

Who or What is God, According to John Hick?

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Abstract I summarize John Hick’s pluralistic theory of the world’s great religions, largely in his own voice. I then focus on the core posit of his theory, what he calls “the Real,” but which I less tendentiously call “God_{hick}”. God_{hick} is supposed to be the ultimate religious reality. As such, it must be both possible and capable of explanatory and religious significance. Unfortunately, God_{hick} is, by definition, transcategorical, i.e. necessarily, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F. As a result, God_{hick} is impossible, as shown by the Self-Identity Problem, the Number Problem, and the Pairing Problem. Moreover, even if God_{hick} is possible, it faces the Insignificance Problem. The upshot is that, so far as I can see, John Hick’s God is unworthy of any further interest.

Keywords God · God_{hick} · The Absolute · The Real · Ultimate reality · John Hick · Religious pluralism · Ineffability · Transcategoriality

1 Introduction

“Who or what is God?,” asks John Hick (Hick 2009). Good question. Hick denies the usual theistic answer that God is an infinite person or personal being (Hick 2010a,

22; Hick 2010b, 27).¹ His own answer arises out of his “pluralistic theory” of “the world’s great religions,” which he introduces by way of several alleged facts.

The first alleged fact is “the religious ambiguity of the universe, the fact that it can be understood and experienced both religiously and naturalistically”; the total publically available evidence does not settle the matter (Hick 2004a, xvii, 1989, 73–125). Despite this ambiguity, it is “entirely rational for those who experience religiously to trust their religious experience and to base their living and believing on it,” a conclusion Hick draws from the “critical trust principle,” according to which “it is rational to trust our experience *except* when we have some reason to doubt it,” and the fact that those who experience religiously lack such reason (Hick 2004a, xviii, 1989, 210–228). However, “religious experience sometimes differs widely between, and indeed within, the religious traditions,” ranging from experience as of “personal gods,” e.g. Yahweh, Vishnu, Shiva, the Trinity, Allah, etc., to experience as of “non-personal absolutes,” e.g. Brahman, the Tao, the Dharma-kaya, etc., resulting in incompatible belief-systems (Hick 2010c, viii, 2004a, xviii, xix, 1989, 228). Since the critical trust principle applies universally, and since the people of no world religion have reason to doubt their own religious experience, the critical trust principle “validates a plurality of incompatible religious belief-systems” (Hick 2004a, xix).

Apprised of this situation, those of us who experience the world religiously cannot “reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not,” “as virtually every religious tradition has

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¹ For critical assessment of Hick’s reasons, see Howard-Snyder (forthcoming a).

done” (Hick 1989, 235). That’s because, says Hick, the people of each religion lack any reason to regard their own religious experience as more veridical than that of other religions, aside from “the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own” (Hick 1989, 235, 2004a, xli–xlii, note 3). In addition, each of the world’s major religions uses “moral and spiritual transformation” from “self-centeredness” to “unself-centeredness” (i.e. love and compassion) as the criterion for veridical religious experience, and no religion is better than any other at producing this transformation (Hick 2004a, xiv–xxvi, 1989, 299–342, 2007, 221–222).² So, the people of each religion face a difficult pair of questions:

if the different kinds of religious experience justify people in holding incompatible sets of beliefs developed within the different traditions, has not our justification for religious belief thereby undermined itself? Does it not offer an equal justification for acceptance of a number of mutually contradictory propositions? (Hick 1989, 228)

“The pluralistic theory,” says Hick, “is a response to this apparently anomalous situation” (Hick 2004a, xix).

2 Hick’s Pluralistic Theory and the “Apparently Anomalous Situation”

According to Hick, “there is an ultimate reality”—which he calls “the Real,” but which I will less tendentiously call “God_{hick}”—“which is in itself transcategorical (ineffable), beyond the range of our human conceptual systems, but whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices” (Hick 1997, 279; 1989, 236, 2004b, 9, 2004a, xix, 2007, 220–221, 2009, 4).³ Hick gives this thought a Kantian twist, “suggesting that we use something analogous to Kant’s distinction between noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearance(s) to human consciousness.... [T]he noumenal [God_{hick}] is thought and experienced by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae*, [the “personal gods” and “non-personal absolutes”] which

the phenomenology of religion reports” (Hick 2004a, xix). (Hick uses “mentalities” in its historiographical sense, as in the phrase “*histoire des mentalités*,” i.e. “mindsets” or “worldviews,” complexes of conceptual, cultural, historical, linguistic and other conditions that form a way of understanding and experiencing the world.) To spell this out a bit, Hick says that, “when we are open to [God_{hick}’s] universal presence,” it sometimes “impinges” on us, “impacts” us, “affects” us; “transmitting information” “that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience” (Hick 2010a, 70–72, 2010c, 69–72, 1989, 243–244). Our mind/brain transforms this “information,” however, only through specific religious mentalities that “particularize” or “schematize” the “universal presence” of God_{hick} into the diverse kinds of religious experience reported by the variety of religions.

Hick divides those mentalities into two groups: first, those that deploy “the concept of God, or of [God_{hick}] as personal, which presides over the various theistic forms of religious experience,” and second, those that deploy “the concept of the Absolute, or of [God_{hick}] as non-personal, which presides over its various non-theistic forms” (Hick 1989, 245, 2007, 220). So the Zen disciple, after years of tutelage and meditation, may “finally attain *satori* and become vividly aware of ultimate reality as immediately present in the flow of ordinary life”; or, the advaitic Hindu, upon a different regimen, “may in due course attain the awareness of oneness with Brahman and become *jivanmukti*”; or, the Christian, in times of prayer, may sense the presence of the loving Father, Abba, forgiving, guiding, and strengthening her (Hick 1989, 294). And the same goes for other mentalities.

But how, exactly, does this solve the anomaly Hick identifies? The answer hangs on the ontological status of the *personae* and *impersonae* of God_{hick}, of which Hick proposes “two models,” patterned after “two different understandings of the ontological status of the [heavenly] Buddhas” in the *trikaya* doctrine of the Buddhas (Hick 1989, 269–275).

According to the first understanding, Amida, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, and the other Buddhas, are “mental creations,” “ideations of the Bodhisattvas: to the Bodhisattva his ideal becomes so vivid and alive that it takes shape as a subjective reality” (Hick 1989, 272–273, quoting Schumann). Amida, etc. are thus, “projections of the religious imagination,” but not *mere* projections: “they are modes in which the limitless Dharmakaya affects our human consciousness” (Hick 1989, 273). As such, although these modes of human consciousness may seem to the Bodhisattva as though they are “real persons,” they are not; nevertheless, the Dharmakaya “transmits” “authentic information” to the Bodhisattva in whose consciousness such modes are produced (Hick 1989, 273).

² Each religion also uses consistency with its belief-system as a criterion of the veridicality of religious experience, a fact that Hick ignores.

³ Why less tendentious? Because, as we will see, to speak of Hick’s God as “the Real” is to import into its conception connotations that cannot be underwritten by its transcategoriality. I therefore use a neutral term, although “X,” which Hick sometimes uses, e.g. Hick (2010c), 75, would be even more neutral, and accurate.

