

# On Doing Philosophy of Religion

(A talk given to the Open End, Birmingham University, UK)

We have to start from where we are and what we are. As I see it, one of the most important things about us is that we are fragments of a much larger whole, and any possible completeness cannot lie in an isolated individual completeness but in a right relationship to the rest of the whole. Physically we are sub-microscopic dots in the vastness of the universe. As human beings we are one among some six billion others. As personalities we are incomplete, imperfect, idiosyncratic, always needing the complementarity of others. As thinkers we can only operate from a partial point of view, with limited abilities, with biases and prejudices, and with a very limited range of experience. Trying to look at myself in this light, in relation to work in the philosophy of religion, the only kind of which I am capable is the kind in which I have been trained, which is the post-logical positivist kind broadly called analytical. This began as linguistic analysis but has long since broadened out considerably to include metaphysics. You identify a problem, learn what has been said about it by major thinkers past and present, examine critically what they have said, and occasionally come up with a new suggestion of your own. You are naturally attached to this and will defend it against criticism – the process whereby it is tested in debate. You have to remember that it is an hypothesis, not a revealed truth, and you have to be ready to modify and develop it, and if necessary in the last resort to abandon it. But as in the sciences failed hypotheses can also contribute to the larger process of truth seeking.

But if a philosophical hypothesis is to contribute, either by being tenable or by being seen not to be tenable, it has to be formulated as clearly and precisely as possible. So analytical philosophers try not to go in for vague but impressive sounding language which cannot be cashed as usable intellectual currency. Further, so far as I am concerned, life is too short to spend it on authors who cannot think clearly enough to write clearly. Reading them is okay for the young, who quite rightly will try anything because they think they have all the time in the world; and in this way, hopefully, they develop discrimination. But as time becomes more precious, you tend to discriminate more severely. Nevertheless as I read stuff whose approach or method is alien to me, I have to recognise that there is plenty of good work going on in ways which are not to my own taste. But personally I benefit more, whether I agree with them or not, from lucid thinkers such as Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant (who was difficult but never vague), Russell, Moore, Popper, Hartshorne, Quine, Wittgenstein (who was clear though never systematic), more than such as Hegel, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, etc.

The other side of our fragmentariness is that we only have a limited responsibility. We are not responsible for finding the whole Truth, but only for contributing the little that we can to the search. Again, we are not responsible for the state of the whole world, let alone the whole universe. We can take the Dalai Lama's advice: when you have the power to change things for the better, you must do so, but when you can't, don't worry about the fact that you can't.

Another limitation, or example, of fragmentariness, is that I am a westerner and, like all of us, an heir to the western Enlightenment. I have often had it pointed out to me by colleagues of the eastern cultures, particularly in India, how western are the presuppositions of so many of us whom they meet. They see in us, for example, individualism as opposed to their more communal outlook, binary either/or logic as opposed to their tendency to both/and thinking, and suspicion of the mystical as opposed to their tendency to embrace it. But more than a year spent at different times in India and Sri Lanka, and shorter times in Africa, has taught me that there are different ways of being human, which are the great cultures of the earth, and that the culture in which I happen to have been born, and which has formed me, is not normative for all humanity. Therefore we have to accept our own fragmentariness and our need for the balancing influence of others. This is one reason, incidentally, why Christian theology ought to be, although it still usually isn't, done as though in the presence of people of the other world faiths.

More individually, I like order and clarity and dislike chaos, vagueness, and cloudiness. I prefer to leave my desk empty rather than littered with unfinished business. And so in my

metaphysical speculations I am probably trying to tidy up the universe in my own mind by finding a systematic picture of it! Question: are systematic thinkers generally also tidy in other aspects of their lives? And unsystematic thinkers generally untidy? Certainly the very systematic Kant was famously tidy, and the very unsystematic Donald Mackinnon, who was a colleague in Cambridge, was incredibly untidy. Note that if there are these correlations, this in no way invalidates either kind of work. It just means that it requires different kinds of mind to do different kinds of intellectual job.

