# Talking About God

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God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 12

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# Disagreement and Literalism

# Getting Disagreement Off the Ground

> I will assume that religious differences are not merely differences involving commitments to ways of living or differences concerning the presence or absence of feelings of spirituality. They include genuine disagreements. (Feldman 2007: 200)

› The epistemic significance of religious disagreement presupposes that the disagreement is **genuine**: that adherents of different religions – and indeed theists and atheists – share a common subject matter and have incompatible opinions about it.

› This presupposes that, when people **verbally** disagree about religion, their sentences are to be taken **literally**.

# Literalism

Literalism **Religious language** is to be taken **literally**.
The words in religious utterances generally have the meaning they do in non-religious utterances, and religious language is distinguished from non-religious language by its subject matter, not its grammar or semantics.

› So when a theist affirms *God is mighty*, the **surface grammar** of that sentence is not deceptive.
  » Just like the sentence *Samson is mighty* ascribes might to its subject, so too the theist sentence ascribes might to God.
  » We assume in both cases that the use of a proper name *God*/*Samson* **presupposes** that it refers. The sentence misfires in some way if the names are 'empty' (non-referring).

› Moreover, the **point** of saying *God is mighty* is to assert that literal content: to **make a claim**.
  » Hence an assertion of it cannot be a wholly successful speech act unless God exists.

# Utterances, Claims, and Other Activities

› Making a literal assertion is one thing we might do with our speech – but it may not be the only thing we could do with an utterance.

1. A typical utterance of *I am a pianist* serves to indicate my belief that I am a pianist – but what if I say it as an actor on the stage (or reading aloud from someone else's autobiography)? Then I am making no claim, and the utterance doesn't reflect my belief.
   » In **fiction**, sentences have their literal meaning but the **aim** isn't to claim those sentences are correct. We'll come back to this idea later.

2. Or suppose what I say is *Apulia is the heel of Italy*. Am I literally to be understood as expressing my belief that a geographical region is a heel? Or is this a **metaphor**, perhaps expressing some other, related, belief, but not to be taken **literally** itself (Hills 2017).

3. Or consider *Mimsy were the borogroves* – something that looks like a grammatical sentence, but actually makes no sense? We could have cases of gibberish which are equally nonsense – just a little more carefully disguised.

# Literalism: our working hypothesis

› This course so far rests on **literalism**.
› **Historically**, in the West, everyone took religious utterances at **face value**, as expressing genuine and widespread belief in a divine personage.
  » Religious non-literalism was not really an option on the table, especially considering the consequences many faced when publicly disavowing religious belief.
  » There is a long tradition of reading scripture **allegorically**, dating at least to the early theologian Origen (Ludlow 2013), but the allegory is understood to **parallel** the literal text, not supplant it.
› The long-term project of arguing for and against the existence of God, and evaluating belief in God as rational (or otherwise), requires that *God exists* has its usual meaning, and that the point of uttering it is to assert that God exists, communicating a literal belief in that proposition.

# The Argument from Systematicity

› Here is an argument for taking religious utterances at face value:

(S1) A typical utterance of *The Queen exists* is to be taken at face value.

(S2) A typical utterance *God exists* is **apparently alike** in grammar and function to a typical utterance of *The Queen exists*.

(S3) We ought not to treat apparently alike utterances differently without compelling reason.

(S4) There is no compelling reason to treat *God exists* differently.

(SC) So, we ought to take a typical utterance of *God exists* at face value.

# Undermining Systematicity

› Suppose someone said *Apulia is in the heel of Italy* or *France is a hexagon*. This is – taken literally – absurd. That is a reason to treat it non-literally – as a metaphor, for example – hence (S4) is false in such cases.

› Maybe *God exists* is like that:

> beliefs that there are incorporeal psychological agents, with infinitely great powers… these are the *sorts of claims* that, in any other, non-religious context, are associated with patently psychotic delusions! … I don't think for a moment that most religious people are psychotic. … that leads me to speculate there must be something else going on, and this has led me to wonder whether they really do believe them. (Rey 2007: 243–44)

› Rey thinks that the claims are to be taken literally, and that religious practice thus involves **self-deception** (2007: 245). (Religious people at some level 'nevertheless know better' (Rey 2007: 246).)