Using this understanding to model the ontological status of the *personae* of God_{hick}, Hick says that “Jahweh, the heavenly Father, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu and so on are not objectively existent personal individuals with their own distinctive powers and characteristics,” but rather ways (“modes”) in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of God_{hick}, shaped by the category of deity, resulting in “a powerful and deeply resonant sense of personal presence,” sometimes further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific theistic traditions, resulting in experiences distinctive of each of these traditions. “In worshipping this divine Thou”—this “mode of human consciousness,” this “mental creation,” this “projection of the religious imagination”—“we are accordingly relating ourselves to [God_{hick}]
—whether or not we are aware of the complex way in which the relationship is being mediated” (Hick 1989, 273). And something similar goes for the *impersonae* of God_{hick}. Each of them is a way in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of God_{hick}, shaped by the category of the Absolute, resulting in a sense of a non-personal ultimate reality, sometimes further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific nontheistic traditions, resulting in experiences distinctive of Zen Buddhism, Advaitic Hinduism, etc. On the first model, then, the noumenal God_{hick} manifests itself through these phenomenal projections, which, for the *personae* of God_{hick}, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for its *impersonae*, are identical with Brahman, etc.⁴

According to the second understanding of the ontological status of the heavenly Buddhas, they are “objectively existing, supramundane and subtle beings” (Hick 1989, 274, quoting Schumann). Furthermore, “Amida, [etc.] are real persons, of immense but not limitless proportions” (Hick 1989, 274).

Using this understanding to model the *personae* of God_{hick}, Hick says that “Jahweh, [etc.]...are real personal beings, independent centres of consciousness, will, thought and emotion” (Hick 1989, 274). However, says Hick,

each of them is finite; for each exists alongside and is limited by the others with their own particular natures and capacities. Although the power of any one of this plurality cannot therefore be infinite it may nevertheless be so great as to be virtually infinite from our human point of view, as the gods exercise their powers in response to prayer and in the providential ordering of nature and history. (Hick 1989, 274–275)

⁴ Hick (1989), 278–296, has a parallel discussion of the *impersonae* of God_{hick}, but no explicit application of the two models. No explicit application in Hick (2004a) either. However, at Hick (2010c), 69, we find an explicit application.

So on the second model God_{hick} manifests itself to us through our experience of these “objectively existing” realities which, for the *personae*, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for the *impersonae*, are identical with Brahman, etc.

Two concerns about the second model. First, it implies polytheism; Hick wants to avoid that.⁵ Second, as William Hasker points out, it contradicts Hick’s pluralism, since the *personae* are supposed to exist in virtue of different mentalities “schematizing” the “universal presence” of God_{hick} into distinctive religious experiences (Hasker 2011, 194–195).

In his last published word on the subject, Hick replaces the second model, as stated above, with the following one, in an effort to address both concerns:

My suggestion is three-fold: (1) The monotheistic God-figures are human projections, existing only in the religious imaginations of a particular faith community.... (2) These projections are human responses within a particular cultural situation to the continuous impact upon humanity of the universal presence of [God_{hick}].... And (3) The thou experienced in prayer and revelation is quite likely an intermediate figure between us and [God_{hick}]. The Gods, then, are phenomenal appearances of [God_{hick}] existing, with their omni- and other properties, in the thought of the worshipping community. But in praying to them we may in fact (unknown to us) be in contact with a real personal presence which is an ‘angel,’ in the sense of an intermediate figure between us and [God_{hick}], corresponding to the angels, archangels of the western monotheisms, or devas (gods with a small g) of Indian religion, or the heavenly Buddhas of one interpretation of one strand of Mahayan Buddhism. These are independent centres of consciousness, finite in their qualities. (Hick 2011, 200, cf. 2010a, 25–26.)

Hick concludes: “The God-figures are not independent centres of consciousness, like the angels, and I was wrong when I proposed that the second interpretation of the *triyaka* doctrine was equally compatible as the first with the pluralistic hypothesis” (Hick 2011, 201).

So on the first model, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are human projections, “so vivid and alive,” they seem to be real persons, though they aren’t; “Yahweh”, etc. name these projections. On the revised second model, however, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are a plurality of intermediate beings, so that “a

⁵ At least the implication holds if we say that “x is a god,” with a little g, means by definition “x is a very powerful non-embodied rational agent” (Swinburne 1970, 53).

Christian in prayer is addressing an angel, or indeed different Christians [are] addressing different angels,” unbeknownst to the Christians. And the same goes for Hindus and their divas, Buddhists and their Buddhas, and so on for other “spiritual beings” each of whom exists independently of any human mentality (Hick 2011, 200).⁶

Now we can see how Hick addresses the “apparently anomalous situation” of religious experience equally justifying contradictory propositions. He proposes that the propositions in question are not contradictory since they are about different objects (Hick 1997, 716, 2004a, xxx). On the first model, the objects of belief are distinct imaginative projections. So if, by way of his experience, Christopher comes to believe that God is F, and if, by way of his experience, Mohammed comes to believe that God is not F, for Christopher, “God” “refers” to a Christian projection of the Christian community whereas, for Mohammed, “God” “refers” to a Muslim projection. Since the Christian projection is distinct from the Muslim projection, Christopher’s beliefs are compatible with Mohammed’s. On the second model, the objects of beliefs are distinct “spiritual beings,” with distinct “spheres of operation”. So if, by way of her experience, Christina comes to believe that God is F, and if, by way of her experience, Khadijah comes to believe that God is not F, for Christina, “God” “refers” to, say, the archangel Michael, whose provenance is the Christian community, whereas, for Khadijah, “God” “refers” to, say, Ridwan, the guardian of heaven, whose provenance is the Islamic community. Since Michael is distinct from Ridwan, Christina’s beliefs are compatible with Khadijah’s.⁷

How does God_{hick} figure in all of this? As follows:

[W]e are led to postulate [God_{hick}] *an sich* as the presupposition of the veridical character of this range of forms of religious experience. Without this postulate we should be left with a plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* each of which is claimed to be the

⁶ While the revised second model avoids Hasker’s concern, it remains thoroughly polytheistic. For discussion, see Mavrodes (2000), Hick (2004a), xxvii–xxviii, (2010c), 33–35, Mavrodes (2010a), 62–69, Hick (2010c), 69–72, Mavrodes (2010b), 72–75, Hasker (2011), Hick (2011) and Howard-Snyder (forthcoming b).

⁷ Four observations. (1) Plantinga (2000), 49–52, misrepresents the referential situation. (2) On the first model, for nearly any F, belief that God is F will be false since, for nearly any F, no projection can be F. (3) The angels of various religions overlap extensively; so the second model will need finessing. (4) Tricky questions about reference abound. For example, on a descriptivist theory of reference, “God” and its natural language equivalents refer on an occasion of use only if the intended referent satisfies a certain description. If the intended referent must satisfy a description that no projection or angel can satisfy, e.g. *is neither imaginary nor a creature*, then, on no occasion of use will “God” refer to a projection or an angel. On reference, see Reimar and Michaelson (2014).

Ultimate, but no one of which alone can be. We should have either to regard all the reported experiences as illusory or else return to the confessional position in which we affirm the authenticity of our own stream of religious experience whilst dismissing as illusory those occurring within other traditions. But for those to whom neither of these options seems realistic the pluralistic affirmation becomes inevitable, and with it the postulation of [God_{hick}] *an sich*, which is variously experienced and thought as the range of divine phenomena described by the history of religion. (Hick 1989, 249.)

The thought is that, when it comes to understanding the religious experience “described by the history of religion,” there are just three options: illusion, confessionalism, and pluralism. We should reject illusion and confessionalism for reasons I mentioned earlier; we are left with pluralism.

