
iii To arrive at a correct account of God, simply perform the 'infinity' function on each of these perfections. So where Enlightenment-man is rational, autonomous, knowledgeable and benevolent, God is omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly free and omnibenevolent.
iv Proclaim that one has arrived at a thorough understanding of the nature of God.

In fact, we have no more than a construction inferred from a parochial vision of the nature of the subject. So the apophaticist insists that such a God is a grotesque construction of a super-(human)subject, a bloated infinitely magnified mirror-image of the fiction of the rational, powerful and benevolent man. When a theologian announces that the God whose death Nietzsche reported was a monster anyway, it is this anthropomorphic God being attacked. In the face of such an anthropomorphic construction, so transparently reflecting a particular self-serving and subverting model of the human subject, apophaticism (a form of the denial of D) is seen as a way of letting God be God, of refusing to repeat the mistake of seeing our own projected reflection at the bottom of the well.

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[1] A shorter version of this chapter has been published under the title 'Anthropomorphism and the Apophatic God', in *Modern Theology*, 17(4), October 2001, 475–83.

My intention here is not to support this 'anthropomorphic' God. In many ways I consider the momentum of thought described above to be an accurate reflection of how philosophical theology can so often proceed after Descartes. So in the Third Meditation the idea of the infinite God arises in intricate connection with the idea of myself, such that Descartes writes:

> By the name 'God' I understand an infinite substance, eternal, immutable, independent, omniscient, omnipotent, and by which I and all the other things which exist (if it be true that any such exist) have been created and produced.[2]

So, corresponding to the (i)–(iv) schema drawn up above, the unproblematized notion of human subjectivity doing the work (upon which the infinity function is performed) is that of a finite substance, temporal, mutable, autonomous in some crucial respects, knowledgeable to an extent, potent, the proximate cause of some (but not all) of the things which are created and produced.

Richard Swinburne is a happy hunting-ground for those hostile to an 'anthropomorphic God', in that he is so clear and explicit about adopting something like the 'infinity function'. So Grace Jantzen complains that:

> many Anglo-American philosophers of religion ... take as fundamental that the human self is an analogue of the divine self, and that the understanding of each is reciprocal to the other. Thus, for example, Richard Swinburne takes his own selfhood entirely for granted, and uses it as an analogate for God, whom he conceives of as a divine self.[3]

Jantzen focuses on a passage from Swinburne where she considers that he

> argues that because he can imagine himself as a disembodied person, that is, as a disembodied subject who can nevertheless still have experiences and can still act in the world, this shows that it is conceptually coherent to think of God as an infinite disembodied subject.[4]

When we look at the passage from Swinburne, we must admit that the 'thought experiment' fits beautifully into the schema (i)–(iv) set out above:

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[2] René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), trans. F. Sutcliffe, 'Third Meditation', p.123.

[3] Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.28.

[4] Ibid.

> Imagine yourself [stages i and ii], for example, gradually ceasing to be affected by alcohol or drugs, your thinking being equally coherent however men mess about with your brain [unacknowledged parochial assumption, with perfection perceived as coherently thinking, increasingly disembodied men empowered against both nature and technology] ... You gradually find yourself aware of what is going on in bodies other than your own ... You also see things from any point of view ... You find yourself able to move directly anything which you choose [stage iii] ... You also find yourself able to utter words which can be heard anywhere ... *surely anyone can thus conceive of himself becoming an infinite spirit*. So it seems logically possible that there be such a being [stage iv]'[5]

This gloss on what the likes of Swinburne are doing, and the critique of this as inappropriately anthropomorphic, may or may not be pervasive. That is not my concern here. My anxiety is with the unproblematized sense of self-satisfaction that the apophaticist could easily fall into, perceiving herself as enjoying a religious integrity that is so lacking in the anthropomorphic approach.

The Apophatic Narcissistic Self

There needs to be some caution about a tendency of thought that is fairly persuasive in theological discussion and literature. This tendency considers that a God about whom we know nothing, who is most present to us in an experience of absence, will escape being understood anthropomorphically. Such an apophatic God can be 'present' in two differently nuanced manifestations. The first strand is in evidence whenever it is held that, although God is real, we cannot in principle have true beliefs about God. Such a God is not only ontologically transcendent, but conceptually so, so that we can say nothing true at all about God-as-God-is-in-Godself (or only the most schematic truths). The most we can do is to talk about the phenomenal God (Hick) or the 'available referent' of God (Kaufman), which is our imaginative God construct.

A complete discussion of Kantians such as Kaufman and Hick would not be complete without addressing that which is less an 'argument', but more a profound and *legitimate* theological concern not to reduce the otherness of God to anthropomorphic categories. So, as we have seen, in *God the Problem*,[6] Kaufman denies that the real referent of 'God' can be directly known or experienced:

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[5] R. Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp.104–5, italics Jantzen's.

[6] G. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

> The religious significance of the unspecifiability of the real referent for 'God' is precisely this sense of an unfathomable depth of mystery and meaning … this implies that the real referent can never be more than a limiting concept for us, a strong reminder that our ideas and experience are far from adequate: for all practical purposes it is the *available referent* – a particular imaginative construct – that bears significantly on human life and thought.[7]

One of the most important reminders of this unfathomable God is to ensure that the God we believe in

> is not simply a kind of extrapolation or extension of what we already are (with our little idolatries and petty loyalties, our narrowness of interest and vision, our self-centredness, and our anthropocentrism) but must refer us to that which is truly *other* than we, different from us, mysterious, ultimately beyond our ken.[8]

This will help us avoid what Kaufman critiques elsewhere as

> the contention that the originative and ultimate reality behind everything (God) is to be understood largely in terms of images and metaphors derived from and peculiar to *human* existence – indeed, *male* human existence: God is pictured as lord, king, creator, judge, father, and so on. The defining model on the basis of which the conception of God is built up is that of an *agent*, and actor, a notion which gains its distinctive meaning almost entirely in and through human exemplifications.[9]

The second, slightly differently nuanced, manifestation of the 'apophatic' God can be detected when we hear talk of the 'absence' of God. Such a God is being addressed whenever religious experience is described as an experience of 'absence'. Whatever else is meant here, it is not simply in the sense of 'non-existence', but more a dimension of God's withdrawal and concealment. We might talk of a significant absence, or an 'absent presence', an absence that is felt as significant and revealing.

Bernard McGinn identifies this sense of absence with the mystical tradition, when he writes,

> If everything we experience as real is in some way present to us, is not a 'present' God just one more *thing*? This is why many mystics from Dionysius on have insisted that it is consciousness of God as negation,

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[7] Ibid., p.85. See also pp.84, 88, 97, 113.

[8] G. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp.313–14.

[9] Ibid.

> which is a form of the absence of God, that is the core of the mystic's journey.[10]

McGinn goes on to add a comment of Simone Weil's, which is very much to our purpose here:

> Contact with human creatures is given us through the sense of presence. Contact with God is given us through the sense of absence. Compared with this absence, presence becomes more absent than absence.[11]

In Denys Turner's book *The Darkness of God*,[12] there is a critique of both strands of modern constructions of apophaticism outlined above. Turner demonstrates, effectively in my view, that the medieval tradition of apophaticism is much richer and substantially supported than modern 'mystical' constructions, and that 'not only would it be dangerous to assume that the similarities of language entailed a similarity of purpose, but that it would actually be wrong to suppose this'.[13] Turner identifies two principle differences. First of all, in 'the classical period of medieval theology, the *metaphors* of negativity are interpenetrated by a high Neoplatonic *dialectics* of negativity'.[14] Negation was part of a spiritual ascent, premised always upon a rich and substantial view about the ontological structure of a universe that emanated from God, and yearned through both kataphatic and apophatic moments to ascend back to God. So Turner comments that 'this constructive interplay of negation and affirmation, embracing ontology, dialectics and metaphor is, as I understand it, the defining characteristic of the medieval apophatic medieval tradition'.[15]

Modern constructions of mysticism are weak in that they have no explicit context of ontology, dialectics and metaphor, but simply focus on what Turner calls 'experientialism',[16] where the heady Neoplatonic metaphors are 'psychologized' so that the mystical is characterized as (with McGinn and Weil) the experience of absence. Against this construal of the mystical, Turner suggests that the apophatic is rather the absence of 'experience' rather than '"the consciousness of the absence of God" … as if such a consciousness were an awareness of *what* is absent'.[17]

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[10] B. McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp.xviii–xix.

[11] *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, trans. Arthur Wills, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), I, pp.239–40.

[12] D. Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

[13] Ibid. p.3.

[14] Ibid., p.7.

[15] Ibid., p.271.

[16] Ibid., p.8.

Turner's judgement here is a masterpiece of succinct demolition:

> This mediaeval tradition of 'mysticism' conceived of as the moment of negativity immanent within the ordinary practice, theoretical and moral, of the Christian life, disappears when the dialectic is detached from the metaphoric, leaving the metaphoric discourse stranded, as it were, in isolation, minus its underpinning hierarchy of ontology and epistemology. What emerges from the decline of the apophatic tradition is no longer a true dialectic, but rather a two-term, anti-intellectualist, experientialist 'voluntarism'.[18]

So it should be clear that this chapter is an attack, not on the apophatic tradition, nor of all apophatic theology; it is, rather, a warning about the potential vanity and negligence of some sloppier modern constructions of the apophatic God. I agree with Turner that modern apophatic constructions lack a well-understood and explicit ontological underpinning, but my fear is that they are motivated by poorly understood, implicit and so all the more dangerous presuppositions about the human and political.

The notion that an apophatic God avoids anthropomorphism works well when we have in our sights a particular manifestation of anthropomorphic projection, namely the Cartesian/Enlightenment variety discussed above. But a critique of the Cartesian *cogito* is not a critique of how the human subject is pervasively understood, so to focus on projections that are based on the Cartesian *cogito* is to be in danger of overlooking other ways in which we may project the human agent, and human political arrangements, onto the Godhead. Perhaps academics have a particular propensity to see the danger of a Cartesian view of personality, more because it is a contortion they *as thinkers* are likely to be drawn to.

The situation is complex in that the apophatic God can be seen to be a projection of, not one view of the human person, but a disastrous compromise between two rival views, both of which are at large. For the analysis of the two views of the person, and the pervasive compromise at work in our culture, I am indebted to the work of Charles Taylor.[19]

The first view of the person, that Taylor outlines, views agency as unproblematic, in that the human is conceived as being no different from animals, which in turn are no different from complex machines. The ultimate furniture of the universe is physical matter, and to attain to an ultimate conception of the universe we must strip away all so-called ‘anthropomorphic’ properties such as colour/heat/beauty/morality. So in human and social sciences we get a reductive drive for absolute, significance-free explanation. In a fascinating move, Taylor aligns this desire for a significance-free world with a gnostic spiritual desire not to be thrown into a world of imperfectly understood meaning, but to be in a position of control, where one’s own ends are understood, just because we are disengaged from the world. The desire for reductive absolute explanations can be understood as an aspiration to rise above the merely human and worldly cares which press upon us.

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[17] Ibid., p.264.

[18] Ibid., p.272.

[19] In particular, the essays 'Self-Interpreting Animals' and 'Language and Human Nature', in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol.1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

The second view of the person is harder to articulate, just because it is more subtle. On this view the person is distinct from animals and machines in that things matter for the person in for which there is no analogue amongst non-humans. By ‘things mattering’, Taylor has in mind the way in which the person is constituted by interpretation. The person expresses him or herself through language, which is mediated to that person through culture. In so expressing herself the person is partly attempting to be faithful to her pre-articulate sense of what she was (was doing, thinking, intending), but is also actually constituting what she is (in expressing her feelings/intentions, the person comes to a new realization, which then constitutes her). The person constitutes herself within, and is constituted by, a world which is rich with pre-given significance, and that cannot be described without attributing ‘imports’ to situations. By an ‘import’ Taylor means a description such as ‘shameful’, which is dependent for its meaning upon a tapestry of language-constituted relationships, but which is not therefore *merely* a ‘subjective’ feeling. Taylor sums up his claims about imports in five points:

1 That some of our emotions involve import-ascriptions;
2 That some of these imports are subject-referring;
3 That our subject-referring feelings are the basis of our understanding of what it is to be human;
4 That these feelings are constituted by the articulations we come to accept of them; and
5 That these articulations, which we can think of as interpretations, require language.[20]

The person, on this second model, has a rich language-like structure. There is an element of expression that is irreducible to more physicalist models. The person is multi-textured and deep in a way that the person on the first model is not. She is not to be understood merely by reporting her physical actions or putative intentions. Neither is the person fully self-perspicuous to herself. The person is disclosed to herself through her self-expression, which is always mediated through historical, social, culturally-saturated languages.

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[20] C. Taylor, pp.75–6.

Taylor describes the way in which we feel the force of both the first model, which he calls an Enlightenment model, and the second approach, which he describes as being Romantic:

> in our bafflement, we naturally split into two camps. This reflects the pull on us of the contradictory metaphysical demands: for the clarity and control offered by an objective account of ourselves and our world, on the one hand, and towards a recognition of the intrinsic, irreducible nature of expression, on the other. There are perhaps very few of us who do not feel the force of both of these demands. And perhaps just for this reason we divide with polemical fervour into opposing parties.[21]

Now the stage of Taylor's analysis that is really interesting for our purposes is his suggestive claim that as a civilization we live with a disastrously ill-thought-out compromise between the two models, such that

> in our scientific understanding we tend to be men of the Enlightenment, and we accept the predominance of Enlightenment – one might say, utilitarian – values in setting the parameters of public policy. Growth, productivity, welfare are of fundamental importance.

On the other side, Taylor comments that

> it is recognized that, without prejudice to the perhaps ultimately available scientific explanation which will be reductive, people experience things in expressive terms; something is 'more me'; or I feel fulfilled by this, not by that; or that prospect really 'speaks to me'. Along with this tolerance of experience goes a parallel in the public domain. The main limits of public policy are set by the requirements of production within the constraints of distribution, and these are meant to be established by scientific means, and in a utilitarian spirit. But private experience must be given its expressive fulfilment. There is a 'Romantik' of private life, which is meant to fit into a smoothly running consumer society.[22]

Quite correctly, Taylor complains that this compromise is intellectually 'rotten', combining 'the crassest scientism (objectivism) with the most subjectivist forms of expressivism'.[23] The subjectivism, which operates in the 'private' sphere (a sphere marked out and exploited by the market) tends towards, in Taylor's opinion, a 'formless sentimentalism'.

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[21] Ibid., p.246.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

At this point I will go beyond Taylor, although in a friendly trajectory. The sentimentalism of the subjectivism, I would say, is one of its less offensive manifestations. Much worse is the phoney privatization of the inner world of each hermetically sealed individual, of each romantic monad in a mechanical merely objective public domain. The romantic monad is infinitely interested in their own expressive depths (which we are told can never be expressed 'by language alone'), their own 'spirituality' (which can never be bound by the ties-that-bind, which is religion) and their own feelings (which are both unfathomable but ethically authoritative in personal relationships). One particularly fascinating feeling, which reveals to the romantic monad depths of their own pathos and beautiful loneliness, is guilt. The guilt is necessarily impotent, in that the person must remain unfathomable, misunderstood and inexpressible within the public domain (which is too objective and mechanical to do justice to the romantic monad); the person's political impotence is symptomatic of, and necessary to, their spiritual, expressive plenitude. Very little that is important about the romantic monad can be revealed in the public domain; we adopt certain roles, produce certain behaviour and attempt interaction, but always there is a veil between this public behaviour and myself *an sich*, the unfathomable source of all effects in the public domain, which only ever distort and veil my true nature. We might say, we can only ever say what we are not.