# Charity and Non-Literalism

› But non-literalism about religious claims is another potential response:
   1. Literalism leads us to regard religious people as psychotic or self-deceived;
   2. They are neither;
   3. Hence we have a compelling reason to treat religious language differently than non-religious language.

› This argument expresses a **charitable** approach to religious people – psychosis or self-deception are interpretations of their behaviour that render it comfortable to non-religious standards, but don't respect the intellectual agency of those believers.

› It may be **patronising** to diagnose people who sincerely avow religious belief as suffering from self-deception. Yet it may also be patronising to suggest that they must be interpreted as not even having any religious beliefs.

# Faultless Disagreement and Epistemic Inconclusiveness

› Another route to non-literalism comes from reconsidering disagreement.
› Some disagreements are **faultless**. When people disagree over whether Brussels sprouts are tasty, there seems to be a genuine divergence of view, but it is not one that requires the disagreeing parties to change their minds in response.
› In this case, we might think the disagreement is faultless because matters of personal taste are **observer-relative**, even if there is a common subject matter.
› But another reason for faultless disagreement might be that there is **no possible resolution** – we have come to an epistemic dead-end, where the evidence is inconclusive and will remain so.
› But if so, why is there not a lot more **suspension of judgment**? That would after all be the standard response.

# Sidestepping this Standstill: Non-literalism

› Our previous attempts to explain the fact that people do not suspend judgment on religious matters have been attempts to defend steadfast epistemologies.

› But an alternative is that we are in some way **misconceiving** of religion.

› Rather than thinking of religious doctrine as **degenerate science** (where evidence is inconclusive and opinion is risky) perhaps our reactions indicate it is not a **truth-aiming discourse** at all:

> One response to religious diversity is to argue that it provides evidence that religious claims do not address a real subject matter. According to this argument, genuinely descriptive fields of discourse such as science and mathematics admit convergence of opinion: … [disputes in those fields are] in principle resolvable with evidence and proof. Religion, by contrast, appears to have widespread and apparently irresolvable disagreement, and this … is evidence for thinking that religious judgments are not objective: religious questions do not have correct answers, and there are no religious facts. (Oppy and Scott 2010: 280)

# Non-Literalist Approaches to Religion

# Precedent for Non-literal interpretation

› As noted above, there is a tradition of non-literal interpretation of tricky theological ideas. Consider the **Trinity**, the Christian doctrine that the three divine persons (God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit) are the same substance and hence one.

› There is limited scriptural support, but some admittedly contested passages are explicit:

> For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. (1 John 5:7)

» Historically, the explicit Trinitarianism here is almost surely a spurious late emendation, likely added to justify '*sola scriptura*' Protestants to continue to affirm Christian orthodoxy.

› Setting aside the textual controversy: How can *these three are one* be true? This seems **self-contradictory** (Tuggy 2021: §1.4)!

› That is a compelling reason to treat this supposed identity as a **metaphor**, rather than literally.

# Non-Trinitarian Heresies

› The Trinity continues to cause the spilling of much theological ink.

One-Self Theories (Tuggy 2021: §1)  God is one divine self. The three are not selves, but rather **aspects** or features of the one God, or perhaps (as Sabellianism holds) **modes** of God. (A mode is a dependent individual: for example, a wave in water is a individual entity in some sense, but is not a distinct being from the underlying water.) God isn't identical to the three, but metaphorically they are Him in the sense of being wholly grounded in Him.

Three-Self Theories (Tuggy 2021: §2)  There are three distinct divine persons, but only one God. One prominent view, **Arianism**, has it that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are distinct from God the Father and were created by Him. Only the latter is really God, but the others 'are' Him by being **generated** by Him.