Hick offers a false trilemma here. That’s because of the penultimacy option, according to which there are many penultimate gods and absolutes, each of which is variously experienced in a veridical fashion. To be sure, claims to one’s own god or absolute as the “sole creator or source of all finite existence” will have to go, but penultimacy resolves the “anomalous situation” at least as well as Hick’s pluralism, and it arguably does so while preserving more of what the traditions say about the objects of their experience and thought, without positing a transcategorical God_{hick} which is, as I will argue shortly, impossible and explanatorily/religiously insignificant (cf. Eddy 2015, 184; Hick 1989, 269).

Of course, Hick’s pluralism faces other criticisms. Some critics argue that our universe does not suffer from religious ambiguity. Others argue that there are good reasons that undermine the justification of belief based on religious experience. Still others argue that, from the point of view of the major world religions, the cost is too high: if Hick’s pluralism is true, each of them is false. Still more argue that, given his description of God_{hick}, “moral and spiritual transformation” could not be a criterion for veridical religious experience.⁸

I want to focus on something else, however. I want to focus on Hick’s assumption that what he describes as God_{hick} is a genuine candidate for being God, the ultimate religious reality. I will argue that this assumption is false. My argument assumes that any candidate for being the ultimate religious reality must be possible and must have explanatory and religious significance. If we can show that the very idea of God_{hick} entails that it is impossible or that

⁸ See Ward (1994), Byrne (1995), Heim (2001), Sugirtharajah (2012), Rose (2013), Eddy (2015) and Netland (2015), and the works cited in the bibliographies of these books and at <http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/>.

it has no explanatory or religious significance, we will have shown that it cannot be the ultimate religious reality and so it cannot play the role Hick assigns to it in addressing the “apparently anomalous situation”.

3 Hick’s Principle of Transcategoriality: Five Observations

According to Hick, God_{hick} is “transcategorial”. But what, exactly, does that mean? After distinguishing “[God_{hick}] as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts,” Hick tells us that “it follows” from this distinction that

we cannot apply to [God_{hick}] *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable ground of that realm.... We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity. (Hick 1989, 246)⁹

I want to make five observations about this and related passages.

Observation 1 Hick conflates contraries and contradictions. Surely he does not mean to allow that God_{hick} is neither good nor evil but indifferent, neither substance nor process but stuff, etc. Rather, “[t]ranscategoriality excludes the attribution of properties either positively or negatively”; God_{hick} “is beyond assertion and denial” (Hick 2004a, xx, 2009, 5. Cf. Hick 1995, 64, 2000, 42–43. Quinn 2000, 243, note 7, misunderstands Hick). So God_{hick} is neither good nor *non-good*, neither a substance nor a *non-substance*, etc.

Observation 2 Transcategoriality cannot exclude the attribution of *all* properties since, as Hick concedes, “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 [categories] do not apply to it’ cannot, without self-contradiction, include itself” (Hick 1989, 239). “It cannot therefore be *absolutely* transcategorial” (Hick 2000, 41). So: which properties are in? Which out?

Hick divides properties into two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive classes: the “purely formal” and the

⁹ Of course, it’s false that “it follows” from this distinction that we cannot apply to God_{hick} *an sich* the characteristics encountered in its *personae* and *impersonae*. For critical remarks on this passage, see Quinn (2000), 229–230, with partial reply at Hick (2004a), xxii.

“substantial,” and he says the formal are in but the substantial are out. As examples of formal properties, Hick mentions *being able to be referred to* and *being such that our categories do not apply to it*, while examples of substantial properties include *being good*, *being powerful*, and *having knowledge* (Hick 1989, 239). More generally, Hick says that formal properties “do not tell us anything significant,” “do not tell us anything about what [something] in itself is like,” and “[do] not give us any information about [it]”. Rather, formal properties are “logically” or “linguistically generated,” “devoid of descriptive content,” and “trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them”. By contrast, substantial properties “tell us something significant,” “something positive about [a thing],” “something about what [it is like] in itself” (Hick 1989, 239, 352, 2000, 41, 2004a, xxi, 2009, 6, 1995, 28).¹⁰ These contrasts run orthogonal to each other, however; and they invite tempestuous disagreement.¹¹ Nevertheless, it’s what we have to work with.

Observation 3 It appears, then, that according to Hick’s “principle of transcategoriality,” as he calls it,

- Necessarily, for any *substantial* property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

Critics object. God_{hick} is not green, so non-green, not a tricycle, so a non-tricycle (Quinn 2000, 243, n7; Rowe 1999, 146; Plantinga 2000, 45).¹² Here’s Hick’s reply:

...I do indeed hold that [God_{hick}] cannot properly be said to be either a tricycle or a non-tricycle, and either green or non-green, on the ground that the concepts of tricality and greenness do not apply to it either positively or negatively. But I now want to add a distinction between properties such as being green or being a tricycle that are religiously irrelevant, in the sense that in religious discourse no one would think for a moment of attributing them to the ultimate divine reality, and those that are religiously relevant, such as being personal, good, loving, wise, etc. Although still in my view a mistake, it would do no harm religiously to say that [God_{hick}] is non-green, non-blue, a non-teapot, a non-tricycle, a non-heap of manure, a non-Mount Everest, etc., etc., because from a religious

¹⁰ Quinn, Insole, and Rowe say Hick does not draw the formal/substantive line in general terms (Insole 2000, 27; Quinn 2000, 232; Rowe 1999, 145).

¹¹ As Hick discovered from the protest to his claim that “[t]he most famous instance in western religious discourse” of a formal property “is Anselm’s definition of God as that than which no greater can be conceived” (Hick 1989, 246). Eddy (1994), 472; Ward (1990), 10; Quinn (2000), 233. Hick recanted: Hick (1995), 60, note 12, (2010c), 91.

¹² Mavrodes (2010b), 75, misrepresents Hick on negation.

point of view these are trivial truths from which nothing significant follows. (Hick 2004a, xxi–xxii)

In this passage, Hick countenances, without asserting, the idea that God_{hick} has “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties, in the specified sense, e.g. *being a non-tricycle* and *being non-green*. How plausible is this idea?

Not very, in my opinion. After all, in light of what some religious traditions have deemed significant foci of ultimate reality’s relation to the world, consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved so that some tradition thought that ultimate reality was specially related to greenness, tricycles, etc., say by becoming green or a tricycle or a green tricycle, etc. Or consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved so that no tradition thought God was personal. If God_{hick} has “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties, then, in the first case, it would not have been non-green, a non-tricycle, a non-green-tricycle, etc., although it actually has those properties. Moreover, if God_{hick} has “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties, then, in the second case, God_{hick} would have been non-personal, although it actually lacks that property. But it can’t be that, simply by virtue of the historic accident that no religion thinks greenness, etc. are religiously relevant, God_{hick} is none of those things; it can’t be that simply by virtue of the historic accident that some religion thinks *being personal* is religiously relevant, God_{hick} is neither personal nor non-personal. Therefore, in my opinion, Hick should reject the idea that God_{hick} has, in the specified sense, “religiously irrelevant” substantial properties.