My suggestion here is that the romantic monad, as outlined above, is at least as plausible a model for our self-understanding as the more austere and intellectual Cartesian model. It is the romantic monad who is seduced in advertising; the monad who, because he is worth it, is invited to create his own universe in the process of being.me.com. Whole dramas are dedicated to the lives and loves of the romantic monad. So Ali McBeal operates in the public domain as a lawyer, which domain only conceals her intensely private and unfathomable world of feelings, characters, moral norms, fantasies and magic events. The public domain is made to look foolish, and ironically pompous, just because of its necessary failure to contain or express Ali's super-abundant, unfathomable and inexpressible inner-world.

Do we not begin to feel the shudder of recognition when we regard some modern constructions of the apophatic God? A being who is inexpressible, unfathomable, infinitely fascinating and self-fascinated, who is politically impotent, although perhaps one who 'suffers' in an empathetic manner which only further enriches the inner world of self-suffering, and glorious self-sensitivity. This being is the romantic monad that fills our television screens, advertising bill-boards, conversations, diaries and all other manifestations of our sloppy, intellectually disastrous, self-understanding. The apophatic God can be as straight-forward a projection of this intensely private romantic self as the Swinburnian model is of the Cartesian self. The apophatic God may be the ultimate source of the cosmos and the public domain, but as with ourselves, nothing is revealed to us in this domain about God, except what God is not. Again, just as with ourselves, God's political and historical impotence, and God's impassibility to petitionary prayer, are a necessary symptom of God's inexpressible self-absorption. So the proclamation of the apophatic God, far from being a letting God-be-God, is the projection into the heart of the created order of our loneliness, our political despair, and the conviction that in principle it is only ever worth being misunderstood, because to be understood is to fail to be romantically rich and self-sufficient.

The Apophatic God and Democracy

It is a familiar commonplace that the traditional patriarchal God can be seen as originating from, and conferring sanctification upon, human power structures. So God is conceived on the model of an earthly sovereign, but with the infinity function carried out so that God is the infinitely powerful King of Kings. Sallie McFague expresses this view-point when she writes,

> The primary metaphors in the tradition are hierarchical, imperialistic, and dualistic, stressing the distance between God and the world, and the total reliance of the world on God. Thus, the metaphors of God as king, ruler, lord, master, and governor, and the concepts that accompany them of God as absolute, transcendent and omnipotent permit no sense of mutuality, shared responsibility, reciprocity, and love.[24]

Again, talking of the apophatic God is supposed to avoid this direct projection of human power structures onto the God-head. It lies at the heart of McFague's approach, in that only an apophatic God enables us freely to construct ethical and humanizing models of God. If we can never form true beliefs about God, we are given freedom to speak of God in ways of our choosing, as long as we register the apophatic dimension by the use of metaphor that always carries an is/is not relationship to its referent.

My counter-suggestion here is that an apophatic God could again be seen as a striking mirror-image of the nature of parochial political arrangements in the West. An apophatic God is not the projection of a monarch or a feudal lord, but such a projection would hardly reflect contemporary political arrangements. The apophatic God can be seen to have striking parallels, not with monarchies or totalitarianisms, but with modern Western democracies. To suggest this parallel, I will briefly turn to the work of the political theorist Claude Lefort. My aim here is emphatically not to endorse Lefort's reading of democracy, or to discuss the nature of democracy; it is the more rhetorical aim of showing that there are a number of plausible enough narratives concerning what a 'projection' of human political arrangements, in a modern democracy, would look like.

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[24] S. McFague, *Models of God* (London: SCM Press, 1987), p.19.

Lefort[25] contrasts a modern democracy with a monarchy. In a monarchy the sovereign power is occupied and embodied by an individual (the King) or a group (the aristocracy). In an operating monarchy, there is an occupied place, both an appropriate place and a presence in that place, from which power comes. In a modern democracy, on the other hand, there is no site of power, and no occupying and embodiment of such a site. Sovereign power is removed from a place of overt rule to an absent site. So Lefort asserts that 'of all the regimes which we know' modern democracy 'is the only one to have represented power in such a way as to show that power is an *empty place* and to have maintained a gap between the symbolic and the real'.[26] The gap between the symbolic and the real can be seen in a constitutional democracy (such as modern Britain) where the Queen symbolically is the font of power, while really being powerless. Any symbol for power is removed by a gap from actual power in that, according to Lefort, 'power belongs to no one ... those who exercise power do not possess it; ... they do not, indeed, embody it'. This non-possession of power can be seen at the level of political agency, where no individual or group can embody or overtly represent power. Dallmyer, commenting on Lefort, comments that the only visible realities are 'power strategies, the mechanisms of government, and the individuals or groups wielding political authority at a given time; but the unity or space–time framework of the polity remains hidden'.[27]

Democracy puts an end to certainty, to presence and a meaningful site for authority. Lefort states:

> the important point is that democracy is instituted and inaugurated by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*. It inaugurates a history in which people experience a fundamental indeterminacy as to the basis of power, law and knowledge, and as to the basis of relations between self and other, at every level of social life.[28]

This fragmentation is met by notions such as 'the people' or 'the state', 'the nation', none of which represent substantial beings or entities. Lefort finds the concept of the 'people' particularly elusive. Power is exercised in the name of the people, although 'the identity of the people remains latent'.[29] Lefort sees at this point two opposite dangers when understanding the notion of the 'people'. One is to reify and divinize the notion of the 'people-as-One', and to claim in totalitarian style to represent the unified will of the people. With this 'phantasy of the People-as-One' we get the search 'for a substantial identity, for a body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division'.[30] The opposite danger when approaching talk of the 'people' is to declare this category entirely vacuous. So libertarians and radical anarchists will declare 'the people' to be an exploitative fiction, and will be sanctioned in non-democratic forms of direct and violent action. Lefort's intriguing suggestion is that 'the people' must be grasped neither as a substantial body nor as a nullity, but as an 'absent presence'. The 'people' is not a nothing, a completely vacuous phrase; but neither is the 'people' a something, a body or a place. It is a presence (not a nullity) that is absent (not a thing in a place).

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[25] Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Mercy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

[26] Ibid., pp.223–6.

[27] F. Dallmyer, *The Other Heidegger* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p.92.

[28] Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Mercy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), pp.17–19.

We remember that the second strand of contemporary apophatic constructions was one which talked of God as an 'absent-presence', where to experience God was to experience an absence that was not simply a non-existence or a nullity, but a significant absence, a present absence. Similarly to experience 'power' in a modern democracy is to experience an absence, which is not simply a non-existence or a nullity. There is 'power', but not present at any site, not represented by a substantial body, by anything.

So, once again, there is at least space for a warning shot across some apophatic constructions of God. If it is a dubious procedure to arrive at, infer or justify a way of talking about God by projecting parochial human political structures onto divine reality, some aspects of the apophatic God are in turn dubious. An apophatic God, in the sense of a present absence, is a remarkably effective projection of the diffuse nature of power that we find in modern democracies, and of the pervasive gap between the symbols of power and the actual mechanisms that are at work.

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[29] Ibid., p.13.

[30] Ibid., pp.18–20.

CHAPTER 10

Violence, Breaking and Gift: Realism and Postmodern Philosophy of Religion

Paul D. Janz: Tragedy, the Cross and Realism

A distinguished bishop, a priest and a peasant are in a great cathedral. In turn the priest and bishop approach the altar rail, beat their chests and declare, 'I am nothing, I am nothing.'[1] The humble peasant, moved to imitate, shuffles to the altar and similarly declares, 'I am nothing, I am nothing.' The bishop turns furiously and hisses in the priest's ear, 'who the hell does he think he is?' Contemporary theology can sometimes resemble this apocryphal anecdote, with theologians competing verbosely as to who can say the most about saying the least about God, thus abasing human reason, thus showing all the more (their awareness of) the glory and otherness of God. But, of course, there is always the suspicion, implied in the joke and hanging over theology, of an involuntary hubris on the part of the triumphant genuflector who has – in the case of the theologian – read enough Kant to know about their own humility. The poor peasant believer, such is the happy life for some, has never read his Kant, and so remains ignorant about the nature of his ignorance.

Paul D. Janz, in *God, the Mind's Desire*, has read enough Kant, and to be fair shows every sign of wanting to avoid hubris. Janz sets himself against the anti-rational assumption that both the human subject, and the structures surrounding the subject, are illusory and indeterminate social constructs. Such approaches end up endorsing a 'free-floating holism or coherence':[2] so truth is not 'out there' to be discovered, but is something that is constructed in constantly changing social matrices.

Such an approach is sometimes described as the critique of 'presence', where 'presence' stands for the notion that there is something genuinely and authoritively *there* (whether that be in our intentions, human history, natural science or cosmology), about which it is possible to be right or wrong, just because it is there prior to and independent of our enquiry into it. Janz makes a strong case that, no matter how jolly a 'lack of presence' might be for some social and human sciences, it simply won't do for theology, which must be dependent on God being something (although not some thing) out there (although not somewhere). Theology must uphold the '*integrity* of reason'.[3] Theological reasoning simply cannot tolerate the 'anti-realist' view that minds (be that of individuals, traditions or communities) construct truth rather than discover it 'because this always, in one way or another, reduces theology in the end to at best something like a sublime human endeavour'[4] (which amounts to a rejection of C in our terms).

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[1] The discussion of Paul D. Janz's *God, the Mind's Desire* and *Religion After Metaphysics* was published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 'Kant for Christmas: a way out of some very nasty problems', 17 December 2004 pp.4–6; the discussion of J.K.A. Smith's *Theology and Speech* was first published in *Religious Studies* vol. 41, no.2, June 2005, pp.233–237.

[2] Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, p.32.

The tension that shapes the nuanced struggle of Janz's book is given by the allegiance to realism, on the one hand and, on the other, a sense that thinking about anything tends to involve making 'possessive or jurisdictional claims' about it. Such possessiveness is of course particularly inappropriate when it comes to 'the "being" of revelation'. Hence the need for reason to be able to declare before the otherness of God, 'I am nothing', without simply saying nothing at all, and so reducing theology to an anti-realist relativism, where in fact any thing can be said.

We might think that the humility demanded would be amply demonstrated by qualification, along the lines, 'I know I might be wrong', with a judicious use of terms such as 'hopefully' and 'perhaps' rather than 'for sure' and 'definitely'. But this would be to misunderstand the nature of the problem with the 'possessiveness' of human thought. Underlying Janz's concern there is a pervasive post-Kantian anxiety that all thought and language is somehow almost 'contagious', contaminated with human constructs and concepts which impose themselves on our exploration of reality, and so veil it at the same time as revealing it. Kant discovered this contamination, a narrative goes, and we can never again speak in quite the same way. The world 'as it is in itself' is in principle not accessible to us; not because it exists 'somewhere else' (Janz considers this a foolish and dated interpretation of Kant) but because, for us, it cannot exist at all, being the epistemologically always vanishing 'world as it does not appear to us'.[5] When the world begins to appear, it passes from the realm of that which does not appear, and so becomes the world as it appears to us, rather than the world as it really is. If something is accessible to us, by definition, it is because our conceptual framework has made it so; if we know it, in some sense, we have made it. This is a particularly disastrous situation when we particularly want to speak of that which has made us and all things, the creator God.

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[3] Ibid., p.43.

[4] Ibid., p.99.

[5] In terms of the discussion in our Chapter 6, Janz is clearly committed to a one-realm interpretation of Kant. As we saw before, the more plausible a one-realm interpretation is made, the less it says anything controversial at all.

If you are unlucky enough to be a Kantian philosopher, and a believer, this is the sort of repeating, viciously circular problem that will drive you crazy. If you cannot manage to be only one of these things (generally to be recommended), then Janz provides an honest and imaginative account of what the options might be. Although Kant sets up the problem perspicuously, Janz finds the Kantian solution inadequate, it not being enough to assert that 'transcendence … is *not real*' but 'posited fundamentally as an orienting or regulative device for the understanding'.[6] Nonetheless Janz praises both Kant and Bonhoeffor for being on the right tracks, in that they reach for ways in which reason can articulate for itself its own penultimacy in the face of otherness.

A richer theological vein is found, Janz suggests, by reflecting on tragedy, and the idea that 'in tragedy we encounter a kind of finality or authority that enables us to project our questioning in reference to the transcendent in unique ways', just because in tragedy we meet 'truly with the sheer intractability of … the *finality of non-resolution*'.[7] Janz interweaves his interest in tragedy with a powerful Lutheran emphasis on the particularity of the incarnation, and the rupture announced between familiar human patterns of thinking about the ultimate, and the death of God on the cross. The scandal of 'the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ' presents us with 'a completely new kind of challenge to the authority of autonomous reason'.[8] In the face of this history the hearer is placed in 'a state of ontological risk that puts the old autonomous self-understanding in jeopardy … the new kind of self-understanding is this: that I have my being from God, and that if I have my being from God and not from myself, therefore I cannot understand myself from out of myself but only from God'.[9]

For all its undoubted originality and flair, Janz's argument conforms to a certain pattern frequently evident in contemporary thinkers preoccupied by Kantian anxieties. First of all there is a pained sense of the violence enacted by thought on the otherness of its object; then there is an interest in breaking the pride and autonomy of human thought, usually through some sort of paradox (in Kant's case the antinomies of reason, in Janz's the scandal of God on the cross); finally, there is some sort of gift from otherness that makes human thought, in some transformed way, again possible (for Janz the transformation that comes about through resurrection and salvation). The plurality of ways in which this schema – violence, breaking, gift – can be fleshed out (of which more below) is perhaps suggestive of nothing so much as the slightly arbitrary nature of each of the solutions.

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[6] Ibid., p.169.
[7] Ibid., p.170.
[8] Ibid., p.201.
[9] Ibid., p.212.

More fundamentally, there might be some concern about misplaced humility and triumphalism. Thinkers bow deeply and uncritically at the Kantian problem, and then pronounce confidently the unique indispensability of their own solution. So an uncharacteristically careless move is to be found at the very heart of Janz's case, when he summarizes, in syllogistic form, the Kantian problem:

(a) the real world is the world we live in – 'the world we experience, the world we breathe, eat, move, sleep, speak and think in'.
(b) 'the world we live in is ... *necessarily* the world as it appears to us'.
(c) Therefore: the 'real world is the world as it appears'.[10]

'Necessarily' (italics mine) is one of the most guarded words in the philosopher's vocabulary, and at this crucial point Janz leaves it unregulated. As it stands here the term is ambiguous between 'is at least', and 'is no more than'; to get to (c) Janz needs it to mean the latter, but the resources of his – and, we might worry, Kant's – argument really take us no further than the former. If we read (b) fairly intuitively as 'the world we live in is *at least* the world as it appears to us', we would see that certain counter-factuals could reveal the independence of the world ('were we not to live in the world, it would retain some of the same properties') and so perhaps defuse anxiety about the contamination of reality by thought. Thought can frame within itself, in speech, counter-factuals that manifest its own humility. Indeed the very function of the concept of 'truth', distinguished as it is from 'justified belief', must be to express in speech a humility about thought and reason. As we have seen in Chapter 6, the more plausible a one-realm intepretation of Kant is made, the less it says anything controversial at all. In terms of the schema of the book, Janz is circling around claim D, that 'we can, in principle, have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition'. Janz ends up taking up the correct attitude towards this claim (that we can have true beliefs), but for the wrong reasons (that it is only possible through tragedy and the cross); his adoption of these reasons is due to a too easy acceptance of the Kantian problem of knowing the world, and a neglect of the extent to which a one-realm interpretation of Kant is either implausible and interesting or true but trivial.