› The First Council of Nicaea in 325 condemned early non-literal views as heretical, and the Nicene Creed appears to affirm as orthodox the idea that we need to take *these three are one* literally regardless of its apparent inconsistency.

# Positive Non-Literalism

› These heretical approaches to the Trinity are examples of what we might call 'positive' approaches to non-literal interpretation.

> Positive Religious discourse isn't truth-aiming, but religious practice has some other purpose than expressing truths through the use of such language.

› In the present case, saying *these three are one* isn't itself to be taken as true, but it is rather an **effective metaphor** for communicating a 'covert' truth.

› But positive approaches may identify purposes for religious speech having nothing to do with doctrine:

» It might **express a moral or spiritual emotion**, such a reverence or awe;
» It might have a **social function** binding people together in fellowship.

› Positive approaches **vindicate religious practice**, because these alternative aims might be in themselves desirable. The fact that the discourse doesn't aim at truth simultaneously explains the persistence of apparent disagreement. (If I'm not getting it wrong in saying $p$, I don't need to stop saying it just because someone else says $\neg p$.)

# Negative Non-Literalism

› But there are also negative non-literalisms.

> Negative  Religious practice aims at true belief, but religious language is **incoherent** or even **meaningless** – our linguistic practice falls short of permitting the assignment of meanings to key expressions – and so the practice is fundamentally **defective**.

› The negative views takes **attempts** at religious speech to be **sincere**, but (unbekownst to believers) in **error**, since there is **no content** in religious doctrines to be communicated.

» Applied to the Trinity, it might be the view that the Nicene Creed attempts to sincerely assert the necessarily false claim that 1 = 3, and goes awry because no coherent body of belief could include that claim.

› Persistent disagreement is explained, to an extent: if you aren't managing to say anything, you aren't saying anything wrong!

» But religious discourse **isn't** vindicated; when you aren't managing to express anything coherent, and the saying of it has no redeeming qualities, you should probably do something else.

# Negative Non-Literalism: Nonsense and the Verification Principle

# Theology and Nonsense

› Perhaps the most discussed argument for treating *God exists* in a way unlike *The Queen exists* has come from arguments that no theological expression can have a coherent **meaning** attached to it.

› As Ayer puts it, with characteristic bluntness

> [A] religious man … would say that in talking about God he was talking about a transcendent being who might be known through certain empirical manifestations, but certainly could not be defined in terms of those manifestations. But in that case the term 'god' is a metaphysical term. And if 'god' is a metaphysical term … then to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false. And by the same criterion, no sentence which purports to describe the nature of a transcendent god can possess any literal significance [i.e., meaning]. (Ayer 1936: 152)

# Ayer's Argument: *God exists* is empirical

(A0) If a sentence has a literal meaning, then either it can be demonstratively proved, or it can be justified on empirical grounds.

(A1) *God exists* has a literal meaning. (Assumption)

(A2) *God exists* can be demonstratively proved, or it can be justified on empirical grounds. (A0, A1)

(A3) If something can be demonstratively proved, it must be a triviality.

(A4) *God exists* is not trivial.

(A5) *God exists* cannot be demonstratively proved. (A3, A4 *modus tollens*)

(AC1) So if *God exists* has a literal meaning, it can be justified on empirical grounds. (From A1–A5, conditional proof)

# Hume's Fork

› Ayer is an **empiricist**. He is here starting (at A0) from a famous empiricist doctrine, known as **Hume's fork**, from the final paragraph of Hume's *Enquiry* (Hume 1777):

> When we run over libraries, persuaded of these principles, what havoc must we make? If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames: For it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion. Hume (1777), §12.34

› Ayer takes Hume's **methodological principle**, and elevates it to a theory of **meaning**.

# The Triviality Option

› Ayer at (A3), following Hume, has a particular conception of what can be demonstratively proved: only **conceptual truths**, those knowable *a priori* without the aid of any specific course of experience.

  » Ayer identifies this class of claims with the **tautologies** – logical trivialities, such as *not both: p and not-p*.

