

On religious ambiguity

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Abstract: I examine, and defend, the idea that human experience is religiously ambiguous. Necessary conditions for there to be ambiguity of any sort are presented. The sort of ambiguity that (it is later argued) is exhibited in the area of religion is clarified in a series of stages. Then the case is made for the application of this notion of ambiguity in the case of religion.

Introduction

John Hick has written as follows:

The universe is religiously ambiguous in that it is possible to interpret it, intellectually and experientially, both religiously and naturalistically. The theistic and anti-theistic arguments are all inconclusive, for the special evidences to which they appeal are also capable of being understood in terms of the contrary world view. Further, the opposing set of evidences cannot be given objectively quantifiable values.¹

Hick's view, I think, is that the religious ambiguity to which he alludes is manifested not merely in the fact that it is possible both to interpret the world in a variety of religious ways and to interpret it naturalistically. It is also manifested in the fact that it is possible to do so while adhering to whatever may be the correct standards to adhere to while doing so, assuming there are such – standards of rationality, for example.²

It is clear from this passage that Hick also understands the ambiguity of the universe to include both intellectual and experiential elements. He means, first, that a sober and careful intellectual assessment of the available evidence would yield the result that the universe is ambiguous. And he means, second, that the universe is open to being experienced in a variety of ways. The idea is in part that a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Confucianist, a Christian, a Muslim, and so forth, may each interpret everything he encounters, including his own feelings and all aspects of his experience, in accordance with his religious perspective. And, again, each may do so while adhering to whatever may be the correct standards to adhere to while

doing so – such as standards of rationality, for example. And the same applies to those who interpret their experience in an entirely naturalistic way.

I consider this experiential ambiguity (if we want a name for it) to include the following additional elements. Many people in many different religious traditions experience the world around them, their own lives, and indeed everything in their experience upon which their religious outlook has any bearing, through the perspective provided by their tradition. When they do so it does not seem to them that what they experience is discordant with their interpretation of it. On the contrary, they generally feel that everything they experience can be comprehended through that perspective and its concepts and categories. One result is that their experience normally fits with their expectations in a hand-in-glove fashion, whatever anomalies that cause perplexity or elicit reflection there may be. Each of the many competing alternative readings of those phenomena that the religions purport to describe meshes with the experience of a particular religious community, generally providing those who adopt it with a way to interpret what they experience that feels right and that feels natural. Presumably a religion that did not have this capacity to mesh with the experience of its followers, or that failed to provide an interpretation of, and hence a way to cope with, those important events in the lives of its adherents that the religions purport to interpret – such as birth, death, bereavement, coming of age, the inner struggles that are part of almost every life, and so forth – would be discarded.

The distinction between intellectual and experiential aspects is hardly a strict one. For one thing, all of the relevant experiences that people enjoy are among the data that an intellectual assessment needs to take account of. Nonetheless there is a distinction here.

Broadly speaking, I believe that Hick is correct in his contention that our circumstances are religiously ambiguous. One can imagine there having been but one plausible interpretation of those phenomena that the religions propose to interpret, such as human nature, death, suffering, and the origins of the universe. It might have been that there was not a lot of room for different interpretations, that someone who doubted the tenets of, say, the one obviously correct religion would be as foolish as someone who doubted the existence of other people or of the external world. But things are not like that. And – to spell out a point that has already been made – Hick's view is that the world is religiously ambiguous through and through. For example, it is not just that the publicly available evidence is ambiguous. However, we need to get clear about the character of this ambiguity, identifying its salient features.

Much of my concern is with the ambiguity of *bodies of evidence*, focusing on cases in which there are a number of hypotheses or theories that purport to account for some such body of evidence. A body of evidence is identifiable as a body of evidence if it concerns some situation or matter or issue, or set of such. This provides the unity that makes for there being a *body* of evidence as distinct

from a random assortment of pieces of evidence. And a situation or matter or issue is ambiguous just because, and insofar as, the relevant body of evidence is ambiguous. Whatever we say about ambiguity in the case of a body of evidence or a situation or issue will probably have implications for the ambiguity of many other things, such as sentences, poems, glances, gestures, or advice. But I will forego further reflection about what ambiguity might amount to in such cases.