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[10] Ibid., p.148.

Religion and Realism 'after Metaphysics': Remembering the Ontological Difference

The three-fold pattern of 'violence, breaking and gift' flashes out frequently from the pages of *Religion After Metaphysics*, a recent collection of essays from some of the most eminent names in 'continental philosophy'; a collection that I would suggest is representative of a pervasive 'oral tradition' in philosophical theology. 'Metaphysics', like 'liberalism', is a word that immediately invokes a certain sense of hostility and superiority in a certain sort of philosophical breast. As with liberalism, there can be a sense of distant indebtedness, even a grudging gratitude, but the task – more or less universally endorsed by the contributors – is to attempt to remember a less brutal and technologically obsessed way of negotiating the world.

The violence wrought by a 'metaphysical' way of thinking has everything to do with the Kantian anxiety that our knowing the world is at the same time a manipulation and a veiling of the world. Thinkers influenced by Heidegger tend to speak of this simultaneous act of knowing/manipulating as the forgetting of the 'ontological difference': the difference between the world-as-it-appears-to-us (appropriated and veiled by our ways of knowing) and the world-as-it-is-in-itself. This forgetting takes place, according to Heidegger, at the very beginning of Western philosophy, which unfolds as a 'history of nihilism', a 'history' marked by the pervasive dominance of manipulative/objective thinking, eventually extending to the thinker's very self-understanding. The collection is remarkable for its relatively clear articulations – from Vattimo, Batnitzky, Caputo, Pippin, Wrathall and Marion – of this 'forgetfulness', and for the fecundity of the memory aids offered. For all their variety, they can be seen to revolve around the conviction that the confidence of this way of 'knowing' must be broken, and something of the nature of a gift received.

For Batnitzky the gift can be found in the pre-philosophical foundations of human goodness, remembered by Levinas's emphasis on the encounter of the face of the other. Pippin is bleaker about the possibility of receiving the gift, expounding Nietzsche's description of our despair, that we suffer from a 'great longing', a 'desire beyond any need'.[11] Dreyfus points to the salvation offered by Kierkegaard's God-man (Christ), 'the source of infinity and eternity required by finite beings like us if we are to be saved from despair'.[12] Wrathall finds resources within Heidegger's notion of the 'four-fold', an enigmatic emanation from Heidegger's later thought, where he invokes the earth, sky, the mortals and the gods as a way of remembering. Wrathall attempts to render this less enigmatic by commenting that 'the four-fold are meant quite literally': the 'earth is the earth', the 'sky is the sky' and the 'divinities', well they '*are* divine beings' (the original italics are suspiciously unhelpful).[13] Marion obliges our three-fold scheme by speaking explicitly of the need for 'the gift', a form of 'donation' from being (*es gibt*) that 'has no need of illegitimately obfuscating the giving (*Geben*, being) … since it is the right of the giving itself'.[14] Marion, as ever, is exciting, but one wonders if his answer does not amount to announcing 'the solution to the problem of forgetting is … "THE SOLUTION"'. After all, if the problematic violence of our knowing is due to our way of receiving being, the question remains of how we are to receive the gift. Furthermore, if the 'onto-theology' of imagining God as 'just another being' is to be overcome, we have to resist the natural grammar of the notion of 'gift', which is that there is a distinct agent who has sent it, and for a purpose.

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[11] Robert Pippin, 'Love and Death in Nietzsche', in Mark Wrathall (ed.), *Religion After Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.20.

[12] Hubert L. Dreyfus, 'Christianity without onto-theology: Kierkegaard's account of the self's movement from despair to bliss', in *Religion After Metaphysics*, p.101.

Vattimo is perhaps the only thinker to reckon with the full nuance of Heidegger's narrative: that the forgetting of the ontological difference is not something 'we do', but is rather a way in which being itself unfolds itself to us. To acknowledge this (which is not the same as understanding it, an almost impossible task) is to remove some of the preachiness that can surround attempts 'to overcome metaphysics'. So Vattimo is true to Heidegger when commenting that it is not the result of a 'causal play of forces' that 'the various metaphorical languages [of metaphysics] have imposed themselves as true and proper, nor can their relationship be arbitrarily modified'.[15] The 'end of metaphysics' is a certain way in which being reveals itself to us in history: from Plato onwards we tend to see the world as an object to be manipulated; this eventually involves making ourselves objects also, which is the beginning of the end of metaphysics in that we cannot reduce ourselves to objects, as our 'very existence' is made up of non-object-like realities, 'projects, memories, hopes and decisions'.[16] In place of metaphysics we have an increasing relativism of truth to interpretation, which Vattimo interprets as the world giving itself 'in a less peremptory, weakened form'.[17] In a sentiment that resonates with Janz's treatment, Vattimo draws parallels between this 'self-weakening' of being's self-disclosure with the 'core of the Judeo-Christian message', where God 'abandons his own transcendence', and then redeems it through the

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[13] Mark Wrathall, 'Between the earth and sky: Heidegger on life after the death of God', in *Religion After Metaphysics*, p.79.

[14] Jean-Luc Marion, 'The "end of metaphysics" as a possibility', in *Religion After Metaphysics*, p.181.

[15] Gianni Vattimo, 'After onto-theology: philosophy between science and religion', in *Religion After Metaphysics*, p.32.

[16] Ibid., p.33.

[17] Ibid., p.35.

'Incarnation and the Cross', such that the 'desacralizing phenomena characteristic of modernity are the authentic aspects of the history of salvation'.[18]

There is a striking contrast between Vattimo's rather beautiful treatment of secularism (as a form of divine self-emptying in history) and Rorty's evangelical zeal in the cause of science. Rorty, dressed in full combat fatigues, announces that 'the battle between religion and science … was a contest between institutions both of which claimed cultural supremacy. It was a good thing for both religion and science that science won the battle'.[19] Indeed. How alarming it would be if it were otherwise, and American presidential elections were partly decided on the basis of evangelical Christian beliefs, and international conflicts waged on the back of fundamentalist convictions. Charles Taylor's typically articulate contribution could be directly addressed to thinkers like Rorty, who fail to see that modern secularism is not a 'neutral' standpoint, the result of subtracting superstition from knowledge, but is rather an alternative theological vision, revolving around 'images of power, or untrammelled agency, of spiritual self-possession'.[20]

If Vattimo is the only thinker to be immersed in the full nuance of Heidegger's 'history of nihilism', Peperzak is the only contributor who really challenges the viability of Heidegger's whole narrative. The result is as enjoyable, brief and refreshing as a fart at a fiercely tribal academic seminar. Peperzak points out, when many would be too nervous, that, for Heidegger's history to hold, one should really have something to say about all the thinkers Heidegger does not mention: all post-Aristotelian Greeks from 300BC to AD600; most Christian thinkers from Justin (AD200) to Cusanus (AD1500); all Jewish and Muslim thinkers; all English and American thinkers, and all French thinkers except Descartes. Perhaps the lesson Heidegger is teaching us is that, if one is going to tell a history, it had better be a big one.

James K.A. Smith: Incarnation as the Condition of Possibility for Realism

All these thinkers can be seen again to revolve, as does so much continental philosophy of religion, around claim D, that 'we can, in principle, have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition'. As with Janz, they tend to the correct conclusion (that we can), but for the wrong reasons (only because of some sort of gift). A more sustained analysis of this movement of thought is provided by J.K.A. Smith's fine book, *Speech and*

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[18] Ibid.

[19] Richard Rorty, 'Anti-clericism and atheism', in *Religion After Metaphysics*, p.43.

[20] Charles Taylor, 'Closed world structures', in *Religion After Metaphysics*, p.55.

Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation. An investigation of Smith's argument will further expose some of the theological, and philosophical, dubiety of post-Kantian approaches marked by the pattern of 'violence, breaking and gift'.

Smith sets out to answer the question of 'how to avoid not speaking?'. On the one hand, we must not avoid speaking, because we are called to worship and praise God: a completely apophatic theology is not an option. But, at the same time, we do not know how to speak of God, because of the 'violence' enacted when we attempt to comprehend a non-linguistic reality in conceptual terms. This violence is particularly destructive when the reality being spoken of is alterity in the highest, God, 'who exceeds all categories and transcends all conceptual determination'.[21] Smith attempts to indicate a 'third way' between silence and 'violent' reductionist speech. He does this by drawing on a range of sources: Levinas's concept of the 'other', Marion's account of the 'saturated phenomenon', the early Heidegger's treatment of concepts as 'formal indicators' that point to that which they cannot adequately capture, the notion of the 'secret' as developed by Kierkegaard, and an 'incarnational' model of meaning as expressed by Augustine.

The usual suspects now line up for consideration: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Levinas and Marion. Levinas shows his respect for the problem of violence when addressing the other, in that he expresses concern at the totalizing relation of knowledge, where the known being is 'objectified' by means of the concept, 'a third term, a neutral term', 'which deprives the known being of its alterity by forcing the other to appear in terms of "the general" '.[22] Levinas seeks to overcome the 'injustice' involved in such a reduction of the other to the same, by calling for 'an-other phenomenology', a 'relation which is otherwise than knowledge'.[23] Marion similarly objects to the way in which 'the phenomenon, in order to appear, has had to measure up to certain standards or criteria of phenomenality', such that 'its right to appear has been established by conditions or laws which govern appearance'.[24] The solution, for Marion, is to recognize that it is the phenomenon itself which sets the rules for appearance. The phenomenon as gift is liberated from the violence and injustice inflicted upon a phenomenon when it is understood as the always-already-appropriated phenomenon of Kantian experience. The phenomenon is not appropriated and constructed by the subject, but rather overwhelms the perceiver; it is given excessively, 'more than adequately, exceeding meaning, overflowing the intention of the ego, leaving, instead of an excess of meaning, an overabundance of donation'.[25] God, as the saturated phenomenon par excellence, fails 'to appear' only because of an 'excess which bedazzles the intentional aim'.[26]

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[21] James K.A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.3.

[22] Ibid., p.29.

[23] Ibid., p.31.

[24] Ibid., p.34.

Ultimately, and for not entirely clear reasons, Smith rejects the solutions proffered by both Levinas and Marion. His objections sometimes focus more on their negative characterization of phenomenology as necessarily involving violence, with Smith commenting, 'if the other person can show up in phenomenology, why can't God?'[27] At other times, and on first blush inconsistently with the first objection, Smith objects that the solutions offered by Levinas and Marion will not work, because phenomenology demands that the transcendent appears in the immanent to be known, and so spoken of. In that this is the demand of phenomenology, Smith's anxiety seems to be Levinas and Marion have by a piece of wishful thinking failed to address the inevitable objectification and reduction-to-immanence of the 'other' or the 'saturated phenomenon'. So, of Marion, Smith comments that 'for God to be given more than adequately he must be given at least adequately, which would require that God be given immanently – thereby undoing his transcendence. Thus Marion's proposal, which seeks to maintain God's transcendence, would seem to fail to allow God to appear, or unwittingly consign God to the same conditions that he seeks to displace'.[28] It is worth keeping an eye on this ambivalent movement on Smith's part: at times upholding the demands of phenomenology, and at times critiquing those same demands as over-rigorous. As I will suggest, contained within this ambivalence is a seed of insight into what might be called the 'problem of the problem', as well as a needlessly critical presentation of non-theological solutions, which is perhaps necessary to the rather imperialist theological solution Smith arrives at in the end.

Heidegger is lauded for searching in the correct direction for a non-violent way of speaking. In view here is Heidegger's critique of the prioritizing of a treatment of the world as an array of objects 'present-at-hand', the nature of which is best grasped by the objective gaze of the observer. The *formale Anzeige* is an attempt at a 'non-objectifying and non-violating mode of description',[29] such that 'formal indication maintains and *respects* the alterity and incommensurability of the phenomenon'.[30] The proper way of speaking 'attempts to describe pretheoretical experience' but in such a way 'that it honors or "respects" the dynamics and excess of "life", which cannot be stilled or grasped by theoretical concepts'.[31]

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[25] Ibid., p.39.
[26] Ibid., p.41.
[27] Ibid., p.51.
[28] Ibid., p.55.
[29] Ibid., p.86.
[30] Ibid.

Smith's approval extended to Heidegger seems to owe something to a sort of 'vitalism', where language, by its own self-deprecation and self-reflexive declaration of partiality and inadequacy, points beyond itself to a pre-theoretical 'life'. Smith brings Kierkegaard's 'secret' into play here: where 'truth' is a (pre-theoretical and existentially concerning) happening rather than a static entity to be approached as an object (objectively). In as much as this 'truth' cannot be objectified, it cannot be a 'public' and direct communication. Rather it must be indirect, secret: 'it is only indirect communication of religious truth which maintains this essential secret: that the God-relationship is essentially secret. The absolute relationship with the absolute is a site of deep interiority ... an "essential secret" '.[32]

Heidegger and Kierkegaard are on the right trajectory, providing indications for the way the phenomenology of religion might develop. Smith at this point shows properly Radically Orthodox instincts (*Speech and Theology* is the seventh book in the 'Radical Orthodoxy' series), finding the highest theological achievement to the problem of violence and speaking in the figure of Augustine.

The violence of speech is overcome in Augustine's understanding by a two-fold movement. On the one hand, it is overcome by God's incarnational appearance, a condescension to the conditions of the finite. Although God exceeds the Word, the Word is nonetheless a genuine manifestation and revelation, whereby God appears but is not reduced. The second movement to overcome the violence of predication or the silence of apophatics is a responsive one: our attitude of praise and worship, which Smith describes as a non-objectifying and non-predicative discourse.

Kataphatics reduces God's transcendence to immanence, and apophatics reduces God to mere transcendence. Both kataphatics and apothetics, Smith considers, are grounded in the '*mythos* of original violence, whereas the incarnational paradigm operates on the basis of a non-oppositional, analogical account of difference rooted in the Christian *mythos*'.[33] The problem of theological speech is found in God's own speaking, where the incarnation is God's own refusal to avoid speaking.

Smith goes on to make an extraordinarily bold claim, hardly justified by the argument that precedes it: 'I am suggesting that it is the Christian confession and understanding of the Incarnation which ought to undergird a general philosophy of language.'[34] Here we see that Smith's book belongs doctrinally in the Radical Orthodoxy series of which it is a part: there is the usual description of 'secular' approaches, reliant upon a *mythos* or 'original violence'; then there is the invocation of the peaceful, analogical Christian *mythos* that understands the secular better than the secular understands itself; finally there is an invocation of a certain theological position to answer definitively a wider social/philosophical problem (in this case, a problem in philosophy of language).

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[31] Ibid., p.87.

[32] Ibid., p.90.

[33] Ibid., p.154.

[34] Ibid., p.155.

At the origin of the arguments generated by Smith, and by the contributors to *Religion After Metaphysics*, there is a motivating anxiety, which may turn out to be the most problematic assumption of the book. This anxiety is the concern that in some sense speaking about that which is other – whether that be the external world, other people or God – is intrinsically 'violent', in that it reduces the rich reality of the 'other' to the categories by which it is appropriated by the speaking subject. The problem of speaking about God is just a special case, albeit an extreme example, of a general problem of the relationship between speech and world.