› Ayer takes it as self-evident at (A4) that *God exists* is not a tautology, presumably because it appears to be coherently **deniable** (Ayer 1936: 151).

› Admittedly, we have looked at arguments – Anselm's ontological argument, in particular – to the effect that *God exists* is a conceptual truth – one that can be denied only by someone who doesn't fully appreciate the concept of God as **the most perfect conceivable being**.

  » Anselm's argument has not widely been hailed as persuasive.

› So most agree: there will not be any proof, akin to mathematical proof, that God exists. So we need to rely on empirical evidence, not just armchair definitions.

# Ayer's Argument, continued: *God exists* is nonsense

(AC1) If *God exists* has a literal meaning, it can be justified on empirical grounds. (From above)

(A6) If any claim can be justified on empirical grounds, then it is either a purely empirical hypothesis summarising the data, or a theoretical hypothesis explaining the data. (Thesis about epistemic justification)

(A7) *God exists* is not a purely empirical hypothesis.

(AC2) So if it has a literal meaning, *God exists* is a theoretical hypothesis. (from AC1–A7)

(A8) Theoretical hypotheses are meaningless.

(AC3) So *God exists* has no literal meaning. (AC2, A8)

# *God* is a metaphysical expression

› At (A7), Ayer claims that the **content** of *God exists* isn't exhausted by its empirical content.
  » That is, we cannot give a synonymous claim that involves nothing other than observable scientific expressions, such as those about 'certain sort[s] of regularity in nature' (Ayer 1936: 152).

› But Ayer recognises that, if God is to play the right sort of explanatory role for the religious believer, He cannot be simply identified with regularities in nature.
  » The existence of God can't **explain** the laws of nature if the content of the claim that *God exists* is just that there **are** laws of nature.

› So *God exists*, taken literally, must be a **theoretical** claim (AC2) – it is at least partly about the non-observational world lying behind the observed empirical data.

# The Verification Principle

› But now a crucial empiricist doctrine enters at (A8): the **verification principle of meaning**, that a sentence is meaningful only to the extent that it **could make a difference to what is verified through observation**:

Verificationism  'a synthetic proposition is significant [i.e., meaningful] only if it is empirically verifiable' (Ayer 1936: 141)

» The claim that *grass is green* does make such a difference, and *salt melts at 800°* could make such a difference. So these claims are meaningful.
» But the hypothesis that *everything in the universe was shifted 3m to my left last night* does not make a difference – it would leave everything observable exactly the same.

› The basic thought behind the principle is that we could only **learn** the meaning of an expression through its being **correlated** with something observable. A notion that, in principle, wasn't able to make a difference to experience is not one that we could ever learn to associate with an expression, so it could not be the meaning of any expression.

# Explaining Religious Disagreement

[The] assertions [of the theist] cannot possibly be valid, but they cannot be invalid either. As he says nothing at all about the world, he cannot justly be accused of saying anything false, or anything for which he has insufficient grounds. It is only when the theist claims that in asserting the existence of a transcendent god he is expressing a genuine proposition that we are entitled to disagree with him....
As far as the question of truth or falsehood is concerned, there is no opposition between the natural scientist and the theist who believes in a transcendent god. For since the religious utterances of the theist are not genuine propositions at all, they cannot stand in any logical relation to the propositions of science. (Ayer 1936: 153–55)

› So genuine religious disagreement arises only when theists and atheists make a mistake about the meaningfulness of their utterances – a mistake akin to taking religion to be a hypothesis of natural science.

# Verification undone I: can we make a division?

› But Verificationism is now universally accepted as **hopeless** as a theory of meaning.

› One main reason: it seems impossible to make the required **division** into empirical and theoretical claims.

› Ayer says that if something is an 'empirical hypothesis' iff

> it would be possible to deduce from it, and other empirical hypotheses, certain experiential propositions which were not deducible from those other hypotheses alone. (Ayer 1936: 152)

› But now consider an empirical claim $A$.