Moving on, what is the philosophy of religion? It is analogous to the philosophy of science, of law, of mind, of morality (i.e. ethics), of knowledge (i.e. epistemology), etc. It is thus not itself a religious exercise but a meta exercise, and it can be carried out by non-religious as much as by religious people. So my own main project in the epistemology of religion, which has been to try to see what in the light of contemporary epistemology a viable religious interpretation of religion would look like, could in principle be done by an atheist. The difference between myself and the atheist would consist in the philosophically extraneous fact that I do and the atheist does not see life in a religious light which can make use of such an interpretation. In actual fact most of those who spend their time on the philosophy of religion do so because they are philosophers for whom religion is very important and thus worth thinking about. But religion can also be important to people, not because it has value to them, but because they feel threatened by it and need continually to assure themselves of its falsity. They are as obsessed with religion as any Christian fundamentalist. They are indeed the mirror image of Christian fundamentalists, and disapprove of the likes of me for not upholding the antiquated theology which they love to attack.

Now my own philosophy of religion manifesto. I hold that from our point of view within it the universe is ambiguous as between religious and naturalistic interpretations. Complete and consistent accounts of both kinds are possible, at least in principle, each including within it an account of the other. To accept either is, and is equally – I want to stress that word ‘equally’ - an act of faith in the sense that it commits one to a view which cannot be proved, or in any precise sense of the word probabilified, and which therefore *may* be mistaken. This is something that naturalistic thinkers find it as hard as religious thinkers to accept. They don’t like to think of naturalism as a faith, though in fact it is.

Concerning this ambiguity, on the religious side the traditional theistic arguments are not conclusive, although they are intellectually fascinating and should certainly form part of the a philosophical education. Nor is the modern revival of the ontological argument by Hartshorne and Malcolm, based on Anselm’s so called second form of the argument; nor is Plantinga’s version, using possible worlds logic, and nor again is Swinburne’s cumulative argument using Bayes’ probability theorem. I won’t bore you here with these, or with the ‘fine tuning’ argument in astro-physics propounded by Barrow and Tipler and many others, which is also suggestive but also inconclusive.

Let us now use the word ‘God’ as our familiar western term for the putative Ultimate Reality to which the religions point, without at this stage defining that reality as an infinite person, or three infinite persons, or in any other specific way. The right approach for a religious interpretation of religion is, I believe, not an argument directly for the existence of such a reality, but an argument for the rationality of trusting religious experience as a mediated awareness of that reality – about which more presently.

On the other side, although the naturalistic assumption is pervasive in all our minds, and is indeed completely dominant as an unquestioned assumption of our western culture, its very dominance hides foundations which are as shaky and inadequate as the theistic arguments. For the only religion-proof form of naturalism requires strict materialism, or as a more friendly name for it, physicalism – the view that nothing exists but the physical universe, including of course human brains and their activity. For if there is further reality beyond the physical, this constitutes a gaping hole in a thoroughgoing naturalism. If naturalistic thinkers are not willing to commit themselves to strict physicalism they ought to be aware that their position has thereby ceased to be religion-proof. In a universe in which there is reality beyond the physical it is impossible to exclude the divine *a priori*.

But there are serious logical and empirical flaws in strict physicalism. The logical flaw is that the physical universe is law-governed and proceeds by cause and effect, so that everything that happens is determined. It is true that the physicists speak of indeterminacy in the movements of the ultimate quanta of energy. But (a) there is a question whether this simply means that we cannot predict the movements of the ultimate particles, not that a theoretical omniscient mind could not predict them, and (b) even if there is genuine quantum indeterminacy, this is swamped in the large scale statistical regularities which constitute the 'laws' of nature – somewhat as the fact that we cannot predict when a given individual will die does not affect the statistical death rates of large populations. And physical objects at our level of awareness are multi-billion populations of the ultimate particles. And so according to physicalism all events, at least on the scale of which we are conscious, including crucially the continuous electro-chemical activity which constitutes the functioning of our own brains, are determined. But in that case we meet the contradiction, which has been pointed out by 20th century philosophers such as Karl Popper, and which Epicurus pointed out long ago when he said that 'He who says that all things happen of necessity cannot criticise another who says that not all things happen of necessity. For he has to admit that the assertion itself happens of necessity'. So there is a practical contradiction at the heart of any strictly physicalist position – practical as in the case of the man who saws off the branch on which he is sitting .