Observation 4 Critics complain that Hick repeatedly puts “his fingers in the jam pot” of substantial properties (Alston 1995, 56. Cf. Mavrodes 2010b; Yandell 1999, 71; Netland 2012, 39). Hick says that God_{hick} is “the ground” of religious experience, even “the ground of our being”; indeed, it is “the source and ground of everything” (Hick 2010c, 94, note 8, 1995, 27). Moreover, it is “the necessary condition of our existence and our highest good” (Hick 1995, 63). Furthermore, although it is a “transcendent reality,” it has a “universal presence,” which “impacts” and “affects” us (Hick 1995, 60, 2010c, 71, 1989, 243–244, 1995, 61, 2007, 221, 2004a, xxix). In addition, it is “infinite, self-existent,” and “self-subsistent” (Hick 1995, 59, 1989, 139, 1989, 249). Moreover, Hick speaks of its “nature,” and he refers to it in the singular, which means number applies it (Hick 1989, 246, 2007, 223). None of these properties are logically or linguistically generated, and each is significant, informative, descriptive, non-trivial, and consequential.

Hick replies that in some of these cases—i.e. those implying causal or explanatory relations with the world,

e.g. sourcehood and grounding—he’s speaking only metaphorically (Hick 1995, 63, 2004a, xxix, 2010c, 72). This is unfortunate, however. A merely metaphorical “source and ground of everything” is a source or ground of nothing. But Hick needn’t go this route; after all, his transcategoriality principle, by way of his formal/substantial distinction, allows God_{hick} to bear significant *relations* to the world; it only precludes significant *in-itself* properties.¹³ Transcendence and presence are relations to the world as well. Hick’s response in other cases—e.g., having a nature—is retreat: God_{hick} neither has nor lacks a nature since “the concept of a nature...belongs to the network of human concepts which [it] totally transcends” (Hick 1995, 62. But see Hick 2010c, 83: “divine transcategoriality does not entail that [God_{hick}] has no nature”). Self-subsistence, self-existence, and infinity require retreat too. I will address number later.

Observation 5 Hick with his fingers jam free has to make you wonder, though. Absent any substantial properties, God_{hick} is looking quite ethereal, perhaps even *unreal*. After all, if it is neither an F nor a non-F, for any substantial property F, then, as Hick puts it, “the ultimate reality, which we are calling God, is an empty blank” (Hick 2009, 6; cf. Smart 1993a). But there is no difference between an empty blank and nothing at all. God_{hick}, therefore, collapses into nothing. Call this the *Empty Blank Problem*.

In reply, Hick stresses that transcategoriality only entails that God_{hick} “is beyond the range of our *human* conceptual resources,” that it has “no *humanly* conceivable qualities” (Hick 2009, 6, my emphases, 1995, 61–62, 2010c, 83). But this can’t be right. Hick does not mean to allow that God_{hick} has properties that can be conceived by nonhumans, say extra-terrestrials or angels.¹⁴ Nor does he mean to allow that God_{hick} has properties that can be conceived by merely possible creatures, say Perelandrians or Hobbits. Rather God_{hick} has no properties that can be conceived by any possible creature. So let’s charitably understand him as saying that

Transcategoriality. Necessarily, for any substantial property F that could be conceived by a creature, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

¹³ Hick misleads critics here. “Hick does attribute properties to [God_{hick}] *an sich* (such as being the transcendent source and cause of religious experience) that, according to his own lights, cannot apply” (Harrison 2015, 264).

¹⁴ Hick approvingly applies Gregory of Nyssa’s words to God_{hick}: it is “incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence” (Hick 1989, 238; quoting *Against Eunomius*, I:42).

Notice that, this principle leaves it wide open whether God_{hick} has substantial properties that *cannot* be conceived by a creature. Hick counts on this possibility in two ways.

First, creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties provide an answer to the Empty Blank Problem. Although God_{hick} has no creaturely conceivable substantial properties, it “is not nothing!,” Hick proclaims (Hick 1995, 60). Rather, he insists, it is “so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the variously partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes” (Hick 1989, 247. Cf. Hick 1995, 62, 66, and 2010c, 83).¹⁵ Clearly enough, it could not be like this without creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties.

Second, they explain the relations God_{hick} bears to the world. Why is God_{hick} “the source and ground of everything,” as Hick says it is? Why is it “that which there must be if religious experience, in its diversity of forms, is not purely imaginative projection but also a response to a transcendent reality”? Why is it “such that in so far as the religious traditions are in soteriological alignment with it they are contexts of salvation/liberation”? Why is it “that reality in virtue of which, through our response to one or other of its manifestations as the God figures or the non-personal Absolutes, we can arrive at the blessed unself-centred state which is our highest good”? Why is it “such that it is authentically responded to from within the different world religions” (Hick 1995, 60, 1995, 27, 1995, 60. Hick 2000, 44. Cf. Hick 2004a, xxiii–xxiv)? Not because of any creaturely conceivable substantial properties; it has none of those. And not because of any formal properties; they are too thin to explain such things. Thus, unless God_{hick} has creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties, it could not bear any of these explanatorily and religiously significant relations to the world.

Let’s now turn to a different problem.

4 The Property Bivalence Problem

According to Transcategoriality, it is necessary that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. But how could that be? After all, consider Property Bivalence, a principle we find in Aristotle among many others before and after him:

Property Bivalence. Necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F.

Given Property Bivalence, God_{hick} is impossible since that principle entails that, necessarily, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is either an F or a non-F. Call this the *Property Bivalence Problem*.

¹⁵ Yandell (1993), 194ff misses this point.

Hick notes that Transcategoriality “has been challenged on the logical ground that anything, including [God_{hick}], must have one or other of any two mutually contradictory qualities, x and non-x, and therefore cannot be outside the domain of our human concepts” (Hick 2004a, xx–xxi). Hick responds both by arguing against Property Bivalence and by arguing for Transcategoriality. Let’s look at the chief arguments he gives.

First, Hick argues against Property Bivalence by way of what he calls

the familiar idea of concepts which do not apply to something either positively or negatively. It does not make sense, for example, to ask whether a molecule is clever or stupid, or whether a stone is virtuous or wicked, because they are not the kinds of thing that can be either. And I have suggested that it does not make sense to ask of the transcategorial [God_{hick}] whether it is personal or non-personal, good or evil, just or unjust, because these concepts do not apply to it—either positively or negatively. (Hick 2004a, xx–xxi. Cf. Hick 2007, 222–223, 2009, 5)

Elsewhere, Hick says that to apply a concept, either positively or negatively, to God_{hick} is to commit “a category mistake” (Hick 2009, 5. Cf. Hick 1995, 61, and Stenmark 2015). What should we make of the line of thought here?

Notice, first of all, that Hick, once again, confuses contraries and contradictories. *Being clever* and *being stupid* are contraries; something of average intelligence or of no intelligence is neither clever nor stupid. *Being virtuous* and *being wicked* are contraries too; something of average goodness or of no goodness is neither virtuous nor wicked. Neither pair is a case of “two mutually contradictory qualities, x and non-x”.¹⁶

Correcting for Hick’s confusion, we can understand him as giving the following argument against Property Bivalence:

The Category Mistake Argument

1. If something is such that “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, then it is neither an F nor a non-F.
2. If something is neither an F nor a non-F, then it is false that, necessarily, for any x, x is either an F or a non-F.
3. So, if something is such that “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, then it is false that, for any x and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F. (1, 2)

¹⁶ Others also ignore the relevance of the contrary/contradictory distinction. See, e.g., Harrison (2015), 264.

This line of thought is fine as far as it goes, but unless there is something about which “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, we cannot infer the falsity of Property Bivalence. Hick offers molecules and stones. He says it doesn’t make any sense to ask whether a molecule is clever or non- clever, or whether a stone is virtuous or non-virtuous.