› Surely disjunction (*or*) **preserves verifiability** (since anything verifying $A$ also verifies $A \vee A'$). Hence $A$ *or not-B* will be empirical if $A$ is, for any $B$.

› Now from $B$ and this empirical claim $A$ *or not-B*, the empirical claim $A$ follows, which does not follow from $A$ *or not-B* alone. So, by Ayer's criterion, $B$ is meaningful – but it was **arbitrary**!

# Verification undone II: would a division work?

› Even if the division were stable, we cannot restrict ourselves, by a division of **vocabulary**, to purely empirical claims.

> any unobservable entity will differ from the observable ones in the way it systematically lacks observable characteristics. … therefore, we shall be able to state in the observational vocabulary … that there are unobservable entities, and, to some extent, what they are like. (van Fraassen 1980: 54)

› A restriction to 'observational' vocabulary won't actually restrict us from making meaningful theological claims.

› For example: surely *is mortal*, *is imperfect*, etc., had better turn out to be meaningful. But now I can say, using meaningful vocabulary, something distinctively theological:

> (GO) There is a being who is not mortal, is not imperfect, who has lived forever, and who created the universe.

# Positive Non-Literalism: Expressivism and Metaphor

# Mysticism and Religion

› Ayer does offer some positive reasons for the existence of religion:

> we are often told that the nature of God is a mystery which transcends the human understanding. But to say that something transcends the human understanding is to say that it is unintelligible. And what is unintelligible cannot significantly be described. (Ayer 1936: 156)

› Ayer's view entails that any discourse about a realm that 'transcends the human understanding', including religious speech, cannot aim at the **communication of truths** by direct assertion.

› A scientific understanding of religious speech must therefore seek to understand **why this discourse exists**, if it cannot be justified in the way ordinary belief-indicating assertions are.

› One idea: the point of religious practice is to express a mystical 'feeling of awe with which men regard an alien world' (Ayer 1936: 155) – the point of atheistic discourse might be to express the feeling that reality doesn't transcend the scientific.

# Verification and Mysticism

› Ayer's instinct to offer a non-literalist explanation of the continued existence of religious discourse and practice is sound. But it doesn't fit well with his verificationism.
› How, exactly, is uttering a meaningless string of sounds able to express a 'feeling of awe'?
› Even standard expressions of awe, like *ooh* and *aah*, are meaningful thereby.
  » They might be meaningful like a traffic light is meaningful, a sign standing by **convention** for a meaning. Saying *ooh* might mean 'This is awesome' in the same way a green light means 'you may proceed'.
  » But if Ayer is right, religious language and speech doesn't even have this sort of conventional function.
› Stripped of the verificationism, Ayer's idea leads to some form of positive non-literalism, where some content must be ascribed to religious language so as to explain why it continues to be deployed.

# Religion and Mystical Awe: Positive Non-Literalism Clarified

› Positive non-literalism says that 'religious discourse isn't truth-aiming, but religious practice has some other purpose'.

› There are at least two ways of understanding how this could work.

Semantic — Religious language is meaningful, but it does not have its **surface meaning**. What is genuinely asserted in religious practice is the non-surface meaning.
The 'surface meaning' is the meaning you would assign if religious language was treated uniformly with non-religious language.

Pragmatic — Religious language is meaningful, and has its surface meaning, but it is **not asserted** as true in normal uses.

# Semantic Approach: Expressivism

› The first sort of non-surface meaning is inspired by Ayer's talk of a 'feeling of awe'. This is the idea that statements like *God exists* are conventional symbols that **indicate** our feeling such awe.

› This 'feeling' isn't a belief; the utterance isn't an assertion that God exists. Rather, it communicates something about a **state of mind**.

› In metaethics, the position known as **expressivism** says that moral prohibitions like *murder is wrong* aren't to be taken as involving beliefs about some mysterious property of WRONGNESS that some action-types possess. Rather, an utterance of *murder is wrong* expresses **disapproving of murdering**, rather than involving any property of 'wrongness' (Ayer 1936: 136).