Even without challenging this account of the problem, we might be alarmed at the way that theology is then invoked. We have a philosophical gap in our theory of language (how to speak of that which is not speech). This gap needs to be filled. We bring in God (in this case God's speaking in the Incarnation) to fill the gap. But we might worry that we have seen this sketch before. Descartes faced the problem of the relationship between mind and world (of which the relationship between speech and world is clearly a variant). He was unable to fill a gap in his theory (because of the persistent problem of scepticism) and so invoked God (via the ontological argument) to underwrite his epistemology: because there is a God, I know that where I have a clear and distinct idea, my idea is reliable. Here the origins of the phenomenological problem are revealed to be genuinely Cartesian: we have a problem in our general epistemology, and so we bring in God to solve it. This is dangerous, in that God is made to fit the shape required by our general problem, and is liable to be squeezed out all together if the problem disappears or – it seems – is solved more elegantly by another means.

It is possible to dissent from this whole project on the more philosophical ground that there simply is not such a problem in the relationship between speech and world. To presume that there is is to assume the disgraced (from Smith's point of view) Cartesian position of an observer framing theories about an external environment, rather than the preferred Heideggerian notion of our being always already engaged in the world. It is not that there is 'world' or 'otherness' out there, to be trapped and contaminated by speech; rather 'world' and 'otherness' is always already language shaped, and language is always already a part of the world and otherness.

Granted there is still the special problem of the relationship between God and speech. But this is how it should be: God as a unique and specific problem of otherness, rather than God as just the extreme case of a universal epistemological problem of otherness. The answer to the problem of how to speak about God without reducing God to the 'same' (the conceptual categories by which we talk about God) could then have something to do with disambiguating two possible meanings of the verb 'to comprehend' (*comprehensio*). A promising framework for the solution of how we can speak of comprehending God is then provided by Aquinas, who observes that '"to comprehend" can mean two things'. It can mean 'to contain something … in this sense God cannot be comprehended either by the mind or by anything else'. Or there can be a second 'broader' meaning, which is 'the opposite of letting something slip … it is in this sense that God is comprehended by the blessed, I hold him and will not let him go' (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia.12.7). Such a conclusion, one suspects, would be entirely acceptable to Smith; perhaps the means by which he gets there are unnecessarily convoluted, leaving too many hostages to fortune (specifically, owing too much to supposed gaps in general 'secular' philosophy of language).

Thinkers gripped by the Kantian problem can fail to question the master enough, and show a tendency to be too ebullient about their own (more or less idiosyncratic) solutions to the Kantian dilemma (speak and be violent, or remain silent and uncommitted). Towards the end of *God, the Mind's Desire*, Paul Janz comments, 'orthodox Christianity actually demands … [a] kind of empirical realism along roughly Kantian lines'[35]. I know what he means, but one suspects that in a calmer moment Janz might not intend to say quite this. A rough Kantian might need Christianity, but it can hardly be true that Christianity needs a rough Kantianism. This entirely forgivable slip of the pen is the sort of thing that renders philosophical theologians rather comic, albeit lovable, figures to other believers. They may have in mind the figure of a certain peasant: not the apocryphal peasant in the cathedral, but a first-century Palestinian carpenter, more inclined to speak of compassion, forgiveness and the Kingdom of God than the necessity of Kantian realism.

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[35] Paul D. Janz, *God, the Mind's Desire*, pp. 216–7.

CHAPTER 11

The Brokenness of Divine Language

The realism that I have set out to defend has both a metaphysical and an epistemological component. As well as being concerned to argue for a fact-asserting construal of religious language (A), and a non-epistemic conception of truth (B), with the way things are being as construed as independent of human cognition (C), I am also concerned to defend the thesis that in religious discourse we can hope to have true beliefs about what is the case independent of human cognition. It will be useful at this stage to state more precisely the position I will be defending in this chapter.

With some p (I do not want to be committed to 'with any p'), where p is a truth about God, it is logically possible for us to believe p.

As a short-hand for this logical possibility of having true beliefs I will speak of the 'realist hope'. This seems an advantageous phrase, in that 'hope' can feed on a relatively meagre diet of possibility accompanied by weak beliefs, but can have an influence on our behaviour and commitments that is not in proportion (without being disproportionate) to the 'evidence' we have.[1] This leaves it open for us to have grounds, or even rational justification to the point of knowledge about p, but it is no part of my brief here to develop or defend these possibilities. The realist hope is necessary but not sufficient for these further developments. Holding that one could in principle have true beliefs about God does not commit one to any fuller conception of the type or extent of justification one has for those beliefs.

Epistemic anti-realism, centred specifically on God, manifests itself frequently in contemporary philosophical theology, whenever it is allowed that there is a truth independent of what we believe about the truth, and independent of human cognition, but about which – owing to God's otherness and our relationship with God – it is logically impossible to have true beliefs.

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[1] The influence is not 'disproportionate' if one considers that where matters of ultimate concern are involved (as with faith) it is not necessarily irrational to make a commitment to a belief that goes beyond the rational evidence one has for it. I do not defend this thesis, and do not need to for the purposes of my argument. A defence can be found in R.M. Adams, *The Virtue of Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Anyone who cannot stomach this position is at liberty to ignore this possible implication of 'hope' and rest just with the logical possibility that, where p is true, we can have a true belief that p.

The route into epistemic anti-realism considered in this chapter dwells on the indeterminacy of our language when talking about God. Precisely stated, the claim is that it is impossible to have a true belief that p (where p is a truth-claim about God), because we cannot have any determinate grasp of the meaning of p (where p is a truth-claim about God). I will call this argument the 'indeterminacy argument'.

I will offer a two-pronged response to this argument. First of all, I will object to the way in which the 'indeterminacy argument' carves up the distinctions between univocal/analogical and equivocal applications of the same word, and will offer an alternative way to delineate these categories. Secondly, I will use my alternative distinctions to defend and even recommend 'anthropomorphic' talk about God. The conclusion will be that we can use words of God and not-God in the same sense, or that, where we cannot, this is for substantial theological reasons, which are quite compatible with the realist hope.

An Argument for Radical Indeterminacy

I will now offer as careful a statement as I can of an argument[2] against the possibility of a determinate meaning for p, where p is a putative true belief about God. This argument requires the following definitions (or something close to them) of what is meant by univocal/analogical and equivocal application of words.

a Univocal 'same' meaning: two tokens of the same word have the same meaning when they are applied to qualitatively near-identical types of object, which we experience in nearly identical sorts of ways (for example the 'red' hat/the 'red' box).

b Analogical 'strained' meaning: two tokens of the same word have a strained analogical meaning when they are applied to objects that are ontologically similar in some respects but not others, and which are experienced in ways similar in some respects but not others (for example, the dog 'loves' me/my partner 'loves' me).

c Equivocal 'different/indeterminate' meaning: two tokens of the same word have different meanings when they are applied to objects that are ontologically similar in no or very few respects.

With these definitions in place, the argument runs as follows:

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[2] The argument is not drawn from any one author, but is intended as a development of themes found in Aquinas and his more apophatic interpreters such as H. McCabe and B. Davies. I will draw attention to the parallels between my argument and theirs in the footnotes.

Theory of Meaning

(1) The meanings of words are controlled by the relevant experiences through which (i) we learnt those words, and (ii) we apply those words. The nature of the reality described controls the meaning of the words. It is not possible to abstract the meaning of words from the specific (mundane) ontological context and background.[3]

So where we have 'Ø calculates', according to the kind of thing Ø is, we will have different senses of calculating. This claim can be given a general schematic form: with any predicate p, where we ascribe the same p to different Øs, in virtue of there being different Øs, we will have different senses of p.

So in the case of 'calculating' the difference in meaning must be something along the following lines: 'a computer *calculating*' – here it is part of the meaning of 'calculating' that the activity is carried out by a non-conscious entity, constituted of non-organic matter; 'a human-being *calculating*' – here it is part of the meaning of 'calculating' that the activity is carried out by a self-conscious entity, using organic matter and neural circuits.

In the case of 'loving' the difference in meaning must be unpacked along the following lines: 'the *love* of one's partner' – here it is part of the meaning of 'love' that it is a disposition that belongs to an organic, embodied, self-conscious being; 'the *love* of a disembodied being' – here it is part of the meaning of 'love' that it is a disposition that belongs to a non-organic, disembodied being.

Conception of God

(2) God's nature is radically dissimilar from the nature of anything that is not-God.

Application to Talk about God

(3) We see that every word applied of God, and of that which is not-God, has a radically different meaning. The nature of the thing described is radically

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[3] Aquinas makes a claim along these lines in *Summa Theologica*, Ia.13.1: 'Aristotle says *words express thoughts and thoughts represent things*; so clearly words refer mediately to things by way of our mental conceptions: we talk about things in the way we know them. Now we have already seen that in this life we cannot see God's substance but know him only from creatures: as their creaturely and transcendent cause. So that is where our words for God come from: from creatures. Such words, however, will not express the substance of God as he is in himself, in the way words like *human being* express the substance of what human beings are in themselves, expressing what defines human beings and declaring what makes them human beings.'

different (God/not-God) resulting in a difference between the meanings of the two words (the one used of God, the other of that which is not-God).[4] This vast difference in meaning is such that words applied of God and not-God are at worst equivocal, and at best *indeterminately analogical*. By this I mean that although we might know that God is really 'wise', we do not know at all what it is for God to be 'wise'. We have no determinate idea of the extent to which our conception is adequate or inadequate. When there is strictly no determinate content to a word, there is no meaning.

As the difference in the nature of the realities described is so vast (God and not-God are not at all alike), the difference in meaning is vast, certainly too vast even to aim for a strained but determinate analogical sense (where we have some notion of the respects in which God and not-God are similar). We can have a sense of what the word means when applied to some kinds of not-God, as it is from this sort of application that we learn the meaning of the words, and from which words get their meaning; but when the word is applied to God, the difference in meaning is vast and *indeterminate*, owing to the indeterminate difference between the nature of God and that which is not-God.[5]

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[4] At this point it *seems* that we depart from Aquinas who is prepared to allow that 'because our knowledge and our words for God come from creatures, the words we use for him express him in ways more appropriate to the kind of creatures we know' (ST, 1a.13.2), but nevertheless insists that words said of God and creatures are not 'said purely equivocally, as some people have held. For that would mean nothing could be known or proved about God from creatures, but all such argument would commit the logical fallacy of equivocation. And that contradicts both the philosophers who have demonstrated many truths about God, and St. Paul, who said in Romans 1 (20) that *the hidden things of God can be clearly understood from the things he has made*' (ST, 1a.13.5). Interpreting Aquinas on this matter is a complex issue, not to be settled in a short footnote. There are agnostic readings which feel able to accommodate his self-distancing from an equivocal account of religious language, but which still render indeterminate the meanings of words applied to God. Such interpretations can be found in D. Burrell, *Aquinas, God and Action* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), and in G. Hughes (see fn.5 below). The 'indeterminacy argument' has close affinities with these agnostic readings of Aquinas. For interpretations of Aquinas which stress his positive account of God's attributes, expressed by the analogous use of words, see Ralph McInerny, 'Can God be Named by Us', *Review of Metaphysics*, 32 (1978), 55–73, and P. Sherry, 'Analogy Today', *Philosophy*, 51 (1976), 431–46.

[5] Exactly this position is held by G. Hughes (ed.), *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology* (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1987), ch.3, 'Aquinas and the Limits of Agnosticism'. Hughes invites us to imagine a scientist – completely ignorant about animals – who knows what it is for urine to be healthy (healthy-U), but not for animals to be healthy (healthy-A), except that all and only those animals who have healthy-U can be described as healthy-A. Hughes is able to conclude that 'although health-A and health-U are equivocal terms, their senses are not unrelated. Health-A is whatever it takes to produce specimens which are healthy-U. But, unlike the vet, the chemist cannot say any more than this about health-A, since he does not know

(4) We must conclude that language when applied to God has gone so far from its moorings in mundane situations of justified application grounded on experience that it is indeterminate what such language means. We can then speak of language 'having gone on holiday' or of 'language idling' or 'being broken'. All of these are poetic ways of describing the phenomena of language learnt and used in mundane situations being applied to a non-mundane situation.

J.F. Ross: Talking about God and Predicate Schemas

The offensive on the 'indeterminacy argument' should begin by pointing out that the definitions of univocity/analogy and equivocacy needed by this approach are highly problematic. The argument claims that one word is more or less univocal with another, depending upon the 'ontological similarity' of the types of object which the words describe. But the notion of 'ontological similarity of types of object' is hopelessly vague and indeterminate. First of all, the question arises, 'how similar and in what respects?' More seriously we can go on to question how relevant being 'an ontologically similar type' is. A cricket ball and a masked ball are both 'colourful',[6] and intuitively we seem to want to say that the word is being used univocally. On both sets of definitions

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what it does take to produce healthy specimens' (p.45). In application to talking about God, Hughes allows 'for the sake of argument ... the principle which Aquinas and Aristotle accepted, that effects in some sense resemble ("represent") their causes' (p.46), but at the same time cautions us that 'when we are dealing with God and creatures, the resemblance cannot be unpacked in terms of specific, or even generic, identity. It seems to me that the consequence of this position is that we are never going to be able to spell out the respect in which the resemblance holds, since any concept we might think of using would suggest at least a generic similarity; and the consequence of that is that we are never going to be able to replace our working definition of God or his attributes with a more adequate one. Just so, the chemist, deprived of any chance of consulting the vet, will not be able to provide any definition of "healthy-A" which has any term in common with his definition of "healthy-U". I therefore think that the notion of representation as Aquinas uses it counts in favour of the agnostic interpretation of his theory of meaning of terms used analogously of God' (Ibid.). This is a case, in my terminology, of indeterminate analogy.

[6] I borrow this example from Janice Thomas's article, 'Univocity and Understanding God's Nature', in *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology*, ed. G. Hughes (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1987), p.97. The point being made is well summed up by Susan Haack (in 'Equivocacy: A Discussion of Sommers' Views', *Analysis*, 28, April 1968, 159) where she claims that 'heterotypical predication is not always equivocal'. I am disagreeing therefore with G. Hughes's claim (in *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology* that a reasonable test for equivocacy *is* 'whether the things referred to are of very different kinds' (p.50).

above it seems that a masked ball and a cricket ball are dissimilar ontological types if any two things are, and so we would be compelled to admit the words were being used at best analogically. If we are to hold that a masked ball and a cricket ball are ontologically similar types on very general grounds such that one is a *material* object and the other an event constituted by the movement of the *material*, or both dependent on a 'cultural institution with rules and conventions', then just about any two things are going to be ontologically similar types at the right level of generality. Either we generate equivocacy all over the place ('colourful' balls and dances) or, in avoiding this result, we have a blanket univocacy (because everything is ontologically similar in some general respects).

J.F. Ross,[7] followed by R. Swinburne,[8] avoids these difficulties by using a semantic rather than an ontological way of carving up the categories univocal/analogical/equivocal. According to Ross, the sense of a word (the contribution the word makes to the meaning of the sentence) is to be recognized and distinguished from other senses by its meaning-related substitutes. A word has the same sense as another word *iff* it has the same 'predicate-schema' as another word, where a word's 'predicate schema' is its near-synonyms, contraries, determinates, determinables and antonyms.

Armed with the notion of a predicate schema, we are able to draw up the following definitions:

(A′) Univocal 'same' meaning: two words have the same meaning *iff* they have the same predicate schema.
(B′) Analogical 'same' meaning: two words have an analogical meaning *iff* they have overlapping, but not identical, predicate schemas. Analogy can be a matter of degree.
(C′) Equivocal 'different' meaning: two words are merely equivocal *iff* their predicate schemas have no, or very little, overlap.