So when Susan Greenfield for example, Professor of Pharmacology at Oxford, says in her recent fascinating popular TV programme about the brain that freewill is an illusion, and holds that more research is needed to find out just where in the brain the illusion is created, she is revealing a complete lack of philosophical sophistication. This on two counts. First, she presumably thinks that, in coming to the conclusion that free will is an illusion she was making a rational judgment based on evidence, and does not realise that, according to her own conclusion, her brain came by physical necessity to that conclusion, and differs in this respect from many other brains, such as for example (amongst many others), that of Wolf Singer, Director of the Max Planck Institute for Brain Research in Frankfurt who is, if Susan Greenfield is right, programmed by physical necessity to conclude that mental 'attributes transcend the reach of purely neurobiological reductionism' (*From Brains to Consciousness*, ed. Rose, Penguin Books, 1998, p. 241). And second, like so many neuro-scientists, she fails to appreciate the elementary point that the fact that mental events are always correlated with brain events does not mean that they are identical with brain events.

But there are also empirical, in the sense of observational, difficulties involved in physicalism. I am not myself very impressed by the ESP experiments done by Rhine at Duke University and by many others elsewhere, probably because I have an irrational distrust of statistical data; but I am impressed by some of the anecdotal evidence, - 'anecdotal' being a scientist's disparaging word for real life human testimony as distinguished from laboratory experiments. Law courts work largely on the basis of real life human testimony, as indeed does much of ordinary life, and it seems to me a perfectly valid basis on which to form beliefs about events of a kind that can only very unreliably be produced at will in a lab. Let me give an example which came to my attention only a few weeks ago of anecdotally evidenced ESP. I was having lunch with a former neighbour who has recently retired from being a judge. He is a standard agnostic, but he told me of an experience that has left him extremely puzzled. A barrister a generation older than himself had been his pupil master and mentor and had been almost like a father to him. When the older man was dying of cancer the judge visited him every day and spent as much time as he could with him. One day the old man seemed to be approaching a critical state, and when the judge left for the night he asked the nurse in charge to ring him if the patient became worse, saying that he would want to come at any time. Then he went home. At three in the morning he suddenly woke with a very strong sense or feeling that the old man was present there with him in his bedroom, not physically present, not seen or heard, but nevertheless very definitely there. In the morning the nurse told him that she had not rung him during the night because the end came too suddenly, but the patient had died at 3 a.m. He saw the medical record which confirmed the time. He could not believe that his experience at 3 a.m. could have been pure coincidence, and he asked me what I made of it. I said that a minimal interpretation would be unconscious telepathic contact between himself and the patient. The literature of parapsychology contains innumerable examples, sometimes in the form of what are known as crisis apparitions. Some of the most impressive of these come from the time before telephone and radio, when messages from, say, India to Britain

took many weeks. They are cases, typically from the 19th century, of a husband in India being quite unexpectedly killed in an accident and of his wife in England seeing an apparition of him at that same time and being aware that he had died, the wife having told others about this both orally and in writing very soon afterwards and long before the official news came. This telepathic explanation was a relief to the judge, since it did not commit him to a belief in any kind of life after death. But for our present purpose it is important to see that if such telepathic interactions, i.e. nonphysical effects of one mind on another, occur, this is as fatal to strict physicalism as would be a proven life after death.

I should add here that Soviet researchers at the Institute for Brain Research in Leningrad, before and up to the second world war, who were of course dogmatic materialists, were nevertheless interested in telepathy, which they found to be a genuine phenomenon, and worked on it because their authorities thought it might possibly have some military use. They devised experiments to find out what kind of physical radiation from brain to brain was involved. They put the telepathic sender and receiver, one in a screening chamber of sheet iron and the other in a screening chamber lined with lead. This was to confirm that when you cut out known forms of radiation, telepathy does not occur. But to their surprise the screening made no difference to the positive results. They also found that distance between the two subjects, varying from 25 meters to 1,700 kilometers, made no difference and that there was no time-distance correlation, as there is with all known forms of radiation. And so they left the presumed physical nature of telepathy as something yet to be discovered, their materialist faith being too strong to admit a non-physical mind to mind causation.