Necessary conditions of ambiguity

To begin to explain what the ambiguity under discussion consists in, I will identify some necessary conditions that must be satisfied if a body of evidence is to be ambiguous. One such necessary condition is that there must be a significant or non-negligible amount of evidence for more than one hypothesis or theory or worldview or proposal.³ Hence, a situation is not ambiguous if it is not clear at all what counts as evidence with respect to it. We might say that a situation of that sort is entirely uncertain. For example, it is probably entirely uncertain whether there will be human life on earth a billion years from now. A matter such as this is not ambiguous. Rather it is a matter with respect to which it is hard for us to begin to know how to think.

Another necessary condition is that, given the available evidence, none of the competing hypotheses is overwhelmingly obvious. For example, it is not possible to prove any one of them to be correct. Nor does the evidence overwhelmingly favour one hypothesis rather than the others. Thus, we would not consider to be ambiguous a situation in which we find, when all of the evidence is taken into account, that there are, say, 2 units of evidence for one hypothesis and 102 units for the only competing hypothesis, assuming that there are units of some sort by which evidence may be measured. An additional necessary condition is that the evidence does not clearly support one hypothesis over the others. For it might do so clearly without doing so overwhelmingly. This would be so if, say, there were 5 units of evidence for one hypothesis and 8 for another.

Interestingly, the necessary conditions I have just mentioned differ in an important way. They vary with respect to the extent to which, in addition to being necessary, each is close to being sufficient. Let's say that a necessary condition that is also close to being a sufficient condition is a 'significant necessary condition'. When you show that a property *x*, whose possession is a significant necessary condition of having another property *y*, is possessed by something, you contribute significantly to showing that that thing has *y*. To show *that* much is to be well on the way to showing that *y* is possessed. Much that is necessary to show that *y* is possessed has been accomplished. We have just another step or two to take. A particular necessary condition can be significant. As you would expect, though, a combination of necessary conditions is more likely to be so. On the other hand, let's say that a necessary condition that is very far from also being

sufficient is a 'minimal necessary condition'. ('Trivial necessary condition' would also do the trick.)⁴

Among the necessary conditions of ambiguity, there are – on the one hand – conditions that are quite minimal. For example, there being some evidence for more than one hypothesis, and there not being a proof of any of the competing hypotheses, are best understood in this way. To learn that these conditions obtain is still to be far from learning that there is ambiguity. On the other hand if we learn that while there is a significant amount of evidence for more than one hypothesis, the evidence overall does not clearly support one hypothesis rather than the others – which is to say that two of the necessary conditions identified above are satisfied – we have taken a significant step towards showing that the situation is ambiguous. Here we have a significant necessary condition.

But rather than dally with necessary conditions, whether significant or minimal or neither, let's take the bull by the horns and try to identify what ambiguity actually consists in. It will involve all of the necessary conditions I have just mentioned. What else might it involve?

Simple ambiguity

I begin with what I take to be the simplest sort of ambiguity. This is to be found in cases in which the amount of available evidence is fairly modest and in which it manifestly supports equally well each of the competing theories that purport to account for it. A crime has been committed. The only plausible culprits are the butler, the nanny, and the gamekeeper. And we have the same amount of evidence for the guilt of each of these parties. Perhaps a footprint near the scene of the crime looks like the gamekeeper's. What seems to be a fragment of the nanny's dress was found nearby. Then there is the dubious past of the butler. In each case we have just a little evidence. And insofar as it points the finger of guilt, it does so to the same extent in each case. The evidence for each hypothesis is in equilibrium with the evidence for the others.⁵

This is the simplest case. Let's say that in cases of this sort, in which there is very little available evidence and an equally strong case for a number of different hypotheses, there is 'simple ambiguity'. Cases of this sort have the following additional characteristic. Just because of the parity in the evidence, there is no intellectual challenge about how to respond. Given the presence of the sort of equilibrium that is involved in there being as much evidence for each of the competing hypotheses as there is for the others, a reasonable way to respond is just to recognize this to be so, in effect suspending judgement among the alternatives.⁶ (Depending on the case it may, for example, also be reasonable to seek to disambiguate the situation by looking for more evidence.)