I am happy to accept this way of carving up the distinctions univocal/analogical and equivocal. This semantic way of carving up the field not only avoids the difficulties of the ontological approach, but would seem appropriate given that univocal/analogical and equivocal are semantic categories (concerned with the properties of words in relationship with one another). There is the further consideration that before one can decide whether a word (with a particular sense) applies to an object (with certain ontological properties), one must have a concept of the kind of sense that the word has. It is entirely appropriate to use semantic distinctions between the categories univocal/ analogical and equivocal, given that it is only within a language and its rules that we can *say* what a 'similarity' amounts to.

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[7] J.F. Ross, *Portraying Analogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), esp. Introduction, chs., 1 & 7.

[8] R. Swinburne, 'Analogy and Metaphor', ed. G. Hughes, *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology* (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1987).

Having, as promised, provided a semantic way to carve up the distinctions between univocal/analogical and equivocal applications of the same word – in contrast to the ontological way used by the 'indeterminacy argument' – I now move on to use these alternative distinctions to defend and even recommend 'anthropomorphic' talk about God. The conclusion will be that we can use words of God and not-God in the same sense or that, where we cannot, this is for substantial theological reasons, which are quite compatible with the realist hope.

Speaking Anthropomorphically

The epistemic anti-realist claims that words used of not-God have an indeterminately different meaning from those same words used of God. A more precise way of formulating what is involved in making this claim can be given as follows:

With any predicate p, where we ascribe the same p to different Øs, in virtue of there being different Øs, we will have different senses of p.

In this section I will attempt to show that the viability of the above statement evaporates when we attend to the actual use of our language. My counter-claim will be that we are used to attributes being realized in radically different ways (in different Øs) but the attribute being the 'same kind of thing'.[9]

If we reflect upon our use of language in the 'mundane' realm, we find that there are abstract common properties that can underlie enormous differences between human and non-human states, and between states in different humans. So, for instance, 'Professor Swinburne weighs ten stone' is realized in flesh, bone and blood, whereas 'the filing cabinet weighs ten stone'[10] is realized by steel; yet still there are not 'two senses' of 'weighs', with one applicable to flesh and blood, and another applicable to steel. Similarly we might talk of a

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[9] Here of course I am in agreement with Alston's seminal article, 'Functionalism and Theology', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 22 (1985), 221–30. I am also indebted, throughout this section on 'anthropomorphic predicates', to Schoen's article, 'Anthropomorphic Concepts of God', *Religious Studies*, 26(1), March 1990, 123–39.

[10] This example is given by R. Swinburne in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.55.

'computer calculating' and of my 'calculating',[11] where one is done in binary computer circuits and one in my organic grey-matter; again we do not have two different senses of calculating, but calculating realized in two different ways. In an analogous way the same recording may be made on a tape and CD.[12] The realization is different, but we have the same performance. There is a firm distinction, which should be borne in mind, between two words having analogous or equivocal senses, and the application of two (univocal) words to their respective objects involving the attribution of a property *whose instantiation amounts to something very different*.

Similarly, in ascribing the attribute 'love' to humans, we do not worry about the specific way in which that love is realized. If we discovered that very different physiological processes were involved with different people, and so that the disposition/intention was realized in very different ways, we would still not be pushed into insisting on there being different senses of love *when there were different physical realizations of it*. Our account of 'love' in terms of dispositions and intentions is prior to and independent of any particular instantiation/realization of it. It precisely needs to be, for the reason that we are only able to individuate neural processes/conscious feels/behaviour as realizations of love, by asking whether or not these processes/conscious feels/ behaviour manifest *this* disposition/intention. Of course there are different kinds of love (jealous/tender/paternal), but the difference here is in terms of dispositions being picked out, rather than in virtue of a difference in realization.

So, in religious contexts, characterizations of God need not be based on an (impossible) study of the inner configurations of the divine, or by reading off directly from divine behaviour. Neither do we claim any direct access to the divine mind in terms of specific feelings or conscious states. All of these attributions of love can be removed from any specific details of the divine mind, or the inner and unfathomable mechanisms of the divine nature.[13]

It is perhaps the peculiar advantage of anthropomorphic concepts that they are so detachable from any specific fixing to a material instantiation. Other attributes that we apply to humans, such as moral goodness, a sense of justice, knowledge and power, are all detachable from any particular material instantiation or manifestation. This is not so true of predicates that are not so particularly derived from our experience of persons. So 'red' or 'two feet square' are not detachable from some notion of extended space.

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[11] See Schoen, 'Anthropomorphic Concepts of God', pp.126–30.

[12] Example given by J. Thomas in *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology*, ed. G. Hughes, p.88.

[13] I have drawn these considerations from Schoen, 'Anthropomorphic Concepts of God', p.133.

That God's nature is unique, and that God is other, need not prevent anthropomorphic characterizations. We can use a concept like 'love' and know what we mean, without being committed to every association that word has in other contexts, and without having to be committed as to the exact nature of the reality being described. When we use the word 'love' of a mature adult affection, we do not imply the frenzied emotional state of the adolescent. In a similar way, when we ascribe 'love' to God we do not imply the faults and flaws of human love (immoral self-seeking traits, the possibility of change and infidelity). Our ordinary linguistic practice indicates that we can, do and must abstract from over-specific contexts and backgrounds when we use broad anthropomorphic concepts to describe situations. Abstraction frees us from over-specificity, without evacuating meanings of content in such a way that we no longer know what we are talking about.

There are two ways in which we can be reassured that we still know what we are talking about. First of all, we can look to the correct level of generality. When an attribute such as 'love' is applied, we need not look for more specific details than required. In a similar way, if we hear that a person loves another person, we do not demand to know the height of the people involved before we accept that we know the meaning of love in this case. The particular way in which the love of committed couples is instantiated will be different in each case, but there is no restriction on saying something sufficiently abstract that will catch all the cases, by addressing the issue at the correct level of generality. So, for instance, we might allow ourselves the following abstractions: the couple wish the best for each other; they each seek the good of the other; they make sacrifices for each other; they share intimate thoughts with each other and they get comfort and solace from the company of the other. What the good of the other involves, what the sacrifices are, and so forth, will be specifics that go beyond the minimum required information for the correct application of the concept 'committed love between couples'.

The other strategy for ensuring that we know what we are talking about when attributing properties to God might seem at odds with the 'abstraction' method above. The other strategy is to specify those contextual applications of a word that are particularly close to the application to God, specifying the aspects of similarity and dissimilarity. A concept such as 'love' is vague, with a continuum of meanings in different contexts, with some more-or-less central meanings revolving around one or more of the following notions: protectiveness, emotional investment, devotion, intimacy, relationship, attraction, sacrifice, interest, extreme admiration and pleasure. Vague concepts such as 'love' would seem particularly suitable candidates for being 'family-resemblance'[14] concepts. Using the notion of predicate schemas given above, we can define a 'family-resemblance concept' as follows:

We have a family-resemblance concept when there is a cluster of applications of the same word (such as 'love'), such that any one application of the word (a) necessarily involves an overlap of predicate schemes (near-synonyms) with at least one other application (b), which itself has a predicate schema overlap with another application (which is not a).

So, for example, we can give the following predicate schemes of five applications of the word 'love':

a 'She *loves* ice-cream': takes pleasure in, enjoys, desires.
b 'She *loves* Mahler': takes pleasure in, enjoys, admires (of a contemporary music critic).
c 'She *loves* Mahler': admires, is devoted to, emotionally invested in, in (of Mahler's wife) relationship with.
d 'The mother *loves* her violent and wayward son: is devoted to, emotionally invested in, has intimate knowledge of, is quick to forgive and would undertake sacrificial acts for.
e 'Darren *loves* Gemma': is sexually attracted to, admires, desires, is (an unrequited teenage crush) emotionally invested in.

With each application of the word 'love' there is some overlap in predicate schemas with at least one other application, which itself has an overlap with at least one other predicate schema. So (a) overlaps with (b) (owing to the enjoyment and pleasure), and (b) shares admiration with (c) which shares emotional investment with (d), although (a) and (d) do not overlap at all.

I take it that (a) to (e) are all legitimate applications of the word 'love'. There would be little virtue in refining a more abstract concept 'love' that operated smoothly such that we have a case of 'love' when necessary and sufficient criteria are met. As Wittgenstein points out, where the image is vague, a precise representation is a distortion.[15] Neither would there be any point in trying to identify the central applications of 'love'. Even if there were such applications. all I need be interested in when considering the meaningfulness of God-talk, is legitimate applications that have a determinate sense.

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[14] I am introducing a technical term that I define for my own purposes. I use the description 'family-resemblance concept' because it seems to me to be similar to Wittgenstein's notion, but nothing turns on my exegetical fidelity at this point.

[15] See Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), sections 76–7. Wittgenstein is considering 'two pictures, one of which consists of colour patches with vague contours, the other of patches similarly shaped and distributed, but with clear contours'. Of the two pictures Wittgenstein comments that 'the degree to which the sharp picture *can* resemble the blurred one depends on the latter's degree of vagueness ... if the colours in the original merge without a hint of

With (a) to (e), we spell out in the particular contexts, with the assistance of other words, what is or is not involved in the application of 'loves'. So in some contexts, associations and near-synonyms, that are appropriate elsewhere, will not be invoked. A teenager would use the word 'love' to describe their frenzied and transient crush (because of the felt attraction), but this contextual application of the vague concept 'love' (legitimate enough) is not applicable to describe the love between mother and son (involving more relationship, sacrifice and devotion) or a critic and Mahler (where we are concerned with pleasure and admiration). By understanding the context, we know which meanings are inappropriate, and can communicate this understanding either implicitly or explicitly if necessary.

In some cases there will not be agreement as to what the appropriate predicate schema is, and so what overlaps there are. It is important to realize that this is not due to an indeterminacy of meaning, but to a substantial difference of opinion that itself it based upon beliefs and can be articulated. So someone might admit that Mrs Mahler is devoted to Mahler (c), but not that she admires him, because they know that Mahler is a drunk who passes off someone else's work as his own (and Mrs Mahler knows this); or in (e) someone might think (contrary to common opinion) that Darren's love is mature enough to facilitate sacrificial acts (perhaps they have read his poetry).

When a vague concept such as 'love' is applied to God, there is no reason to think that its application is any more indeterminate or off-centre than its application in numerous other contexts not involving God. Just as in other contexts we need to use further words to explain what is or is not involved, so also with God. And just as in other applications there will be disagreement regarding which near-synonyms the application of the word has. This disagreement will itself be based upon a difference in substantial opinion that can itself be articulated. So, if we add to our pool of applications,

(f) God *loves* people,

there will be some fairly uncontroversial near-synonyms and associations, such as 'is protective towards, loyal to, has intimate knowledge of'. Other associations and near-synonyms, favoured by some contemporary approaches,

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any outline won't it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? Won't you just have to say: "Here I might just as well draw a circle or heart as a rectangle, for all the colours merge. Anything – and nothing – is right." – And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in aesthetics or ethics'.

will be controversial, such as ‘would undertake sacrificial acts, is emotionally invested in, is pained by, takes pleasure in’.[16]

So when ‘love’ is predicated of God it has *some* overlap in predicate schemas with *some* applications of ‘love’ when applied to humans. It is true that not every application of the word to God has the same predicate schema as every application when applied to humans, but this is no more damaging than the observation that not every application of the word in human contexts has the same or overlapping predicate schema as other applications in human contexts. Importantly, *some* attributions of love have overlapping predicate schemas when applied to God and humans. This overlap arises between the predicate schemas of specific contextual applications of the concept (‘love’) applied to God and humans respectively.

Curiously, it is precisely the point hammered home by the ‘indeterminacy argument’, that meaning is context-sensitive, which enables us to see how vague concepts such as love can be applied to God without involving inappropriate associations and near-synonyms. The threatening approach was unable to appreciate how its own observation facilitates God-talk, because it wrongly insisted, as we saw, that the legitimate application of concepts involves us fixing the exact manner of instantiation (physical or non-physical), or knowing the ontological make-up of the reality being described, or eliminating all discrepancies (for example, God’s not being tempted to infidelity).

Other concepts used of God and humans are even less problematic than ‘love’. So, with ‘knowledge’, there will certainly be large differences in the way in which knowledge is enjoyed by God and humans (God knows everything it is possible to know, has no contingent dependency on a material brain, and is the cause and source of all knowledge other than his own), but at an appropriately general level we can be sure that ‘knowledge’ is being used in the same sense in that God’s knowing that p and our knowing that p both entail p and the belief that p, and whatever element of justification/warrant is required on top of this.[17] Concepts such as ‘knowledge’ and ‘power’ are less problematic than love in that they are more precise, and their contextual applications do not have such various predicate schemas. We cannot always infer that a word has two analogous (or equivocal) senses, just because its application to an object involves the attribution of a property whose instantiation can amount to something very different from another instantiation, depending upon the nature of the object.

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[16] For instance, Sallie McFague writes, ‘God as lover suffers with those who suffer . . . God participates in the pain of the beloved as only a lover can. God as lover takes the pain into her own being’, in *Models of God* (London: SCM, 1987), p.142.

[17] This example is given by R. Swinburne in *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p.79.

I chose the love example to show, first of all, that even highly anthropomorphic concepts could be attributed to God without denigrating the otherness of God, and secondly to demonstrate that the claim that we can speak of God, and hope to express true beliefs, does not privilege or preclude any particular theological agenda. Speaking anthropomorphically about God does not entail speaking exclusively in terms of God's sovereignty, masculinity or power; it can equally support a feminist or liberation programme that wishes to assert God's interest in mutually enriching and vulnerable relationships, or a subverting of a worldly 'patriarchal' sense of power to reveal that God's power is to break spirals of violence through the revelation of the 'crucified of Golgotha'. Obviously, speaking anthropomorphically about God is also compatible with denying God's existence in any of these various senses.

I can still see room for someone to adopt the Ross definitions, and accept the considerations concerning abstraction, but generate trouble for our talk about God. An argument on these re-drawn lines might look like the following:[18]

1. Words are used univocally of God and not-God *iff* those words so used have identical or similar predicate schemas (God is wise/Socrates is wise).
2. When we apply predicates to not-God we know what we are talking about *iff* we know the predicate schemas of the words we use. With two applications of the same word we can judge the extent of univocity *iff* we know what each word means (that is, know the predicate schema of each word).
3. God, being so different from that which is not-God, is such that we do not know what the predicate schemes of words are when we apply them to God.
4. (From 2 and 3), we do not know what we are talking about when we ascribe predicates to God, and we cannot judge the extent of univocity/equivocacy when we use the same word of God and not-God.

So in a test case such as 'God is wise' and 'Socrates is wise', we can fill in the predicate schema of 'wise' when applied to Socrates ('understands many true things, and knows the value of such understanding'), but not of 'wise' when applied to God. To think that we know the predicate schemas of words when applied to God is to beg the very question as to whether we can talk of and have true beliefs about God. Talking of 'predicate schemas' simply puts the question in a different key, along the lines of 'given God's otherness do we know the predicate schemas of words when applied to God?'

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[18] Something along these lines is raised by Janice Thomas's article, 'Univocity and Understanding God's Nature', in *The Philosophical Assessment of Theology*, ed. G. Hughes (Tunbridge Wells: Search Press, 1987), pp.94–9. Thomas comments that 'predicates applied to God may have real senses none of us knows (and thus the question whether such terms are or are not applicable may be unanswerable for us)' (p.94). She goes on to write that 'we could not be in a position to settle the question whether terms applicable to both men and God are or are not equivocal unless we could first learn to what degree and in what ways God is unlike us or even beyond our comprehension' (p.96).