  » Note that the utterance doesn't assert *I disapprove of murdering*, though anyone who disapproves of murdering would be correctly interpreted as subscribing to that claim. Rather, the utterance is the verbal appearance of what it is to experience that feeling of disapproval.

› By parallel construction, perhaps Ayer's positive view is a **religious expressivism**.

# Religious Expressivism

› The most substantial tradition in religious expressivism isn't directly inspired by moral non-cognitivism, but by some remarks of the later Wittgenstein (see O'Leary-Hawthorne and Howard-Snyder 1996: 248ff.):

> If this [religious doctrine] is a truth, it is not the truth it appears at first glance to express. It's less a theory than a sigh, or a cry. (Wittgenstein 1998: 34–35)
>
> To ask whether God exists is not to ask a theoretical question. If it is to mean anything at all, it is to wonder about praising and praying; it is to wonder whether there is anything in all that. This is why philosophy cannot answer the question 'Does God exist?' with either an affirmative or a negative reply … . 'There is a God', though it appears to be in the indicative mood, is an expression of faith. (Phillips 1976: 181)

› An 'expression of faith' seems to be involved in adopting a **religious form of life**, independent of belief.

› To evaluate religious life by asking whether God exists is to miss the point. (So what **is** the point of 'all that' without God?)

# Problems for Expressivism

› One standard problem for moral expressivism: **embedding** (Geach 1965: 463).

> (P1) If murdering is wrong, you shouldn't commit murder;
> (P2) Murdering is wrong.
> Ergo, You shouldn't commit murder.

› This argument is good, but how? If (P2) just expresses disapproval, then what does it express when it is embedded in the conditional in (P1)?

» It can't express the existence of an attitude of disapproval, since (P1) can be asserted by someone who doesn't disapprove of murder.

» And how can we embed an attitude anyway? That would make (P1) mean something like '*If thumbs down to murdering, you shouldn't commit murder'.

# Religious Expressivism

› The same problem will arise for religious expressivism:

> (R1)  If there is a God, then you should venerate him;
> (R2)  There is a God.
> Ergo,  You should venerate him.

› Many religious people will think this reasoning is unexceptional, but if (R2) is merely an 'expression of faith', a 'sigh or a cry', then how does it embed in (R1) to make this argument a good one?

› How can we reason conditionally from a 'feeling' which is not a proposition?

› The expressivist problem with embedding arises ultimately because the expressive language has **no propositional content**, though it has some sort of conventional meaning.

# Semantic Approach: Irreducible Metaphor

› A better model might then come from conventional non-surface meaning which does have content: for example, **idiomatic** language, like *kick the bucket* meaning 'die' (Nunberg, Sag, and Wasow 1994).

› Many idioms involve metaphors; the idea would be to treat all religious language as an idiomatic metaphor, even that with an apparent surface meaning (Tacey 2015). The paradigm of obvious religious metaphors like *God is my shepherd* would be extended to all religious language.

› If this is to be an example of non-literalism, these metaphors need to be non-compositional idioms, what Alston calls 'irreducible' metaphors (1989: 19): those where there is **nothing non-metaphorical** that can be said about the subject of the metaphor.

» So *God exists* has a metaphorical role, but has no literal role at all. It cannot be used to express the proposition that God exists, if used in a way conformable to standard religious uses.

# Apt metaphor

› For a metaphor to be good, or **apt**, it will need to meet at least these conditions (Oppy and Scott 2010: 23):

  1. The sort of thing to which the metaphorical predicate (*is my shepherd*) literally applies is a good **model** for the metaphorical subject (*God*).
  2. The subject and model **resemble** one another in some more or less specific way that is intended by the speaker.

› If this is right, then any use of a metaphor involves the speaker having some (perhaps imprecise) **concept** of the feature of God which resembles the model.

  » *God is my shepherd* is apt because we have, dimly but well enough, an idea of God as responsible for us and taking an interest in our wellbeing.