My reply is two-fold. First, it does make sense for you to ask these questions if you don’t already know the answer. Second, even if you do know the answer, and so even if it would be inappropriate for you to ask these questions, it does not follow that the proposition that molecules are non- clever or the proposition that stones are non-virtuous is false or meaningless. On the contrary, they are true, in fact necessarily true. Divide reality into what is clever and what is not, and you’d be wise to look for molecules among the non- clever. Divide reality into what is virtuous and what is not, and you’d be foolish not to look for stones among the non-virtuous. So, by my lights, Hick’s first argument against Property Bivalence fails (Cf. Rowe 1999).

Hick’s second argument can be seen in a response to an objection from William Rowe. Hick writes:

...Rowe still insists that it is logically necessary that if the attribute of being personal does not apply to [God_{hick}, then it] has the attribute of being non-personal. For ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ are logically interdependent, in that if X is not personal, it is necessarily non-personal. But the inference from ‘X is not personal’ to therefore ‘X is a non-personal, or impersonal, reality’ only holds within the domain of things to which the concepts ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ apply. The transcategorical [God_{hick}] is not in that domain.... To deny—as in effect Rowe does—that there can be a reality beyond the scope of human conceptuality seems to me to be a dogma that we are under no obligation to accept. (Hick 2010c, 84–85, 2000, 42–43)¹⁷

If I’m not mistaken, we have latent here the following argument:

The Beyond Human Conceptuality Argument

1. There can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality.
2. If there can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality, then there can be a reality

¹⁷ Cf. Rowe (1999), 149–150. Let’s ignore Hick’s name-calling (“dogma”), Hick’s modal confusion (Rowe asserts the necessity of the conditional, not the necessity of the consequent), and Hick’s misrepresentation (Rowe asserts that even if ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ are *not* logically interdependent, they are nevertheless *necessarily* interdependent).

such that, for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F.

3. If there can be a reality such that, for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F, then it’s false that, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F.
4. So, it’s false that, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F. (1–3)

What should we make of this line of thought?

Let’s begin with three observations.

First, Hick says everything, including God_{hick}, has some formal properties within the scope of human conceptuality. So we must restrict premise (1) to substantial properties.

Second, a substantial property “is beyond the scope of human conceptuality” just in case it does not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of.

Third, given these two points, premise (1) must be read as the claim that

- 1a. There can be a reality at least some of whose substantial properties do not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of.

Moreover, in order for the argument to remain logically valid, premise (2) must modified to the claim that

- 2a. If there can be a reality at least some of whose substantial properties do not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of, then there can be a reality such that for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F.

Unfortunately, (2a) is false. For suppose that there can be a reality at least some of whose substantial properties do not fall under any concept humans have a grasp of. What follows? So far as I can see, nothing of immediate interest. In particular, it is left wide open whether that reality—or any other reality, for that matter—is such that, for some substantial property F, it is neither an F nor a non-F. Our supposition is simply silent on that score. So Hick’s second argument against Property Bivalence has a false second premise.

Hick also argues for Transcategoriality. Here’s one such passage:

...[God_{hick}] *an sich* is the ultimate mystery. For the relationship between [God_{hick}] and its *personae* and *impersonae* is, epistemologically, the relationship between a noumenal reality and the range of its appearances to a plurality of perceivers. It is within the phenomenal or experienceable realm that language has developed and it is to this that it literally applies. Indeed, the system of concepts embodied in human language has contributed reciprocally to the formation of the humanly perceived world. It is as

much constructed as given. But our language can have no purchase on a postulated noumenal reality which is not even partly formed by human concepts. This lies outside the scope of our cognitive capacities. (Hick 1989, 349)

We can put the line of thought here like this:

The Language Development Argument

1. Human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it has developed in that world.
2. If human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it has developed in that world, then it can have no purchase on the noumenal world.
3. If human language can have no purchase on the noumenal world, then it can have no purchase on God_{hick}.
4. If human language can have no purchase on God_{hick}, then, for any humanly conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.
5. So, for any humanly conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

What should we make of this argument?

The problem, I submit, is premise (1). Even if human language has developed within the experienceable world, it has a purchase on that world *not* because of where it developed but rather because it embodies a system of concepts at least some of which apply to that world. A concept within that system applies to the world of our experience just when it is as that concept describes. Whether a concept embodied in human language applies to the experienceable world has nothing to do with where that language developed. Indeed, whether a concept embodied in human language applies to the noumenal world has nothing to do with where that language developed. A concept within a system of concepts embodied in human language applies to the noumenal world just when the noumenal world is as that concept describes.

Elsewhere, we find what looks like a second argument for Transcategoriality. Hick asserts that if God_{hick} “must be either a personal or a non-personal reality,”

this would at a stroke falsify either all the theistic or all the non-theistic religions—for the argument can be deployed equally well either way according to preference! But either way it would be unacceptable from a global religious point of view. (Hick 2004a, xxii)¹⁸

¹⁸ Hick’s “global religious point of view” implies the falsehood of the globe’s religions. For relevance, see Netland (1986), 255–257, Twiss (2000), 73–77, Byrne (2003), 205–206, and Netland (2012), 36–39.

So far as I can see, the deepest idea here is that the denial of Transcategoriality is “unacceptable from a global religious point of view”. But what is “a global religious point of view,” exactly? And what about it renders the denial of Transcategoriality “unacceptable”? And why is it more acceptable than the denial of Transcategoriality? Hick doesn’t pause long enough to say.

Hick fails to solve the Property Bivalence Problem. Moreover, he fails to shed any light on how Transcategoriality can be true. I would like to try to do better.

5 How to Solve the Property Bivalence Problem and Understand Transcategoriality

Let’s begin with a simple question: how could it be that God_{hick} is, for example, neither personal nor non-personal?

The only way, it seems to me, is illustrated by a homely example. Consider the property of *being bald*. Now imagine a man who is a borderline case of baldness, a man who is such that no amount of empirical research or arm-chair theorizing can decide the question of whether the quantity and distribution of his hair renders him bald. In such a case, some philosophers say that there is nothing determinate about him in virtue of which he is either bald or non-bald. There is no fact of the matter. Thus, he lacks the property of *being bald* and he lacks the property of *being non-bald*. The propositions that *he is bald* and *he is non-bald* are neither true nor false (Van Inwagen 1996; Merricks 2001; Sorenson 2013).

Hick can say something similar. Consider the property of *being personal*. Hick can say that God_{hick} is a borderline case of *being personal*. There is nothing determinate about it in virtue of which it is either personal or non-personal. There is no fact of the matter. Thus, it lacks the property of *being personal* and it lacks the property of *being non-personal*. The propositions that *God_{hick} is personal* and *God_{hick} is non-personal* are neither true nor false. And what goes for the property of *being personal* goes for any other creaturely conceivable substantial property.¹⁹

This way of understanding Transcategoriality is a significant advance, for three reasons.

First, we can now see why Property Bivalence is false. Property Bivalence is false because there can be borderline cases of being an F. In such a case, there is nothing determinate about x, there is no fact of the matter about x, in virtue of which x has the property of *being an F* or *being a non-F*. So it is neither.

¹⁹ On my view, God_{hick} has to be indeterminate only with respect to its creaturely conceivable substantial properties, whereas on the view of others, it “has to be utterly indeterminate” (Smart 1993b, 62). Cf. Yandell (1993), 197.