At least this is so in the case of anyone who is aware of all of the relevant evidence. The situation of someone who, even in a very simple case of this sort,

is aware only of part of the evidence, is quite different. Perhaps someone knows only of the dubious past of the gamekeeper and has heard nothing of the footprint or of the apparent fragment of a dress. Accordingly, he suspects the gamekeeper. Being aware of only one part of the available evidence, he opts for one hypothesis to the exclusion of the others. This is understandable and such a person may not be in any way at fault. (Whether or not he is at fault will, for example, depend on whether he should have known about the other available pieces of evidence.)

For ease of reference let's refer to this distinction between, on the one hand, being aware of the evidence for only one of the competing hypotheses and, on the other hand, being aware of all of the relevant evidence as the distinction between partial and comprehensive perspectives. This distinction has application to ambiguity of different sorts and not only to simple ambiguity.

The available evidence

As mentioned, a feature of simple ambiguity is that there is little available evidence to consider. This notion of 'little available evidence' requires clarification – actually more clarification than I can give it here. First we need to clarify the notion of the 'available evidence'. This certainly should not be understood along the lines of 'all the evidence that people who are reflecting on this situation are currently aware of', since people can fail to be aware of evidence that, so to speak, stares them in the face. Evidence can be available even if people do not avail of it when they easily could.

Rather, the idea of the available evidence is best understood as indexed to our cognitive capacity. It is evidence that a human being is capable of being aware of, given the human cognitive apparatus. It is neither, on the one hand, the evidence that is available to, say, a goldfish nor, on the other hand, the evidence that is available to God, if God exists. As for the latter case, it goes without saying that there may be evidence for this or that hypothesis, including the hypothesis that God exists, that is available to God but that is beyond human comprehension.

The evidence concerning some matter that is available at some level of cognitive ability might exhibit the sort of equilibrium that is a feature of simple ambiguity while such an equilibrium is not present in evidence concerning this same matter that is available to beings at other levels of ability. Thus, the available evidence with respect to some matter might exhibit this feature at the human level but not do so for beings that are either lower than us or higher than us on the cognitive totem pole. And it might be that if we were a hundred times smarter than we are, we could have a clear view of evidence that would disambiguate something that is currently ambiguous to us, or for that matter that would render ambiguous matters that currently lack ambiguity for us. While this is a matter of speculation, in matters of religion in particular it behoves us to take seriously the possibility that there are matters that we find to be ambiguous because of human

limitations. One reason is that the object of religious veneration is typically understood by its devotees to far exceed human comprehension, and the frailty and inadequacy of the human cognitive apparatus are generally (and for good reason) taken for granted.

The notion of evidence that is available to a human being requires additional clarification. To which human beings is the evidence available? Is it the average human being? Or is it the average human being with secondary education? What about tertiary education or a Ph.D.? And for the evidence to be available, must it be obvious – perhaps to the point where one to whom it is available would be foolish to ignore it? Or is it enough that with some effort it would be comprehensible? If so, how much effort?

A full account of the idea of the available evidence would require answers to these questions. Not knowing how to provide such answers, I will settle for something less complete and less clear. I will just assume that the relevant evidence is evidence that is available to human beings, bearing in mind that this will remain a somewhat unclear idea. To say that there is *little* available evidence is just to say it can be taken in by us with ease.

Rich ambiguity

There are various respects in which ambiguity can be less simple. Rather than attempt to give a comprehensive account of the umpteen ways in which this can be so, and hence of the umpteen varieties of ambiguity that we could distinguish, I will take a short cut. I will attempt to identify the salient features of the sort of ambiguity that, in my view, is exhibited in the case of certain important religious matters. I will do so in two stages. First, I will describe in broad strokes the distinctive elements of what I call ‘rich ambiguity’. Then, in the next section, I will turn to a particularly relevant sort of rich ambiguity.

For one thing, if there is rich ambiguity the various necessary conditions for there to be ambiguity (of any sort) will be satisfied. Thus, there must be a significant amount of evidence for more than one hypothesis. Given the available evidence, none of the competing hypotheses can be proven to be correct. More broadly, none of them is correct in an overwhelmingly obvious sort of way. Nor does the evidence clearly favour one hypothesis over the others.

Next, I attempt to lay out systematically the ingredients in this idea of rich ambiguity. First, there is the matter of the amount of available evidence. A defining characteristic of richly ambiguous situations is that

- (1) There is an abundance of relevant evidence.

In addition, the following conditions obtain:

- (2) This evidence is diverse in its character, multifaceted, and complicated.