› If a speaker has such a concept, however, they can introduce a term for that concept, and thus say what they intend **non-metaphorically** (Oppy and Scott 2010: 28): for example, we could say 'God cares for us', which is not to be understood idiomatically.

› A uniform metaphorical approach to religious language seems to be perhaps self-undermining.

# The key problem for deviant semantic approaches: the theoretical role of God

› One fundamental problem confronts every approach to religious utterances which **reinterprets them**: religious discourse never occurs in **isolation**.
› Rather, they are made in the service of some larger project:
    1. to explain how the universe came to be, or
    2. to explain what our purpose is, or
    3. to explain how moral truth is grounded, etc.
› And God can play a role in these explanatory projects only if claims about his existence and nature are taken at face value.
    » How can stating that God exists form part of an **explanation** of how the universe came to be, if the content of that statement is **compatible** with there being no supernatural aspects of reality?
    » Likewise if we **reinterpret** *God* to mean something like *the infinite and eternal universe* – then *God exists* will be literally true, but God can't play a role in these further explanations.

# Disagreement in content

> One could try to reinterpret professions and denials of religious faith not as statements of beliefs about how things are but as expressions of commitment to different ways of life or as mere expressions of spiritual attitudes. But any such effort is an evasion. It is obvious that theists and atheists do not merely differ in how they live their lives. They really do disagree about the truth of the proposition that God exists. Any attempt to turn religious disagreements into mere differences in lifestyles fails to do justice to the plain facts of the case and is, perhaps, part of an effort to paper over troublesome questions. (Feldman 2007: 199)

› While some sophisticates might consciously **adopt** a conception of religion as metaphor, it is hard to see it as a plausible interpretation of existing religious speech, whatever the difficulties in understanding it literally.

  » Maybe **it would be preferable** if religious speech were non-literal, but it looks like wishful thinking to interpret existing speech that way.

# Positive Non-literalism: The Aims of Religion

# Pragmatic Non-Literalism: Religious Fictionalism

› A positive non-literalism needn't reinterpret religious words – it can 'reinterpret' the motivations behind religious utterances.

› In linguistics and philosophy of language, the **pragmatics** of an utterance refer to the conversational purposes that a given utterance might have.

› Pragmatics is a broad field, but all of its aspects focuses on the different ways **what is communicated** can come apart from **what is (literally) said**.

› One example is the theory of **implicature**. Consider when someone writes in a letter of recommendation just this: *Jones is punctual and hard-working*. They literally express that Jones has those features; but they communicate (by omission) that Jones lacks other relevant features for the job (Grice 1989: 33)

› Another example comes from **fictional** discourse: the sentences of the novel have their literal meaning, but aren't expressions of the novelist's belief. They do something that looks like **assertion**, but is perhaps just **pretence** (Eagle 2007).

› **Religious fictionalism** adopts the model of fictional discourse as a way to understand religious language (Scott and Malcolm 2018).

# Clarifying Religious Fictionalism

› Fictionalism needn't be the view that religious texts are literally novels or works of fiction.

› The **fictionalist about fiction** says that the benefits of engaging with a fiction don't accrue because one thereby comes to gain knowledge from testimony, learning what the writer believes.

› Likewise, the fictionalist about religion says the **benefits of engaging with religion** don't accrue because one thereby comes to gain knowledge from testimony, learning what religious practitioners believe.

› Accordingly, we need an account of the benefits of religious practice which doesn't include *having true beliefs about God* on the list.

› So those benefits will be those we've already noted: fellowship with others who engage in the same discourse, a way of expressing appropriate awe at the universe, or committing oneself to a spiritual and/or ethical framework.

# The Benefits of Religious Practice

› Alongside an account of the non-belief-related benefits of religion, we will need to explain why those benefits cannot be attained in some other way.

› Recall our earlier discussion of whether one can be 'good without God' – in the context of religious fictionalism, this discussion pivots on whether one can readily acquire a moral compass outside of a religious framework.