Second, we can also more easily understand Transcategoriality. It is no more surprising that God_{hick} is neither personal nor non-personal than it is that a borderline case of a bald man is neither bald nor non-bald—which is to say it is not surprising at all.

Third, this way of rejecting Property Bivalence and understanding Transcategoriality avoids Hick's errors. It does not confuse contraries and contradictories. It does not incorrectly affirm that, if there can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality, then Property Bivalence is false. It does not erroneously say that molecules are not non-clever, or that stones are not non-virtuous. It does not inaccurately affirm that language has a purchase on reality because of the location of its development. It does not appeal to a mysterious "global religious point of view".

To sum up, I contend that we must understand Transcategoriality in terms of God_{hick} 's extensive indeterminacy. That is to say, if Transcategoriality is true, it is true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property.

Objection. If God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property, then God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*. But that property is itself a creaturely conceivable substantial property: after all, we can conceive of it and it is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, and descriptive. Therefore, Transcategoriality entails that God_{hick} has neither it nor its logical complement. And so it is false that Transcategoriality is true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property.

Reply. Two possible replies might help us avoid the objection.

First, if Transcategoriality is true, then there is something about God_{hick} in virtue of which it is true. It's not just magic. We should expect, therefore, that, if Transcategoriality is true, there may well be an implicit restriction of its quantifier to properties that are not required in order to explain why it is true. Such a restriction would not be *ad hoc*. Given my explanation of what that something is, Transcategoriality allows God_{hick} to have the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*.

Second, if Transcategoriality is true, then God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is transcategorial*, i.e. God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is neither an F nor a non-F for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F*. But that itself is a creaturely conceivable substantial property! Or so it appears. On closer inspection, however, appearance is not reality. Why?

Because a property is substantial not only if it is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, and descriptive, but also only if it is neither logically nor linguistically generated. The property in question, however, is logically or linguistically generated—it is logically or linguistically generated from Transcategoriality itself, which is definitive of God_{hick} . So it is in fact a formal property, contrary to (initial) appearances (Hick 2009, 6). The same arguably goes for the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*. At least it does if I am right that Transcategoriality is true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property. For if I am right, then it is an *entailment* of Transcategoriality that God_{hick} has the property of *being an x such that x is a borderline case of every creaturely conceivable substantial property*. Therefore, that property is logically generated by Transcategoriality itself, and therefore it is a formal property of God_{hick} and not a substantial one—contrary to initial appearances. As such, Transcategoriality allows God_{hick} to have it.²⁰

6 Why God_{hick} Can't Be God, the Ultimate Religious Reality

We are now in a position to see that God_{hick} is not a genuine candidate for being God, the ultimate religious reality. There are at least four problems. Any one of them undermines its candidacy.

The self-Identity Problem The gut idea driving the Self-Identity Problem is that something can have some properties only if it is self-identical; but God_{hick} can't be self-identical given Transcategoriality. We can spell this out as in the form of an argument:

The Self-Identity Argument

1. Necessarily, for any x, if x has some properties, then there is some y such that y is identical with x.

Thus, for example, necessarily, if Barack Obama has some properties, then there is some y such that y is identical with Obama. Of course, Obama has many properties, e.g. the property of *being the first black US President*. Thus, there is some y such that y is identical with Obama. Naturally enough, the y in question is Obama himself. Obama has the property of *being a y such that y is identical with Obama*. Of course, it follows from (1) that

2. Necessarily, if God_{hick} has some properties, then there is some y such that y is identical with God_{hick} . (1)

²⁰ Thanks to Alex Clark for pressing me on this matter.

Hick assures us that God_{hick} is “infinitely rich” with creaturely inconceivable substantial properties, and so it has some properties. Let’s assume, for *reductio*, that he’s right:

3. God_{hick} has some properties. (Assume for *reductio*)

It follows from (2) and (3) that

4. There is some y such that y is identical with God_{hick} . (2, 3)

But

5. If there is some y such that y is identical with God_{hick} , then God_{hick} has the property of *being a y such that y is identical with God_{hick}* .

It follows that

6. God_{hick} has the property of *being a y such that y is identical with God_{hick}* . (4, 5)

Now notice that this property is a creaturely conceivable substantial property. After all, we can conceive of it; furthermore, it is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, descriptive, and neither logically nor linguistically generated from Transcategoriality itself. So, Transcategoriality entails that God_{hick} does not have it or its logical complement. So, God_{hick} does not have it. That is,

7. God_{hick} does not have the property of *being a y such that y is identical with God_{hick}* .

Contradiction (6, 7). Therefore, our assumption for *reductio* is false. That is, it is false that God_{hick} has some properties. But God_{hick} is possible only if it has some properties, say, those creaturely inconceivable ones that give it that special “infinite richness” that Hick goes on about rapturously. Therefore, God_{hick} is impossible.

The Number Problem Number is a creaturely conceivable substantial property, and so Transcategoriality implies that God_{hick} “does not have number,” an implication Hick affirms (Hick 1989, 247, 249, 2007, 223, 1995, 71). Critics complain that, if God_{hick} really is “beyond number,” then Hick should not prefer the singular over the plural when he speaks of “it,” which he uniformly does (Smart 1993a, 100; Quinn 2000, 232–33; Mavrodes 2000: 66, 73).

In reply, Hick makes four points. First, he says that there could not be a plurality of ultimate realities since, if there were, each would be “the sole creator or source of the Universe,” which is impossible (Hick 1989, 248). Second, “the postulation of [God_{hick}] *an sich* [is] the simplest way of accounting for the data” of the history of the world religions, from a religious perspective (Hick 1989, 249, 2004a, xxvii). Third, and perhaps as a consequence of the first two points, “we affirm the true ultimacy of [God_{hick}] by referring to it in the singular” (Hick 1989, 249). Fourth, “the exigencies of our language compel us to refer to it in either the singular or the plural,” and “the plural would be

more misleading than the singular” (Hick 1989, 249, 2010c, 75).

None of these points adequately addresses the critics’ complaint, it seems to me. As for the first, given Transcategoriality, Hick might as well say there could not be a single ultimate reality since, in that case, it would be “the sole creator or source of the Universe,” which is impossible. Being *the sole* F is ruled out by Transcategoriality every bit as much as being *one among many* F s. As for the second, the postulation of God_{hick} is the simplest way of accounting for the data only if that postulation involves fewer entities than competing hypotheses. But, according to Transcategoriality, number does not apply to God_{hick} , and so the concept of fewer doesn’t either. As for the third, since God_{hick} is “beyond number,” there is nothing about it in virtue of which we affirm its “true ultimacy” by referring to it in the singular. We affirm its “true ultimacy” just as well—or, rather, just as poorly—by referring to it in the plural. As for the fourth, the plural is more misleading than the singular only if there is something about God_{hick} in virtue of which the singular is closer to the truth than the plural, but there is nothing about God_{hick} in virtue of which that is the case given that God_{hick} is “beyond number”.

The real worry here, however, is not that Hick has no basis to prefer the singular over the plural when he speaks of God_{hick} . Rather, the real worry is that, on the one hand, number *cannot* apply to God_{hick} but, on the other hand, it *must*—in which case God_{hick} is impossible.

As for why number cannot apply to God_{hick} , the reason is just what Hick said. God_{hick} is defined by Transcategoriality. Thus, since number is a creaturely conceivable substantial property, number cannot apply to God_{hick} .