Now I suppose that nothing in this area can be said to be 100% certain. But it does seem to me more rational to conclude that ESP occurs, and is not a physical effect, and therefore that there is more to reality than matter, than to maintain a dogmatic physicalism regardless of the evidence. It is also necessary, as I pointed out earlier, to affirm intellectual and volitional freedom because to profess to deny it on rational grounds is to be in a self-contradictory position. But in that case the physicalist, or naturalistic, assumption is simply a local cultural consensus taken, as a cultural consensus always is, as established fact. For if there is reality beyond the physical, or in addition to the physical, the door is open to religious possibilities.

So the situation thus far is that, on the one hand, there are no religious phenomena – and ESP as such is not a religious phenomenon - that cannot in principle be described in purely naturalistic terms. But on the other hand, the assumption that the naturalistic account is correct does not have a privileged status over against a religious account. It only seems so from the point of view of an already existing naturalistic faith. The exceptions to this statement are those in which a religious picture contradicts known, or highly probable, conclusions of any of the special sciences – as, for example, in the case of ‘creationists’ who believe that the world was created some four thousand years ago. And of course the churches, from the time of Galileo to Darwin, have been habitually behind the times and have needlessly involved themselves in contradictions of this kind. But that is a problem for the churches, not for philosophers. Setting the churches’ self-created problem aside, the naturalistic picture is threatened by the fact that it can only be totally consistent and religion-proof if it accepts a strict physicalism, to embrace which as a freely reasoned belief is self-refuting, and which also has at least a potential problem, I would say an actual problem, with ESP.

But on the other side, a religious picture is threatened by the appalling problem of human and animal suffering and human wickedness, the ancient problem of evil. For the great world faiths are all, though in different ways and with different qualifications, forms of cosmic optimism. And so the fact of evil constitutes the biggest obstacle there is to all major forms of religious belief. Any religious interpretation of the universe has to recognise the extreme toughness and non-human-centredness of any creative process that is taking place, and has to set this within a very large view, involving many lives in many worlds. I have attempted this in *Evil and the God of Love* and *Death and Eternal Life*, and cannot attempt to summarise all that here. For our present purpose I simply have to leave it as a vast acknowledged problem.

But how to justify accepting religious experience as cognitive? This is a difficult area because ‘religious experience’ covers such a vast field ranging from manifestly human imaginings expressing hopes and fears and prejudices, to profoundly impressive and valuably transformative experiences. We have to take the matter in three stages. First, we live all the

time by the principle that what seems to be so is so, unless we have adequate reason to doubt it. In other words, it is in general rational to trust our experience. Otherwise we would walk into walls, get run over by traffic, etc., etc. This principle is of course always subject to the proviso that we have no good reason to suspect our experience in a particular case to be erroneous or hallucinatory. But apparently cognitive experience is, so to speak, innocent until proved guilty. This basic principle, I suggest, applies to religious as much as to sense experience, for both are apparently cognitive. And so instead of assuming that it is guilty until proved innocent, we should assume that it is innocent until proved guilty. And so the question becomes, on what grounds have we – our modern western society - judged it to be guilty, delusory?

Well, the paradigm of experience that we all accept as cognitive is sense experience, because (1) it forces itself upon us, so that (2) everyone participates in it, and (3) it is uniform – or very largely so – throughout the world. If we did not experience the physical world correctly for the kind of physical organism that we are, the world would eliminate us. In contrast, religious experience (1) is not compulsory, so that (2) not everyone at any given time seems to participate in it, and (3) it is not uniform throughout the world, but on the contrary takes many different forms. At first glance these differences discredit religious experience. But on second thoughts, not. The second and third factors both depend on the first, the compulsoriness of sense experience versus the non-compulsoriness of religious experience. But I suggest that this is appropriately correlated with the different putative objects of these two types of experience. Our natural or physical environment has to force itself upon us as sheer brute fact if we are to survive within it. But if we are living at the same time within an interpenetrating supra-natural environment, may this not be of such a kind that it does *not* force itself upon us? Is it not of the very nature of value-laden reality that it can only be freely recognised? Suppose the Transcendent to which the religions point is such that the only appropriate human recognition of it is a self-committing cognitive choice, reorientating us, or beginning to reorient us, towards a reality of limitless value - in traditional religious terms, a faith response involving the whole person? Will not this be, in its very nature, a response that cannot be forced? And if the religious response is in its essential nature free, it is not surprising that we do not find everyone making that response. It may be that ultimately everyone will, but at present not.