› The fictionalist would say that the justification for continuing the practice is its efficacy in leading to moral attitudes – for example, they might argue that

> Religious stories, particularly when bound together as incidents in the life of a religious figure, can provide models of good behaviour that are more memorable and engaging to the imagination and stimulating to one's actions than bare moral principles. … [One] fully immerses oneself in religious practice as a means to attain certain benefits, including self-understanding and moral and practical guidance (Scott and Malcolm 2018: 3–4)

› The evidence for religion as an effective moral teacher is, however, fairly weak (Hofmann, Wisneski, *et al.* 2014).

# The Success of Science

› Another route to religious fictionalism focuses not on morality, but on religion as a theory of reality, and it starts from the case of **scientific theory**.

› **Empiricists** have long been sceptical of scientific claims to knowledge of the unobservable parts of reality.

› But the **success of science** seems to suggest this scepticism is misplaced. The basic thought is that if theoretical science is successful in prediction and accommodation, then the best explanation of that is that science is getting things right in its claims about the unobservable parts of reality.

› Non-literalism about science was an empiricist attempt to undermine this argument: if theoretical claims don't have the literal meaning they seem to, then the success of science isn't evidence for the literal truth of those claims. (Verificationism was probably the most prominent approach in this vein.)

› The failure of verificationism and other non-literal accounts of scientific language suggested to many that we ought to take scientific theories literally. **But does that mean we have to believe them when they are successful?**

# Constructive Empiricism

› Van Fraassen characterises **scientific realism** as follows:

> Science aims to give us, in its theories, a literally true story of what the world is like; and acceptance of a scientific theory involves the belief that it is true. (van Fraassen 1980: 8)

› Rather than object to literalism, as verificationists do, he suggests attacking the account of belief. His **constructive empiricism** proposes a different notion of acceptance and a different conception of the **aim of science**:

> Science aims to give us theories which are empirically adequate; and acceptance of a theory involves as belief only that it is empirically adequate. (van Fraassen 1980: 12)

>> A theory is **empirically adequate** just in case it is correct in what it says about the observable.

› This difference is **pragmatic**: the constructive empiricist takes scientific language literally, but denies it communicates scientific belief. This is arguably a kind of **fictionalism about science**.

# Weaker Religious Doctrines

› A parallel idea for theology suggests itself: that while theology has a literal content, its **purpose** is only to assert something weaker.

› One way of doing this is to adopt **religious constructive empiricism**, the claim that religious doctrine is to be accepted as empirically adequate.

  » Everything observable is 'just as if' God exists; so that theological hypothesis is empirically adequate, and a theology including that claim could satisfy the aims of science.

› Constructive empiricism is often associated with a **permissive** epistemology, which allows any empirically adequate theory to be rationally accepted.

› In the case of theology, both theism and atheism could turn out to be empirically adequate, and both could thus be rationally accepted.

  » Importantly, rational acceptance is a guide to practical (observable) action, including speech – religious disagreement might persist because no one can be rationally required to give up an empirically adequate view, and everyone with an empirically adequate theology (theists of various sorts, as well as atheists) might be permitted to speak **just as if** their theory were true.

# Religious Empiricism

› Most think religion is more than theological doctrine. The **point** of religion is not merely empirical adequacy, but to help make sense of, and respond in an appropriate way to, **religious experience**.

» So in accepting 'God exists', I commit myself to the empirical adequacy of theology, but also I adopt a practice in which spiritual experience is **significant**.

› Van Fraassen himself, in a later book, suggests something like this:

Suppose that, in a philosophical way, I do not understand … science or religion. It might be one thing to take me by the hand and lead me into relevant experience. That might allow me to acquire a deeper sense of insight into those aspects of human existence. It would be quite another thing – and to the empiricists of little or no value – to postulate that there are certain entities or realms of being about which … science, or religion … tells us a true story. Yet, that is what philosophers have often tended to do: [contending that …] religious doctrines the putative true description of a divine, extra-mundane reality. (van Fraassen 2002: 29)

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