As for why number must apply to God_{hick} , the gut idea is that if something is distinct from everything else, then it must *uniquely* have some distinguishing substantial property, in which case number applies to God_{hick} .

We can spell this out more formally by way of the following argument.

The Unique Substantial Property Argument

1. Necessarily, if God_{hick} does *not* uniquely have some substantial property, then it is *not* distinct from everything else.
2. God_{hick} (if such there be) *is* distinct from everything else.
3. So, necessarily, God_{hick} uniquely has some substantial property. (1, 2)
4. Necessarily, if God_{hick} uniquely has some substantial property, then number applies to it.
5. So, necessarily, number applies to God_{hick} (if such there be). (3, 4)

Logic sanctions (3) and (5). What about (4), (2), and (1)?
In defense of (4), consider this argument:

- 4a. Necessarily, if God_{hick} uniquely has some substantial property, then there is some substantial property G such that God_{hick} has G and nothing else has G.
- 4b. Necessarily, if there is some substantial property G such that God_{hick} has G and nothing else has G, then God_{hick} is *the one and only* G.
- 4c. Necessarily, if God_{hick} is the one and only G, then number applies to it.

Premise (4) follows by two applications of hypothetical syllogism.

As for premise (2), two considerations tell in its favor. First, *you* aren't God_{hick}. But don't take it personally. Neither is Hillary Clinton, Mother Teresa, or Donald Trump, despite what he seems to think of himself. Go through the entire inventory of what there is and, with one exception, everything will be distinct from God_{hick}. Second, nothing could be a "transcendent reality" that is "the source and ground of everything" unless it is distinct from everything but itself.

As for premise (1), consider the following argument:

- 1a. God_{hick} does not uniquely have some substantial property. (Assume for conditional proof)
- 1b. Necessarily, for any x, if x does not uniquely have some substantial property, then x has no substantial properties in virtue of which x is distinct from everything else.
- 1c. Necessarily, for any x, if x has no substantial properties in virtue of which x is distinct from everything else, then x is not distinct from everything else.
- 1d. God_{hick} is not distinct from everything else.

Discharging our assumption for conditional proof, we arrive at premise (1).

The weak link in this argument is premise (1c). Here is an argument for it. Necessarily, for any x, if x has no substantial properties in virtue of which it is distinct from everything else, then, if x is distinct from everything else, x is distinct from everything else merely in virtue of its purely formal properties. But, necessarily, there is no x such that x is distinct from everything else merely in virtue of its purely formal properties. So, necessarily, for any x, if x has no substantial properties in virtue of which it is distinct from everything else, then x is not distinct from everything else.

The upshot is that, on the one hand, number *cannot* apply to God_{hick} and, on the other hand, number *must* apply to God_{hick}. Contradiction. So, God_{hick} is impossible.

The Pairing Problem. We can begin to see the problem here by way of

The Pairing Thesis. There are pairs of creaturely conceivable substantial properties, F1 and F2, such that, necessarily, for any x, if x is a borderline case of an F1, then x is not a borderline case of an F2.

To illustrate, if something is a borderline case of *being located all and only in Australia*, then it is not a borderline case of *being located all and only in Brazil*. That's because, necessarily (and holding fixed the actual locations of Australia and Brazil), if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of *being located all and only in Australia*, then it is determinate enough *not* to be a borderline case of *being located all and only in Brazil*; it is *non-located-all-and-only* in-Brazil. Likewise, if something is a borderline case of *being bald*, then it is not a borderline case of *being a physical object*. That's because, necessarily, if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of *being bald*, then it is determinate enough not to be a borderline case of *being a physical object*; it is a physical object. And the point holds for religiously relevant substantial properties as well. For example, if something is a borderline case of *being perfectly loving*, then it is not a borderline case of *being obstinately wicked*. That's because, necessarily, if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of *being perfectly loving*, then it is determinate enough not to be a borderline case of *being obstinately wicked*; it is *non-obstinately-wicked*. And the same goes for other pairs of substantial properties, e.g. *being almighty* and *being wimpy*, *being omniscient* and *being irrevocably ignorant*, *being wholly independent* and *being wholly dependent*, etc.

These observations are relevant to Transcategoriality, as can be seen by way of the following argument:

The Pairing Argument

1. For any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. (Assume for *reductio*)
2. So, God_{hick} is neither almighty nor non-almighty. (1)
3. If God_{hick} is neither almighty nor non-almighty, then God_{hick} is a borderline case of being almighty.
4. So, God_{hick} is a borderline case of almightiness. (2, 3)
5. If God_{hick} is a borderline case of almightiness, then it is not a borderline case of wimpiness—it is a non-wimp.
6. If God_{hick} is a non-wimp, then there is some creaturely conceivable substantial property F such that God_{hick} is a non-F.
7. If there is some creaturely conceivable substantial property F such that God_{hick} is a non-F, then it is

false that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

8. So, it is false that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. (4–7)

Our assumption for *reductio* leads to a contradiction, i.e. the conjunction of (1) and (8). So our assumption is false, in which case Transcategoriality is false and God_{hick} is impossible.²¹

The Insignificance Problem We have three arguments against the possibility of God_{hick}. Even if they all fail, and God_{hick} is possible, matters look grim for its candidacy as the ultimate religious reality. That's because it has no explanatory or religious significance. Let me explain.

I take it that there must be something about God_{hick} in virtue of which it is, as Hick says, “the source and ground of everything”. There must be something about it “in virtue of which,” as Hick says, “we can arrive at the blessed unselfcentred state which is our highest good”. And the same goes for other relations of explanatory and religious significance that Hick mentions. It isn't a brute, inexplicable fact. So what is it about God_{hick} in virtue of which it has such explanatory and religious significance?

Is it God_{hick}'s formal properties? No. They are too thin to bear the burden of being that by virtue of which God_{hick} has explanatory and religious significance. Is it God_{hick}'s creaturely conceivable substantial properties? No. It has no such properties. There is only one other option: God_{hick}'s creaturely *inconceivable* substantial properties. The worry, however, is that they are not up to the task either.

To see why, consider the property of *being an x such that x is capable of bearing significant explanatory and religious relations to the world by virtue of x's creaturely inconceivable substantial properties*. This property is in-itself, informative, significant, nontrivial, descriptive, and neither logically nor linguistically generated. Therefore it is substantial. Furthermore, it is conceivable by us. So, given Transcategoriality, God_{hick} does not have it or its logical complement. Therefore, God_{hick} does not have it. But if God_{hick} does not have the property of *being an x such that x is capable of bearing significant explanatory and religious relations to the world by virtue of x's creaturely inconceivable substantial properties*, then it is not the case that God_{hick} is capable of explanatory and religious significance by virtue of its creaturely inconceivable substantial properties.

The upshot, then, is this: neither by virtue of God_{hick}'s formal properties nor by virtue of its substantial properties is it capable of explanatory and religious significance. But it has no other properties. Therefore, God_{hick} has no properties by

virtue of which it is capable of explanatory and religious significance. Therefore, it cannot be “the source and ground of everything,” it cannot be that “in virtue of which...we can arrive at the blessed unselfcentred state which is our highest good,” etc. But God_{hick} is a candidate for being the ultimate religious reality only if it is capable of explanatory and religious significance. So, even if God_{hick} is possible, it cannot be the ultimate religious reality, it cannot be God (Cp. Yandell 1999, 79; Yandell 1993, 197; Netland 2015, 162).