But what about the third factor, the immense variety of forms of religious experience around the world, in contrast to the global uniformity of sense experience? Does not this discredit it? Not, I suggest, if we apply another epistemological principle which is well established elsewhere. This is the principle that was succinctly expressed by Thomas Aquinas 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). But this has a much wider application than he realised – which provokes the thought that almost everything has been said before, but often by people who did not know that they were saying it! Its most massive and influential development is of course in Kant's first *Critique*. But Kant applied it only to sense experience and did not extend it to religious experience. Consequently his own epistemology of religion was quite different from that which I am going very briefly to outline. He held that in the case of sense experience there is a reality beyond us, which is somehow affecting us all the time, but that the form that our awareness of it takes is always and necessarily determined by the structure of human consciousness. And so he sought to identify the categories (substance, causation, etc) that are necessary for experience to occur within a unitary finite consciousness. What I want to take from him, however, is not his complex categorial system but only his basic insight that we cannot be aware of things as they are in themselves, unobserved, but always and only as they appear to us with our distinctive, and distinctively limited, cognitive apparatus. Our world, as we consciously perceive it, is partly our own construction, a fact that requires the distinction between the world as it is in itself and as to appears to us. This is a commonplace today in cognitive psychology as well as in epistemology. To develop a concept of Wittgenstein's, though in a way that he himself did not authorise, all experiencing is experiencing-as.

So my neo- or quasi- or, if you like, pseudo- Kantian suggestion is that whereas Kant held that God is a necessary postulate of the moral life, I suggest that a transcendent Ultimate Reality, or the Real, is a necessary postulate of the religious life in its global variety. This Reality is experienced by human beings in a manner analogous to that in which, according to

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. But whereas Kant held that the categories of thought structuring sense experience are universal throughout the human species, the categories of thought which structure religious experience are historically formed and vary from culture to culture. The two key concepts are those of deity, which presides over the monotheisms and polytheisms, and of the non-personal absolute, which presides over the non-theistic religions. These basic categories are, to use Kant's language, then schematised or made concrete, not as in Kant's system in terms of the abstract form of time, but in terms of the filled time of history and culture, as a range of specific god figures (Jahweh, the Heavenly Father, Allah, Vishnu, Shiva, etc), and specifically conceived absolutes (Brahman, Nirvana, the Tao, etc), which thus constitute the personae and impersonae of the Real in relation to humanity. And although there is not time to expand this here, this hypothesis requires that the Real in itself is, in relation to the human mind, ineffable, or as I would rather say transcategorial, i.e. beyond the range of our human conceptual systems. And if we ask, as well we may, why we should postulate a transcategorial Ultimate Reality, the answer is that this constitutes the difference between a religious and a naturalistic understanding of the universe. A religious interpretation of the universe will be founded on the basic faith that religious experience is not purely projection, but is responsive projection. If we then take account not only of one tradition but of religious experience globally, then I suggest that we shall require the two tier model of the transcategorial noumenal reality and its varied phenomenal manifestations to human consciousness.

It follows that religious experience is not to be taken at face value as an experience of the Ultimate Reality as it is in itself but rather as an experience formed jointly by the universal presence of the Real and our own varying religious conceptualities and spiritual practices. And if we now ask how it is that the ineffable Real can affect us, the answer has to be that given by the mystics, namely that there is an aspect or dimension of our own nature that is inherently responsive to, or akin to, or on one view even continuous with, the Real. This is the image of God within us, or what the Quakers call that of God in everyone, or the atman which we all are in the depths of our being and which is ultimately identical with Brahman, or the universal Buddha nature which is obscured within us by self-concern, but the recovery of which is a salvific transformation, or again the Tao within which answers to the Tao without.

Religious experience, then, I am suggesting, is to a greater or lesser degree a fragmentary response to the Real. But we have to note that religious concepts can also inform modes of experience that are in no degree responses to the Real, but entirely projections of human hatred, greed, and prejudice. The criterion, which is taught in all the great traditions, lies in the fruits of such experience in human life, namely in a gradual transformation from natural self-centeredness towards a universal compassion, feeling with and for others, and acting accordingly.