I consider that the 'ignorance about divine predicate schemas argument' against the realist hope is the product of some confusion. For a start it is hard to differentiate it from a straightforward scepticism about knowing which of our beliefs might be true; this is a different problem from the purportive in principle impossibility of ever framing a true belief about God. Remember that the realist hope, which I am defending, is just the claim that it is logically possible that someone could believe p, where p is a truth about God. Accepting the predicate schema model involves accepting a certain semantic way of deciding whether or not two words are being used univocally/analogically or equivocally. It is a thesis concerning the meaning that a token-word has relative to another token-word. When someone uses a predicate such as 'is wise' of God they know what the predicate scheme of that word is, if they are competent speakers who know what they meant, and are able to provide what they would consider synonyms, determinates, antonyms and so forth. This was the whole force of adopting a predicate schema semantic definition of 'same meaning' rather than the bankrupt 'ontological similarity' model. There is no room for indeterminacy or scepticism about whether the speaker meant the words 'is wise' in the same way in both instances, if the speaker is able to provide appropriate predicate schemas in each case.

The only place at which there is room for debate is at the level of (i) the content of the predicate schemas, and (ii) the justification we have for positing such properties (with their predicate schemas) of God. To develop (i) we can see that someone might want to fill out the predicate schema of 'is powerful' of God in a way that makes it not univocal to 'is powerful' of Tony Blair. Such an articulation might read as follows

> God is 'powerful': God is foolish by the world's standards, God is self-sacrificing, vulnerable and co-suffering with us, God will not use force or authority.
>
> Tony Blair is 'powerful': Tony Blair is well regarded by the world, Tony Blair is ambitious and well-protected, and uses force and authority to get his way.

From the point of view of the realist hope, I have no objection to the drawing up of predicate schemas which are transformed, 'broken' or reversed in a 'Christ-like' way, such as with 'is powerful' above. It is clear that consciously applying radically broken and transformed predicates involves a great deal of substantial belief, and so truth claims, about God. Claiming that p can be believed, where p is a truth about God, is neutral as regards the content of any such truths. At the level of debating the content of predicate schemas of words applied to God and not-God, there may well be substantial theological beliefs which lead people to claim that certain words should not be used univocally of God and some kinds of not-God (for instance God's power, and the power of British prime ministers). This claim, as we see, is not made because language is broken, but because our claims as to what is true are (as in the case of power).

The second possible area where there might be room for debate is the question of the justification we have for positing such properties (with their predicate schemas) of God. This again has no bearing on the epistemic realism issue. A similar scepticism as regards our justification for our beliefs could be applied to any area: ethics, the external world and other minds and science. Our epistemic realism is preserved if there is at least a logical possibility of having a true belief (if where p is a truth about God, it is logically possible to believe p). This sort of scepticism about our justified beliefs takes the form of asking 'Do you know that God is "good", where "good" has a predicate schema such that it is the contrary of "immoral" and "cruel" and has the near-synonym's "moral", "compassionate" and so forth?' In other words, 'How do you know that God is compassionate and not cruel?' Such a question really presumes alethic realism (truth and falsity are independent of our beliefs, and could in principle be believed), but is simply sceptical about our justification for believing one thing rather than another.

There is no need to flesh out God's ontological otherness and transcendence in terms of a similar conceptual transcendence. God's otherness cannot render it impossible to use language to express true beliefs about God, just because, in articulating the contours of this otherness and the limits of our knowledge, we must express or imply putatively true beliefs. We have seen that the mundane origins and application of language do not prevent it from being used to express truths about God. Whether words are being used in univocal/analogical or equivocal senses is decided by degrees similarity of predicate schemes, rather than by the problematic notion of the 'ontological similarity in their objects'. Words can be used of God and not-God with similar overlapping predicate schemas; where there is a controversy about the overlap, this is due to a difference in substantial beliefs about what is true, rather than being due to a breakdown in all our language used of the divine.

CHAPTER 12

Why Anti-realism Breaks up Relationships[1]

In some ways this book might look to be less a defence of realism, and more an attack on anti-realism.[2] In as much as I have made plausible *anti*-anti realist points, I have been casting a favourable light on a minimal realism, which can be articulated as the conviction that truth is neither constituted by our ideal epistemic practices nor constructed by our cognitive activity. So in Chapter 2 I argued against the view that religious language was expressive, in favour of the view that it was descriptive. In Chapters 3 and 4 I showed a Wittgensteinian anti-realism, which rendered truth epistemic, to be untenable. Having dismissed the 'Wittgensteinian solution', the book took a more therapeutic turn, as I attempted to tease out some of the misguided philosophical temptations to insist that 'we cannot get out of our own skins'. So in Chapter 5 I tackled globally anti-realist arguments to the effect that we construct our reality, rather than the 'way things are' being independent of human cognition. Chapters 6 to 8, and Chapter 11, despatched more indulgent anti-realisms, which allowed a cognition-independent realm, but insisted that we could never form true beliefs about this realm of reality. Chapter 9 argued that a recent vogue for apophaticism did not avoid the very anthropomorphism that it attempted to avoid. Chapter 10 was critical of realist positions in postmodern continental philosophy that showed too much deference to the Kantian problem.

If I have done all that I claim in the above paragraph, then I suppose I will have done well. But I have a lingering sense of dissatisfaction at this point that I have failed to communicate anything of urgency or import concerning why realism matters, or why anyone should worry that other people espouse anti-realism. Someone might have followed my argument, accepting at each point that religious practice cannot afford to deny any of A to D as set out in the first chapter. In as much as realism involves accepting A to D, such a reader might be convinced of the bankruptcy of anti-realism, and the default survival of a rather thin realism. I have certainly failed so far to say anything more positive and substantial about what a religious realism should look like, and how it might enrich, underpin or transform the lives of believers or society.

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[1] A version of this chapter was first published under the same title in *The Heythrop Journal*, January 2002, 43(1), 20–33.

[2] Although I make a case for the *prima facie* 'realist' construal of religious language as fact-asserting in Chapter 2, this is only a superficial 'defence' of realism against a crude anti-realism which asserts that religious utterances are expressive rather than descriptive. The deeper realism/anti-realism issue is still up for grabs here in that it is precisely what it is for something to be a 'fact' which is the controverted point.

In this final chapter I will make some movements towards filling these gaps. The chapter has five movements. In the first, I re-emphasize what I mean by realism and anti-realism, and separate this heart of realism from gratuitous doctrines that are too often associated with it. Religious realism is the claim that truth is independent of our beliefs about truth, and that we can in principle hope to have true beliefs about God. Realism is not intrinsically concerned with the existence of 'objects', with natural theology or rational justification.

In the second part I show that even thinkers who are hostile or indifferent to religious realism, so defined, usually make an implicit appeal to a similar realism in the sphere of ethics.

In the third section I suggest that realism in religion is, if anything, more intuitive and plausible than it is in ethics. I draw an analogy with realism/anti-realism about persons, to show that anti-realism makes mutually risk-taking and courageous relationships impossible. In the fourth section I make a sketchy suggestion as to why reflecting upon realism about persons is particularly fruitful for modelling a religious realism.

In the final phase of the chapter I conclude that the most vital feature of religious realism is not certainty of belief, but the opposite: the acknowledged risk that all our hope could be in vain. I go on to argue that far from it being the realist who is obsessed with rational certainty, this is one of the worst vices of the anti-realist, who cannot bear there to be a gap between her beliefs and reality. Closing the possibility on this risk, the anti-realist demonstrates an unfaithful and uncourageous movement of thought, which especially causes immeasurable damage when the anti-realism is applied to the reality of other persons.

First Movement: Just Realism – Some Political Ramifications of Anti-realism

The realism I have been defending focuses, not on the existence of entities or objects, but on what it is for something to be true. The minimal realist view of truth involves the claims that (i) truth is independent of our beliefs about what is true, and of our cognitive activity, and (ii) the in principle logical possibility that where p is a truth about God, we can believe that p.

A perhaps obvious, but frequently over-looked observation, is that a commitment to realism in the sense I have defended does not involve a commitment to adopting a rational, or highly philosophical, theology. So I consciously avoid defending the view that we have 'knowledge' of God. Neither should realism, the view that we can have true (in a realist sense) beliefs about

God, be confused with the quite different view that everything that is true about God can be known (no reputable thinker has ever claimed that). There is a world of difference between the claims that we can have true beliefs about something, and that everything which is true about something can be known.

So it is not my intention to assert that faith does or does not involve a strong element of rational justification. Knowledge as typically analysed, involves true belief as well as some element of warrant or justification; the realism I defend involves only truth and belief. Realism, as I defend it, is not the opposite of fideism, but quite compatible with it. Fideism is the position that the way to have true beliefs in religion is to rely on faith rather than reason. Fideism on this view would be impossible without realism (without realism there is no true belief). Other things, of course, are also impossible without realism (such as Swinburnian natural theology), but realism is possible without any particular elaboration of how we attain true beliefs.

It is perhaps an obvious point that a conclusion that we can in principle use our language to speak the truth about God does not entail or preclude any particular theological truth claim about God. Indeed no truth claim about God (traditional, feminist or liberation) can be made unless this conclusion, that we can use our language to speak the truth about God, is established. To make this point would be gratuitous, except that I have been struck by the equation consistently made by thinkers of a high calibre between the realist claim that we can have true beliefs about God, and the endorsement of a traditional, 'patriarchal' theology. The equation is so often made (it can be found in Don Cupitt,[3] Sallie McFague[4] and Gordon Kaufman[5]) that an objection to traditional formulations of Christianity, or patriarchy or natural theology, is taken to be an objection to realism (the interest in having true beliefs about God, where truth is independent of our procedures for arriving at truth).

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[3] Don Cupitt speaks of a realist attitude towards God as being the 'objectification' of God, commenting that 'objectification is politics, for we project the divine outwards precisely in order to make religion an effective control system. Divinity can then only be approached through the proper channels, and by the time it gets down to the man in the pew society ensures that it is very highly diluted'; *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p.141. In *The New Christian Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 1988) Cupitt trumpets the dependence of 'ethical liberation' on non-realism: 'the end of the old realistic conception of God as an all-powerful and objective spiritual Being independent of us and sovereign over us ... makes it now possible and even necessary for us to create a Christian ethic, almost as if for the first time' (p.9).

[4] So in *Models of God* (London: SCM Press, 1987) McFague promises a critique of 'the triumphalist, imperialistic, patriarchal model' of traditional theology with 'alternative models that are ... commensurate with the evolutionary ecological sensibility and with the Christian faith' (p.20). This movement of thought is understood to involve intrinsically a commitment to the anti-realist claim that 'all language about God is human construction and as such perforce "misses the mark"' (p.23).

[5] Kaufman understands his project of denying metaphysical realism, and asserting the unknowability of the real God, as part of a project whereby he combats the

From a very different theological stable, and for very different reasons, Andrew Moore seems to make a similar equation between realism and a particular form of Christian theology. Moore makes his case by suggesting that 'theological realism' is committed to the correspondence theory of truth, and the view that there is only one true description of the world.[6] He further argues that 'theological realism' tends to assume a theologically inappropriate parallel between the objects of science, and that of religion (God). At the same time, Moore is not therefore an 'anti-realist': he stands four-square behind the claim that 'the triune God exists independently of our minds and that he is knowable'. But the confusion comes when Moore seems to suggest that the *only* sort of realism possible is a 'Christocentric' one: 'a Christian realism will be Christocentric. We can begin at no other place than where God has dwelt among us, where he has judged our sinfulness and graciously healed us'.[7] Realism must be Christocentric both because all 'human points of view are ineluctably situated and embodied', and also 'because our various creaturely points of view are also corrupted and distorted by sin'.[8] Our only way towards realism is for Jesus Christ to find us, 'become an epistemic subject for us', judge our sinfulness and begin 'to restore our noetic equipment'.[9]

Moore is using his terms in a highly idiosyncratic way. First of all, he over-commits (non-Christocentric) 'realism'. Why should even a non-Christocentric realism be committed to a correspondence account of truth, or the view that there is only one complete description of the world, or the drawing of parallels between the objects of science and religion? As we saw in Chapter 5, there is no good reason to think that a realism should be so committed; indeed there are good reasons for thinking not, as these positions are so untenable. It is a favourite tactic of anti-realism to over-burden realism with untenable metaphysical baggage, and then declare it broken-backed. Moore's practice here is no better, except that he does it in the cause of a distinctively '*Christian* realism'.

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ways in which traditional imagery for God supports militarism or escapism in the 'nuclear age', by entering 'into the most radical kind of deconstruction and reconstruction of the tradition … including the most central and precious symbols … *God* and *Jesus Christ* and *Torah*' in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p.13.

[6] Andrew Moore, *Realism and Christian Faith: God, Grammar and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.214ff.

[7] Ibid., p.214.

[8] Ibid., p.216.

[9] Ibid.

It is clear that what Moore is really talking about, when espousing 'Christian realism' is an exclusivist soteriology: that knowledge of God, and salvation, only comes by belonging to a Christian community. Although I would not agree with Moore's doctrine, that is beyond the concerns of this book; what is peculiar to Moore's approach is the way in which he calls this 'realism' at all. Is the use of the word 'realism' here meant to imply that Jews, Muslims, humanists or even (non-Christocentric) 'theological realists' cannot adopt the correct meta-position of realism about discourse and truth (in the sense articulated in this book)? This seems to be about as plausible as insisting on a 'Christocentric' mathematics. After all, the same arguments would apply: every human view-point is situated and embodied, and sin has distorted our noetic framework. Even *theologically speaking* Moore's substantive point is a strange one: it is usual to think that the Fall distorted our relationship with God, our neighbours and ourselves, in that we always tend to think too much of our own importance and righteousness. It is less usual to think that the Fall affected our noetic structure more generally (our beliefs about the physical world), let alone our grasp of fundamental metaphysical options about truth (whether it be understood by means of realism or anti-realism).

I find it hard to think of a single claim about 'realism' (in the sense that this term of philosophical art is ever used) that could not be articulated by a non-Christian: what could such a claim look like? In fact, it would look like a doctrinal statement concerning soteriology, that we are saved only because 'Jesus Christ has found us'.[10] I would suggest that if one is to start using terms such as 'realism' in such unusual ways (to cover soteriology), this needs to be acknowledged, and some justification of the procedure given. The debate surrounding 'realism' is concerned with the truth about *truth*: whether or not truth is internal to epistemic practices and is in principle accessible to us. Christianity may be the truth, but this is quite different from the truth about *truth* only being accessible to Christians, which is a rather bewildering suggestion. Much of Moore's wider argument is relatively unaffected by this odd terminology, in as much as it does not really concern realism at all; nonetheless the question remains of why Moore has used 'realism' to talk about something else (soteriology) with all the adjacent risks of confusion, talking at cross-purposes and misunderstanding?

The general point that should now be clear is that an objection to a particular theology (which happens to be realist) is not an objection to realism, or an assault on the importance of realism. All attacks on particular theologies tend to be premised on the view that they say something wrong, partial, sexist or ideologically suspect about God. All these objections seem to claim that the critiqued theology asserts something which is not true. An interest in having true beliefs about God would seem to go hand in hand with an impulse to critique wrong theologies.

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[10] Ibid.

There is less room for a compelling critique of a theology premised on an anti-realist construal of truth. In a genuinely anti-realist system truth is either constituted by our beliefs, or it is something to which we can have no access whatsoever. On a realist construal, where truth is independent of our best practices, and where that which is true can in principle have a role in forming our beliefs, all human beliefs are answerable and vulnerable to a truth beyond those beliefs. Realist truth is a powerful ontological lever which can always act to resist claims to absolutism, or claims that a whole culture/tradition cannot be wrong. That theology preserve its claim to have access to a truth beyond our practices is important where a culture's practices have become corrupt, as with Nazi Germany.