Here's another implication of the Insignificance Problem. Hick makes a big deal of distinguishing what he calls “literal truth” from “mythological truth,” the former of which consists in a statement's “conformity to or lack of conformity to fact” and the latter of which consists in its not being literally true but rather “tend[ing] to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude” to what it's about (Hick 1989, 348). Hick says that, with the exception of formal statements, no statement about God_{hick} is literally true; rather, a statement about God_{hick} is true if and only if it is mythologically true, if and only if it has the “capacity to evoke appropriate or inappropriate dispositional responses to [God_{hick}]” (Hick 1989, 349–353, 2004a, xxxiii–xxxiv). Of course, as Hick rightly observes, this raises the question: “what is it for human attitudes, emotions, modes of behavior, and patterns of life to be appropriate to [God_{hick}]?” (Hick 1989, 353). Here is his answer:

It is for the god or absolute to which we relate ourselves to be an authentic manifestation of [God_{hick}]. In so far as this is so, that *persona* or *impersona* can be said to be in soteriological alignment with [God_{hick}]. For example, to love both God and one's fellow humans is a natural and appropriate response to the awareness of God as imaged in much of the Christian tradition. And to the extent that ‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is indeed an authentic *persona* of [God_{hick}], constituting the form in which [God_{hick}] is validly thought and experienced from within the Christian strand of religious history, to that extent the dispositional response appropriate to this *persona* constitutes an appropriate response to [God_{hick}]. Again, an un-self-centred openness to the world and compassion for all life are the natural expressions of an awakening through meditation to the eternal Buddha nature. And to the extent that this is an authentic *impersona* of [God_{hick}], validly thought and experienced from within the Buddhist tradition, life in accordance with the Dharma is likewise an appropriate response to [God_{hick}]. (Hick 1989, 353)

But there's a problem with all this.

For, as we've seen, God_{hick} has no properties by virtue of which it is capable of explanatory and religious significance. Therefore, it is impossible for any “god or absolute to which we relate ourselves to be an authentic

²¹ Thanks to Hud Hudson and Frances Howard-Snyder. Cf. Yandell (1993), 197.

manifestation of [God_{hick}]; moreover, no “*persona* or *impersona* can be said to be in soteriological alignment with [it]”. Consequently, it is false that “‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is indeed an authentic *persona* of [God_{hick}], constituting the form in which [God_{hick}] is validly thought and experienced from within the Christian strand of religious history”. Moreover, it is false that “the eternal Buddha nature” “is an authentic *impersona* of [God_{hick}], validly thought and experienced from within the Buddhist tradition”. That’s because that claim is true only if God_{hick} is capable of explanatory or religious significance. But, it is not. Consequently, it is also false that “an un-self-centred openness to the world and compassion for all life” and “life in accordance with the Dharma” are “an appropriate response to [God_{hick}]”. Generalizing, there are no mythologically true statements about God_{hick}.

(We might go further: for any true non-formal statement, it is either literally true or mythologically true. On Hick’s view, no statement about God_{hick} is literally true. We’ve just learned that no statement about God_{hick} is mythologically true either. So, a statement is true of God_{hick} if and only if it is a formal statement. But that’s not possible. So, necessarily, no statement is true of God_{hick}. But something is possible only if, possibly, some statement is true of it. Therefore, God_{hick} is impossible.)

According to some of Hick’s critics, given Transcategoriality, we could never know whether God_{hick} was explanatorily or religiously relevant, we could never know whether there were any mythologically true statements about it (e.g., Mavrodes 2010b, 74; Plantinga 2000, 56–59). Hick replies that he never said anyone *knows* such a thing. Rather, he postulates God_{hick}, with its creaturely inconceivable substantial properties, distinguishes its *personae* and *impersonae*, and uses them to explain the data of the history of religions and to solve the “apparently anomalous situation” he identified. Hick and his critics are both wrong, in my opinion. Hick is wrong because Transcategoriality implies that God_{hick} has no explanatory or religious significance at all, and so cannot explain or solve anything. His critics are wrong because Transcategoriality implies that we *can* know whether God_{hick} is explanatorily or religiously significant, we *can* know whether there are any mythologically true statements about God_{hick}. Indeed, we *do* know. We know that God_{hick} is explanatorily and religiously *insignificant*, we know that there are *no* mythologically true statements about God_{hick}.

7 Conclusion

Hick’s pluralism has been extensively criticized in the literature. In a revealing passage, Hick complains that “the great majority” of his critics

start from the presupposition that there can be at most only one true religion, and the fixed conviction that this is their own. A hermeneutic of suspicion cannot help wondering if their search for anti-pluralist arguments, usually philosophically sophisticated arguments, is driven by a need to defend a highly conservative/evangelical/sometimes fundamentalist religious faith. For it is noticeable that thinkers, within both Christianity and other traditions, who are more progressive/liberal/ecumenical in outlook tend to have much less difficulty with the pluralist idea....Needless to say, and as the religiously conservative critics would probably be the first to point out, this does not show that they are mistaken in their beliefs. But, together with the fact that their holding their conservative Christian, rather than conservative Muslim or Hindu or other, beliefs is precisely correlated with their having been raised in a Christian rather than a Muslim or Hindu or other society, it does ‘make one think’. (Hick 2010c, 72)

Three observations about this passage are in order.

First, as Hick well knows, each of the world’s great religions posits its own gods or absolutes as ultimate realities, and its own diagnosis of what ails humanity and how to fix it. And, as Hick also well knows, his pluralism implies that they are all wrong. So it’s not just conservative Christians who will have a “fixed conviction” that entails the negation of his pluralism. The faithful of all the world’s great religions will have the same. Indeed, in my opinion, embracing Hick’s pluralism—not pluralism *per se*—is a sure mark of infidelity to those religions.

Second, Hick says that those of us who are more progressive, liberal, and ecumenical in outlook tend to have much less difficulty with his pluralism, which implies that we tend to have much more difficulty discerning its defects—that is an extraordinarily offensive thing to say. Do we who are more progressive, liberal, and ecumenical in outlook tend to be so dense that we are less likely to see Hick’s conflation of contraries and contradictories? Do we tend to be so incompetent that we are more likely to overlook the multiply-equivocal line he draws between formal and substantive properties? Do we tend to be so inept that we are less likely to recognize his manifold blunders in defending transcategoriality? Do we tend to be so thick that we are more likely to be unable to process its disastrous philosophical, explanatory, and religious implications? Do we tend to be less likely to put forward “philosophically sophisticated arguments”? It is appalling that Hick would insult us in this way. Just who does he think he is, anyway? It’s not pleasant to say this, but someone must call him to account, even if in retrospect.

Third, Hick's "hermeneutic of suspicion" ploy is at least as apt to make one wonder about his motivations, and the psychological impediments that blinded him to the failings of his view, as it is to make one wonder about the motivations and impediments of anyone else. The mere fact that he'd stoop to such tactics might well "make one think". But let's resist the temptation to stoop that low. Let's judge Hick's God on its own merits alone.

It is my contention that, when we do that, we will discover that Hick is wrong when he writes that his God—"the transcategorical Real"—is "the ultimate mystery" (Hick 1989, 349). For, if my arguments are sound, there's nothing mysterious about Hick's God at all. It is impossible and, even if it possible, it has no explanatory or religious significance. As such, Hick's God is yet another ideology that belongs in the dustbin of intellectual history.²²

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