All this is not an argument that those who do not currently participate in the wide range of human religious experience should accept it as authentically cognitive. They are not under any obligation to do so. For they are operating with a more restricted range of data than those for whom religious experience is an important part of their data. As a large intermediate group, many ordinary religious believers who do participate in this mode of experience, though only very rarely and slightly, can properly be influenced by the existence of the saints or mahatmas in whom we see very clearly the fruits of the religious response. However if there is nothing at all in your experience that resonates, however feebly, to the reports of the saints, then you have no reason to think that they are more in touch with reality than the rest of us. On the contrary, they must be more deeply deluded. So my argument is the comparatively modest one that, as rational beings, those who *do* participate in the wide field of religious experience are fully entitled to trust it as genuinely cognitive, as an enhanced awareness of reality, though one that involves all the time our own human conceptual systems and human imagination.

So the two basic contrary responses to the ambiguity of the universe consist in two different ways of experiencing our existence within it. In one way our life is, at least sometimes, experienced as taking place in relation to, or in the presence of, an Ultimate Reality, variously conceived and experienced as one or other of its humanly formed personae or impersonae.

One aspect of this is the sense of an overarching meaning in life, going beyond the individual meanings which we find or construct for ourselves, in our relationships to others, in the use of our skills, in the creation of beauty or the discovery of truth, and so on. The more ultimate meaning of our lives depends on what kind of universe we believe ourselves to be part of, and more particularly whether we believe that we exist within a cosmic process leading to a limitlessly desirable future. For the meaning of the present moment depends, in important measure, on the future to which it is leading – a point that Sartre made very well. The outcome determines retrospectively the meaning of the events leading to that outcome. If the process of existence is not leading anywhere, then we are just contingently fortunate or unfortunate in the circumstances of our lives, but with more misfortune than good fortune being presently evident in human life as a whole. And that's all there is to it. If on the other hand the cosmic optimism of the great religious traditions is well founded, this gives to our present situation, both in its fortunate and its unfortunate aspects, the positive character that Julian of Norwich expressed in her famous saying, which she repeats a number of times, that in the end 'all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'. This was not for her a guarantee against accidents and illnesses, hardships, pains, sorrows, failures, death. It did not mean that we may not face all manner of sorrows and disasters, as well as all the wealth of good things that also happen to us. It means that beyond all this, and within all this, we can have an ultimate trust. In practice, let it be admitted, this can often be so difficult as to be beyond the capacity of almost anyone. Even Jesus, as he died, is said to have felt deserted by God. But nevertheless, according to the religions, the structure of the universe – meaning not just the physical universe but the totality of reality – is such that the cosmic optimism which they teach is objectively well founded.

So, to conclude, my basic epistemological argument is that it is as rational for those who participate sufficiently in the religious response to the universe to adopt and try to live in terms of a religious conception of it, as it is for those who do not currently participate in that response to adopt a naturalistic interpretation of it. I would add however that we seem to have an inborn tendency to experience the natural in terms of the supra-natural. This tendency can be repressed or perverted, as in Soviet Russia, Maoist China, and Nazi Germany, and also in a quite different way in our own contemporary western secular culture. But we are ourselves part of the totality of reality, and it may well be that the religious aspect of our nature answers to the character of the totality. At any rate, I maintain that it is just as reasonable, just as rational, just as intellectually responsible, to take the risk of trusting the religious aspect of our nature as it is to take the opposite risk of suppressing it – which is not, needless to say, a risk of perdition, but of being blind, at least for now, to an enormously important and transforming range of reality.

I would also add, however, that from a religious point of view it is entirely possible for many people to be responding in their lives to the universal presence of the transcendent Real in a felt imperative to value and serve their fellow humans both near and far, without using religious concepts to structure that awareness. In other words, there can be, and are, 'secular' servants of humanity who may also attain the level of saintliness. If the religions are right, there is a great deal more for them still to discover, but the discovery – in this life or beyond – will be wholly positive, not a 'judgment' but a welcome!

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