The crucial conceptual point here is that there is a link between realism, the conviction that a whole practice could be wrong, and fallibilism, the recognition that, owing to human frailty, whole communities can become debased and oppressive. The political corollary of this 'metaphysical' position, it seems to me, is a position that embraces human complexity and frailty, and avoids the excesses of strong communitarian positions; a position discussed extensively in my *The Politics of Human Frailty: a Theological Defence of Political Liberalism*.[11] I take a position to be strongly 'communitarian' if it tends to endorse the view that our thought about ethics, politics and morality should always seek to further rather than restrict the natural priority of the community over the individual. Although there is no rigorous connection here, I would suggest that there is a momentum between strong communitarian approaches to politics and anti-realism: after all, if a whole practice cannot be wrong, and truth is internal to practices, we only need to read 'a practice' politically to know that truth is internal to actual communities, and – alarmingly – that whole communities cannot be wrong.

It happens to be the case that, for instance, Kaufman and McFague are both broadly speaking liberal humanists in their ethical dispositions. But if truth is inaccessible and we are free to construct 'models of God' there is nothing

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[11] Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: a Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM Press, 2004/Notre Dame Ill.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005). See also my article, 'Against Radical Orthodoxy: the Dangers of Overcoming Political Liberalism', in *Modern Theology*, 20(2), April 2004, 213–41. For a discussion of the relationship between analytical philosophy and political liberalism, see my 'Analytical Philosophy of Religion, Political Liberalism and the Forgetting of History', in *Faith and Philosophical Analysis: the Impact of Analytical Philosophy on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Harriet A. Harris and Christopher J. Insole (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005).

residing in the truth of things that compels us to adopt humanizing models, rather than dehumanizing Neo-fascist models. In criticizing a Neo-fascist model, we could not appeal to what was true about God, but only to our preference for our humanizing model. Both Kaufman and McFague fail to see the weakness of their positions, and trumpet their epistemic anti-realism (the denial of D) as a way to counter-balance the tradition's failure to grapple with ecology, feminism and social justice. The truth is, rather, that they are able to address these issues *in spite of* their anti-realism, which constantly undermines any authority that their maxims to build humanizing models might otherwise have.

Second Movement: Feminism and the Appeal to Realism in Ethics

What in fact seems to happen when a theologian denies that we can hope to have true beliefs about God is that there is always an implicitly realist appeal to belief-independent truth in another area. Most frequently the realist appeal is in a broadly ethical sphere such as feminism, politics or ecology. The appeal usually is implicit, in that the insights appealed to, against which traditional philosophy of religion are found wanting, are assumed to be so obvious and inviolable that it hardly occurs to the thinker that they would be problematized without some sort of realist hope (that their ethical belief has some belief-independent validity which they could in principle hope to grasp).

There is a startling case of this implicit but unacknowledged reliance on a realist hope, which is explicitly denigrated, as irrelevant, in Grace Jantzen's *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*.[12] Jantzen avoids the mistake made by many, and recognizes that a commitment to realism/anti-realism is neutral as regards a stance on feminism: there are pro-feminist realists (Graham Ward and Rowan Williams) just as 'many anti-realists seem to retain gender-stereotypes virtually unchanged, only with the proviso that "Father", "Son", "Lord", "King", and all the rest do not "really" refer, but rather are used to express and nurture a community's self-understanding'.[13]

More problematically Jantzen claims that 'from a feminist perspective it is not at all clear that a resolution of the realist/anti-realist dispute is crucial; and in fact a focus on that dispute might easily serve to deflect attention from more important concerns'.[14] The 'more important concerns' include an awareness of the way in which patriarchal philosophy of religion styles itself as practising from a supposedly objective 'view from nowhere stance', which Jantzen considers to be an obsession of the male mind conceiving of itself as disembodied and rational. Traditional masculinist philosophy of religion, Jantzen considers, is motivated most of all by a fear and fascination with death and a consequent eulogizing of ‘other worlds’. These obsessions and neuroses lead traditional philosophy of religion to consider only the rationality and truth of beliefs (the disembodied rational mind being of more value than the body or emotions) and to denigrate this world by seeking justified beliefs about other worlds or realities (such as the ‘onto-theological God’), which protect the male mind from his fear of death. A feminist philosophy of religion values and celebrates our shared natality, bodily flourishing and the interdependent web of life which makes up the born world.

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[12] Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.191.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid.

Now why are these concerns, on Jantzen’s account, more ‘important’ than the realist/anti-realist issue? In fact, why are they important at all, if they are not part of my practice, or my form of life, or my epistemic community? Of course, Jantzen would reply that they are important because to ignore or deny these issues leads to oppression and suffering, especially of women and vulnerable men. But then why should I, if I am a white, heterosexual, privileged man, care that women and oppressed men suffer, if it is not part of my practice so to care? Or if what is true about morality is completely inaccessible to us?

A powerful answer, if not the only answer, must be that I should care because it is *wrong*, and it is realistically true that it is wrong, to perpetuate and be complicit in injustice, because it is *true*, regardless of what epistemic practice I belong to, that people should be treated with respect, dignity and justice. Notice that I am not claiming that we need reasons or justifications to be just, over and above the human encounter ‘before the face of the other’ (to echo Levinas[15]). I am saying nothing at all about the importance of having *rationally justified beliefs*, just the importance of having beliefs which are true.[16]

Of course, all the arguments in favour of a non-factualist, non-cognitivist or epistemic construal of religious statements, which I encountered in Chapters 1 to 4, could now be re-encountered when dealing with ethical statements. I suspect that all the arguments against these positions in religion could be brought out against ethics. Anti-realism about ethics fails because it provides an implausible account of what people mean by ethical statements; it fails to account for our reasoning/arguing/truth-tracking procedures in ethics, and the more plausible we make the identification of ethical truth with our best ethical practices, the more it seems ‘best practices’ must lean on a non-epistemic notion of ethical truth. At the same time, being concerned as I am with a specifically religious anti-realism, I am aware that I am not entitled to two theses for the price of one, and I would need to demonstrate this parity of religion and ethics. For the purposes of my point here, it is enough to comment that when thinkers denigrate the importance of the realist/anti-realist issue in religion, they give every appearance of doing so on the basis of an uncontested and crucially important realism in justice issues and ethics (in terms of what really matters).

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[15] Jantzen admires Levinas’s prioritizing of the ethical over the ontological, where the demand for justice comes paradigmatically from the face-to-face encounter with the other. See ch.10 of *Becoming Divine*. Jantzen’s support of Levinas is in accord with her relocating of the realist hope from ontology to ethics.

[16] Jantzen does not distinguish, as I do, between being concerned with the truth of beliefs and being concerned with having rationally justifiable beliefs. I consider the distinction to be important.

I think that what happens with many contemporary theologians concerned with justice issues is that they denigrate the importance of the whole realism/anti-realism issue, implicitly only conceiving of this debate as being about ontological entities of the medium-size-dry variety. The debate can only be so dismissed if it is represented in this straw suit. To be sure, if the debate were only ever about the existence of such entities, it would be impossible to apply to ethics, aesthetics and probably religion also. But, as I have presented the realism/anti-realism debate, it is not particularly about the existence of entities at all. The realist hope, in any particular area, is that something is true independently of what we might believe about it and our cognitive activity, and that we can in principle hope to form true beliefs. That is all. When put like this, it becomes clear that McFague, Kaufman and Jantzen[17] are all deeply committed to a realism in ethics, and would be alarmed by the threat of anti-realism about ethical truth. Also, unlike the entity realism/anti-realism issue, which is not applicable to ethics, it is clear that the issue of alethic realism (realism concerning truth) applied to ethics does have to be answered one way or the other, and is an urgent and natural question.

Third Movement: why Realism about God Matters

It remains open to claim that, while realism in ethics is important, in religion it is unimportant. By using an analogy of our relationships with other peoples, I will suggest that realism in religion is, if anything, more intuitive and less problematic than it is in ethics.

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[17] Jantzen, in *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), stands apart in that she demonstrates a keen awareness of this tension between her absolute commitment to justice (motivated by her feminist critique) and her Foucaltian claim that all truths and knowledge claims are constructed. Her solution to this tension remains at best evocative, at worst evasive. After outlining the tension she concludes in a way which seems just to re-assert the tension: ‘it is precisely the demand of justice which requires the deconstruction of legitimacy’. The interesting question here, of course, is whether ‘the deconstruction of legitimacy’ is of *all* legitimacy, including the feminist’s demand for justice. I am suggesting that Jantzen’s position is powerful only if the demand for justice is not self-reflexively deconstructed.

One all too frequently wheeled-out reason for the realism/anti-realism debate being unimportant is that it lowers theological discourse into an inappropriate weighing up of arguments for and against the existence of an extra divine 'object' in the universe. The realism I am defending is first and foremost about truth and the logical possibility of our access to truth. It is not necessarily committed to 'weighing-up arguments' at all (any more, say, than Kierkegaard was). Neither is it a very natural description to say that it concerns the existence of a divine 'object'. There is always something cheap and suspicious about this characterization of the realist. The realist *could* be described as being committed to the existence of an 'object' God, but this is no more a fair and evocative a representation of the realist's devotion, passion and integrity than describing someone who is in love as being committed to the 'existence of one more object', just because they believe their beloved to be, at the very least, for all their faults, real. In as much as the realist might believe God to be real and personal, they could be construed gramatically at least, as being committed to an 'object'; but the choice of word would not be not the realist's. Would the anti-realist be happy with summing up their own commitment to the reality of other people as a mere attachment to the 'existence of one more object'?

In order to convey the importance of alethic realism in religious discourse, we could develop the analogy with realism/anti-realism about people. An anti-realist/realist debate about people would revolve around the realist claim that there are some truths about other people that are true independently of our beliefs and our cognitive activity, and which we could in principle get to have true beliefs about. Of course some truths will not be true independently of our beliefs, because they make reference to beliefs (such as 'Peter is believed to be trustworthy by his friends, me included'), but a realism about people requires that a belief such as this be true independently of beliefs about this belief (it is true, independently of whether I believe it, that Peter is believed trustworthy by his friends).

I cannot conceive how a genuinely risk-taking, and so mutually vulnerable and trusting relationship could develop without this basic and implicit realist conviction. What would it be like for the entire truth about another person (even their existence) to be entirely dependent on my best epistemic practices with regard to that person, for there to be no truth about them independent of my beliefs or cognitive activity? This is old solipsists' universe given the linguistic turn (realism centred on the nature of truth, rather than the existence of metaphysical entities).

I suggest that we are all implicit realists about other people and, if we failed to be, we could not have genuine ethical relationships where we acknowledged the dignity, autonomy and ethical demand of the other person (in the 'face-to-face encounter' if you like). So we see that an alethic realism about ontology is vital if a similar realism about ethics (such as we see Jantzen, McFague and Kaufman to need) is even to get a foothold. The importance of realism in the area of personal relationships is easily ignored, in that we never question it. But it is there nonetheless. Try removing it and we soon lose all the ethical challenges so valued by someone like Jantzen: a face-to-face encounter with alterity (a person's otherness and autonomy within a web of inter-relationships) and the possibility of being surprised and transformed by this encounter with another 'natal' (Jantzen's term for another life). Ethics is not more important than ontology. It is just more visible, like the tip of an iceberg.

I consider that with religious discourse the importance of realism concerning truth is similar. If the truth about God is constituted by our best epistemic practices, there is no realm of reality from which genuine encounter and transformation can be hoped for. It is no better if there is a truth about God which is completely inaccessible. A something of which we can say nothing may as well be nothing, and the curious result of elevating truth to such a pedestal is that it idles as a conceptual wheel within our practice, beliefs and hopes.

Fourth Movement: a Non-reductive Account of Human Nature and Society as an Analogue for Realism about God[18]

I consider the analogy of a realism about persons to be a much more fruitful line of reflection, when thinking about religious realism, than drawing on issues arising from realism/anti-realism debates in science or metaphysics. How much can be gained from the notion of a realism about persons depends entirely on what understanding we have of humans and human agency. For a realism about persons to be a close analogy for realism about God, we will need a non-reductive and non-naturalistic approach to persons.

A non-reductive approach to persons would mark out as *indispensable*, when giving an account of those parts of the universe which are persons, the type of explanations which are characteristically unique to persons. I have in mind principally the self-interpreting[19] aspects of persons, which are manifested in the following: the ability of persons to think self-consciously about their own situation and to conceive and make judgements about what things are important to them; the ability of persons to articulate their judgements and feelings, and to collaborate to form societies within which common assumptions and frameworks set the conditions for the forms of life which are possible for the persons in that society. Some or all of these levels of explanation are indispensable in that an attempt to describe persons using ontologically thinner notions (such as brain-functions or the firing of neurons) would not be a more fundamental explanation, but a change of subject, a refusal to admit the existence of that which we all know to exist (a self-interpreting faculty) and which is a condition for the very possibility of framing reductionist philosophies of mind (where we make a judgement about our situation and its importance).

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[18] This section, and the next, are sketchy and suggestive, pointing the way for a future trajectory of detailed thought and research, rather than establishing or summarizing anything proved or established in this book. In particular, that which is suggested rather than being argued for is (i) the non-reductive account of persons and (ii) the personal nature of God. Neither is without problems, but by way of excuse I would claim that both (i) and (ii) are fairly engrained in some important strands of the Christian tradition. At least I can make the claim that *if* one is committed to a non-reductive account of persons and a personal God, realism is important for the reasons given.

It is precisely if we insist upon such dimensions to reality that talk about God will be deeply and substantially analytical with our talk about the world (especially of persons), rather than being a queer[20] supernatural 'fact' for which we can find no role or meaning. In other words, we will have an analogue for God in our experience of being in relationship with other persons. The perceived danger of rendering God 'anthropomorphic' and so less than God-like is only real if we already have an impoverished anthropology, whereby humans are reduced to naturalistic categories such that they are rendered less than human (not bearing the image of God). Only if our view of persons is narrow and naturalistically reduced will we have cause to be anxious about speaking of God in personal terms.

It turns out that modelling our religious realism on a non-naturalistic account of persons renders it *less* problematic than ethical realism. With ethical realism there is the difficulty of giving an account of what sort of 'queer' fact an ethical truth might be; with religious realism we are able to gesture towards a trace of the divine personal reality – the source of all reality – to be discerned in real persons.

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[19] My inspiration here is C. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol.1*, especially ch.2, 'Self-Interpreting Animals', where Taylor adumbrates what he understands to be a Heideggerian account of the nature of persons.

[20] I am alluding here, of course, to J.L. Mackie's 'argument from queerness' against ethical realism: *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp.38–42. Mackie's argument is that one cannot be an ethical realist without having an esoteric belief in something like Plato's Forms.

Fifth Movement: the Gap between our Beliefs and Reality

As well as being the only option if we are to have proper relationships and encounters with otherness, realism is also important in that it leaves room for us to be wrong on issues, and so to doubt, and so to take risks. The most vital feature of religious realism is not certainty of belief, but the opposite, the acknowledged risk that all our hope could be in vain.

Traditional Christian theologies are going to be irredeemably impoverished by an anti-realist construal, which claims that truth is internal to our practices and so that whole practices cannot be wrong. It is one thing for it to be the correct thing to say within our form of life that Jesus died to redeem us from our sin. It is another thing altogether to hold that, whatever we believe about it, the structure of the universe changed when Jesus died on the cross and defeated the devil (on a Christus Victor model) or paid off our guilt-debt (Anselm) or revealed God's forgiving purposes (Abelard). There is a richness and a hope in the realist construal that will never be embraced by the anti-realists' preparedness to say the same words, but allow no gap between our words and their truth. It is this gap between our practices and the way things are which is the source of hope, risk, transformation and faith.

Equally more contemporary and fashionable theologies are impoverished by an anti-realist construal. Again it is one thing to construct, in our cognitive freedom, a model of a God as mother or lover, because it is pragmatic in helping us to live more ethically in twenty-first-century liberal–capitalist America. Our hopes, beliefs and prayers take on a whole new dimension of depth, risk and faith if we believe that, regardless of what our practices say (and so also regardless of the best secularizing, cynical practices of media-culture), the source of the universe cares for us, and will sacrifice itself for us, and will attend to and redeem injustice in a way analogous to a devoted mother or lover. The risk, and so the faith, comes in when we consider the inverse of this to be that, if this is not the truth about the universe, our hope has been in vain. What the anti-realist does when they pray might be fruitful (as a self-help stress reliever or self-therapy), but on a realist construal prayer becomes an intimate encounter with another, with alterity in the highest.

The anti-realist might well claim that she has, in the case of God, and perhaps persons also, a sufficiently rich concept of truth to encompass even talk of objectivity and otherness. I can well imagine the anti-realist being able to assert 'it is part of the practice of religion to say that God is other'. But, on life and death matters of faith, it is not so much what we are able rationally to say, or what we can talk about that matters, but what we really believe and hope to be true. The claim that the anti-realist construal of truth gives us 'otherness, alterity, hope, trust and risk' because it has a way of talking about them is reminiscent of every well-intentioned but half-baked reply to scepticism, which tries to close the sceptical gap with absolute certainty.

So Berkeley insisted that his anti-realist idealism returned common-sense objectivism to the common-man, against the ravages of Humean scepticism, and the philosophical complexities of Locke's representative realism. But it is clear that Berkeley only saved the reality of objects from scepticism by essentially capitulating to the sceptic's core demands. The sceptic claimed that we could not know about an external world beyond the veil of perception. Berkeley agrees completely, adding a further nail in the coffin by arguing that there could not even be any point in *believing* in such an external world. Equally Kant saved the spatio-temporal law-governed world by capitulating to the sceptic's demand for absolute certainty, and placing this world in the only realm where we could have such certainty, within the realm of what is constituted by our minds. Again the sceptic has won her point: outside of our conceptual skins there is no reality we can know about, believe in, have hopes for. The religious anti-realist also saves God, by handing God over to those who claim there is no divine reality outside our practices, no source of hope beyond our pragmatic aspirations, and no relationship to a divine dimension except that which is simulated in liturgy.

A religion which speaks of a *personal* God suffers greatly from an anti-realist construal, just because the desire to collapse the gap between our beliefs and feelings, and what those beliefs and feelings are of, is most damaging (and most subtly tempting) when the other is personal.

Martha Nussbaum writes beautifully concerning what might be called an anti-realist view of persons in *Love's Knowledge*. Nussbaum is commenting on Proust's *Remembrance*. The character Marcel has come to realize that he loves Albertine, by what Nussbaum calls a 'cataleptic impression',[21] which is a 'blind, unbidden surge of painful affect', a sudden sensation of suffering which reveals to Marcel knowledge of his own heart. Nussbaum is suspicious of Marcel's epistemology of the heart, commenting that

> Marcel's whole project has about it an odd air of circularity. How do we know love? By a cataleptic impression. But what is this thing, love, that gets known? It is understood to be, is more or less defined as, the very thing that is revealed to us in cataleptic impressions. We privilege the impression of suffering as the criterion, and then we adopt an account of love (hardly the only possible account) according to which love is exactly what this criterion reveals to us.[22]

Nussbaum identifies the motivation for a cataleptic epistemology, where we have an intuitive certainty about another person, rooted in our own sensations of suffering, to be the inability to cope with the sceptical gap between our feelings and the abysmal independence of the other. Her diagnosis and critique of this attitude I want to use as a therapeutic mirror to anti-realists about God, to suggest that their attitude is suspiciously rooted in the fear of losing control, and the inability to tolerate the separateness of others, climactically expressed in their attitude to that paradigm of otherness – God. Nussbaum writes:

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[21] M. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.270.

[22] Ibid.

> on the cataleptic view an emotion can be known if and only if it can be vividly experienced. What you can't have you can't know. But the other's will, thoughts, and feelings are, for Marcel [the anti-realist], paradigmatic of that which cannot be had. They beckon to him out of Albertine's [God's] defiant, silent eyes … a secret world closed to his will, a vast space his ambitious thoughts can never cover. His projects of possession, doomed before they begin.[23]

Because Marcel the anti-realist is a suspicious man, who cannot be content with lacking the certainty that the separateness of the other, of God, makes impossible, he arrives at a lovely and lonely expression of anti-realism about other persons. Marcel considers 'that the heart and mind of another are unknowable, even unapproachable, except in fantasies and projections that are really elements of the knower's own life, not the others'.[24] Proust breathes the following words into Marcel's lips, amongst which we can hear the anti-realist's whisper: 'the human being is the being who cannot depart from himself, and if he says the contrary, lies'.[25] Albertine (and so God) can never be anything more for Marcel (and so the anti-realist) than 'the generating center of an immense construction that rose above the plane of my heart'.

Nussbaum's sadness about Marcel, is my regret about the religious anti-realist:

> it is because he (Marcel/the anti-realist) wishes not to be tormented by the ungovernable inner life of the other that he adopts a position that allows him to conclude that the other's (Albertine/God) inner life is nothing more than the constructive workings of his own mind. The skeptical conclusion consoles far more than it agonizes. It means that he is alone and self-sufficient in the world of knowledge. That love is not a source of dangerous openness, but rather a rather interesting relation with oneself.[26]

Religious anti-realism is an unfaithful and uncourageous movement of thought. It cannot bear to leave a gap between our practices and reality; it cannot bear doubt, and so faith, and so risk. Religion, so much of which is to do with faith and courage and love between otherness, is impoverished beyond measure if love and hope are safely rendered interesting relationships with ourselves.

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[23] Ibid., p.271.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., quote from Proust, *Remembrance*, I, 874ff.

[26] Ibid., pp.271–2, quote from *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C.K. Scott, Moncrieff and A. Mayor, revised by Terence Kilmartin. London: Chatto and Windus, 1981, III, 445.

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Index

Allison, H.E. 110–13, 116
Alston, W. 2n2, 23n20, 32–3, 43n5, 48n20, 54n34–5, 63n50
anti-realism
  apophatic 148–159
  criteria for 1–2
  epistemic 62–65
  and ethics 194–5
  and feminism 193–4
  and humour 1
  Kantian 97–147
  political ramifications of 188–192
  and scepticism 199–202
  scope of 1–5
  theological dangers of 65–69
  Wittgensteinian 11–69
  see also non-realism; quasi-realism; realism
apophatism 9, 148–159
Aquinas, Thomas, St 114–5, 121–2, 129
Aristotle 114
Augustine, St 169
Ayer, A.J. 25, 27

Banner, M. 14–15
Barrett, Cyril 13, 28
bent-rule follower, 'bricklayer' example 38–9
Berkeley, G. 75, 76, 200
Blackburn, Simon 47n19, 50
  quasi-realism 15–20
Byrne, Peter 102

cogito, Cartesian 153
concepts
  and conceiving 75–7
  and perception 77–9
constructivism
  correspondence relation 80–83
  diversity of world-views 71–2
  extent of mental organizing 75–80
  meaning 70
  relativist truth 84–96
  word and concept contingency 72–5
contradiction, Wittgenstein on 25–6
Cupitt, Don 147, 189

democracy
  and the apophatic God 157–9
  nature of 158–9
'depth grammar', religious language 11, 14
Descartes, René, on God 149
Devitt, Michael 74–5, 90
Dummett, M., on truth 51–2

empiricism, and verificationism 28
epistemology, cataleptic, Nussbaum on 200–201
ethics, and anti-realism 194–5
expressivism 11–12, 13–14, 16, 18–19
  religious language 16–18, 28
  Wittgenstein 27–8

feminism, and realism 193–4
fideism
  meaning 189
  and realism 189
Fries, Jacob 12

God
  anthropomorphic 149, 178–86, 198
  apophatic 148–9, 151, 153, 156–7, 159
    and democracy 157–9
  as 'available' God (Kaufman) 141–3
  conception of 174
  Descartes on 149
  Kaufman on 135–6, 137–40, 145–6
  'love', predicated of 182–4
  notions of 135–6
  noumenal (Hick) 124–7, 131–3
  properties (Hick) 127–33
    formal 128–30
    substantial 128, 129, 130
  as 'real' God (Kaufman) 140–41, 143, 144, 145, 150–51
  realism about, importance 195–7

  as regulative concept (Kaufman) 138–40
  speaking about, problem of 170–71
Goodman, Nelson 89–95
  on perception 78–9, 80
  Ways of Worldmaking 78
Guyer, Paul 114

Hacker, P. 37n20
Heidegger, Martin 166
  'four-fold notion' 164–5
  non-violent speaking 168–9
Hick, John 3, 5, 8, 116
  on Kant 98
  on a noumenal God 124–7, 131–3
  noumenal/phenomenal hybridity 117–34
    analysis 120–21
  on perception 79
  on properties of God 127–33
  and the world 121–4
Horwich, Paul 49n22
Hume, David 18, 19
humour, and anti-realism 1

idealism, transcendental 4
indeterminacy, radical, argument for 173–6
Insole, Christopher J., *The Politics of Human Frailty* 192
interpretation, Wittgenstein on 37

Jantzen, Grace 149, 194
  Becoming Divine 193
Janz, Paul D.
  God, the Mind's Desire 160–62, 171
    criticism of 162–3
  on tragedy 162

Kant, Immanuel 77, 98–9
Kantianism
  Allison on 110–3, 116
  Kaufman on 98
  Hick on 98
  noumena 107–8
  Strawson on 104–5
  transcendental idealism 99–116
    one-realm account 110–16, 120, 143–4, 163
    two-realm account 104–10, 115, 145
kataphatism 169

Kaufman, Gordon 3, 5, 8, 101, 116, 189
  anti-metaphysical presupposition 138, 143, 145
  constructivist presupposition 137–8, 143
  God, as regulative concept 138–40, 143
  on Kant 98
  on the 'real' God 140–41, 143–5, 150–51
  works
  Essay on Theological Method 76, 98, 142
  God the Problem 97, 139, 140, 150–51
  In Face of Mystery 139–40, 141, 142
  Theology for a Nuclear Age 142
Kierkegaard, Søren, 'secret' notion of truth 167, 169
Kripke, Saul 37n20

language
  anthropomorphic 148–150, 178–186
  brockeness of, 172–186
  'chair' example 73–4
  and indeterminacy 56–61, 173–175
  'rose' example 74–5
   word and concept contingency 72–74
'language games' 20–23
  cross-discourse 20–21
  discourse-limited 20, 22–4
  and truth 29–41
Lefort, Claude, on monarchy/democracy 158–9
Lemmon, E.J. 88
Levinas, Emmanuel 167–8
Locke, John 110
'love'
  examples, as predicate schema 181–2
  predicated of God 182–4

McCutcheon, Felicity 25–26, 73
McFague, Sallie 99, 157, 189
McGinn, Bernard 151–2
Mackie, J.L. 12
Marion, Jean-Luc 165, 167–8
meaning
  analogical 173
  equivocal 173
  family resemblance theory 34
  indeterminacy of 56–61, 173–175
  theory of 174
  univocal 173

Moore, Andrew 190–91

non-realism 4
  see also anti-realism; quasi-realism; realism
noumena 102, 104, 113, 115
  Kant on 107–8
Nussbaum, Martha
  on cataleptic epistemology 200–201
  Love's Knowledge 200

One-realm position 110–16, 120, 121

particularism, Wittgenstein's 34–5
Pears, David 73
perception
  and concepts 77–9
  Goodman on 78–9, 80
  Hick on 79
persons
  models 153–5
    Enlightenment 155
    Romantic 155, 156
  non-reductive approach 197–8
  self-interpreting aspects 198
  Taylor on 153–5
Phillips, D.Z. 3, 5, 6, 11, 13–15, 19, 20–25, 31–33, 41
  on God's will 12
  on the philosopher's purpose 44
  on truth 42–47, 51–53
  works
    Faith After Foundationalism 12, 31–3
    Religion Without Explanation 18
    Wittgenstein and Religion 32
Plantinga, Alvin 40, 43, 114, 115
  Warranted Christian Belief 100–101
political liberalism 192
predicate schemas, 'love' example 181–2
projectivism 16–18
properties, projected 16
Proust, Marcel, anti-realism 200–201
Putnam, Hilary 7, 51
  on truth 53–61

quasi-realism, Simon Blackburn 15–20
  see also anti-realism; non-realism; realism

realism
  about God, importance of 195–7
  Christocentric 190–91
  empirical 110
  and feminism 193–4
  and fideism 189
  and political liberalism 192
  relativist 33–4
  and scepticism 81–2
  strategies 89–96
  theological 190–91
  see also anti-realism; non-realism; quasi-realism
relativism
  approach 86–7
  establishing 87–9
  ideal 85
  purpose 84–5
  and truth 84–96
religion, Wittgensteinian characterizations 29–30, 40
religious believers, behaviour 13–15
religious language 11–12
  'depth grammar' 11, 14
  expressivism 16–18, 28
religious statements 2–5, 194
Rescher, N. 76
Rhees, Rhush 42
Rorty, Richard 166
Ross, J.F. 177
rule following
  and scepticism 35–41
  see also bent-rule follower
rule use, Wittgenstein 37n20

scepticism
  and realism 81–2
  and rule following 35–41
Smith, James K.A.
  Speech and Theology 167–71
  on violence of speech 167, 169
Strawson, P.F., on Kant 104–5
Swinburne, Richard 11, 12, 93, 149–50, 177

Taylor, Charles 166
  on the person 153–5
theology 146–7
  natural 28
tragedy, Janz on 162
transcendental idealism, Kantian 96–116
Trigg, Roger 73–74
truth

  Dummett on 51–2
  epistemic conception of 42–3, 51–69
    theological dangers of 65–9
  Kierkegaard, 'secret' notion of 167, 169
  and 'language games' 29–41
  non-epistemic conception of 45–7
  Phillips on 42–7, 52–3
  Putnam on 53–61
  conceptual relativity 56–61
  model-theoretic argument 54–6
  and realism 188
  redundancy of 47–51
  and relativism 33–34, 84–95
Turner, Denys
  The Darkness of God 152–3
two-realm position 104–10, 115

Vattimo, Gianni 165–6
verificationism 25–27
  and empiricism 28
violence of speech 168–9
  Smith on 167, 169

Weil, Simone 152
Westphal, Merold 115
Wilkerson, T.E. 71, 109
Williams, M. 83
Wittgenstein, Ludwig
  chessboard example 71–2
  on contradiction 25–6
  expressivism 27–8
  on interpretation 37
  particularism 34–5
  rope analogy 34–5
  on the resurrection 27
  rule use 37n20
  and verificationism 24–28
  works
    Lectures and Conversations 14
    Philosophical Investigations 34
world, *a priori* knowledge of 105–7
Wrathall, Mark 165
  Religion After Metaphysics 164, 170
Wright, Crispin 1n1