- (3) Within this body of evidence there are discrete pockets of evidence that are particularly congenial to advocates of particular interpretations of the evidence.

In elaborating this point I want to focus on a particular sort of advocate of such hypotheses. I have in mind people who are intelligent, honest, and insightful, and who reason with as much care as they can. Let's refer to such people as 'people of integrity'. Because there are discrete pockets of evidence, people of integrity who take different points of view can each have something significant to go on. Each relevant group has its own data to which it can appeal.

- (4) The advocates of different hypotheses disagree about the status of some, or even much, of the putative evidence.

One group sees evidence for its position where another group does not do so, or at any rate has a perspective on its role as evidence that others lack. The disagreement may concern whether alleged phenomena occur or whether, given that they occur, they are evidence of the sort claimed by one or more parties.⁷

- (5) Because the foregoing conditions, (1)–(4), are met, it is very difficult to tell whether there is more evidence for one side or the other.

There is little hope of quantifying the evidence precisely. Any parity there may be is likely to be rough and a matter of debate. We are not likely to find the sort of equilibrium that is a defining feature of simple ambiguity. Nor is it likely to be possible to measure with the sort of precision that would be required to discern whether there is an equilibrium.

Extremely rich ambiguity

Next I turn to a special sort of rich ambiguity. I call it 'extremely rich ambiguity'. Its distinguishing feature is that, in addition to sharing the features of rich ambiguity, the available evidence is superabundant, far exceeding what it would take to be considered abundant. In particular no single person can have access to anything more than a portion of the available evidence. It is impossible for anyone to examine all of it and it is impossible for anyone to tell whether, all things considered, it supports one hypothesis rather than another. Although the evidence that is relevant is evidence that is available to people, there is so much of it that no one person can hope to have access to more than a small part of it. So the task of disambiguating such a situation far exceeds our capabilities. A comprehensive perspective on the evidence is out of the question and only a partial perspective is feasible. Any assessment of the overall import of the evidence would be speculative. In cases of this sort – given that they exhibit all of the other features of rich ambiguity – it is all the more true that people of integrity who

take different points of view can have a body of evidence to which they can appeal.

There can be situations that exhibit extremely rich ambiguity but in which one hypothesis is nevertheless supported by more evidence than the others. For that matter, parity in such cases is not out of the question. But knowing what the evidence adds up to is another story entirely. There is what we can see now. And there is what we would see if we could see everything relevant.

Whether or not a situation is richly ambiguous, or for that matter extremely richly ambiguous, may be far from obvious. It may take some work to figure this out. Many people may be convinced that it is not the case even when it is so. Perhaps they appeal in the process to some perspective from which particular pieces of evidence are especially easily noticed, from which all evidence that might be troublesome is somehow rendered nugatory, and from which what is appealing about the perspectives of others is not apparent. In such situations it may seem to those who have a particular perspective that others could not possibly have enough going for them for their views to be reasonable. Getting yourself to the point where you see that a number of perspectives can reasonably be adopted with respect to the available evidence would require acknowledging that the situation as a whole is in a very important respect 'beyond you'.

Someone who sees that there is extremely rich ambiguity, and hence an abundance of relevant evidence that he is not aware of, when that is indeed the case, and that people who endorse other interpretations have much to appeal to, is seeing more deeply than someone who just considers, say, the part of the evidence that is congenial to her own point of view and who continues to adhere to that point of view.

Although it is not my aim here to explore carefully the implications of a recognition that an area of enquiry is richly, or extremely richly, ambiguous, I suggest that one can reasonably combine recognition that there is such ambiguity with endorsement of a particular interpretation of the evidence. For one thing, in such a situation you do not know how things would look if – *per impossibile* – you had access to all of the evidence, and it may not be unreasonable to believe (or, say, to have some confidence, or to hope) that overall a stronger case could be made for your position than for any of the alternatives. After all, as mentioned, if everything were taken into account, the balance of evidence would presumably favour some point of view or other. And the evidence you have most access to – your evidence – supports your interpretation. I shall return to this theme.

Probably it is also true that once someone believes there to be rich ambiguity, his reasons for adopting any particular position are accordingly diminished in force. Also, if we as much as suspect that we are in a situation in which there is extremely rich ambiguity, humility and caution should be our watchwords.

Religion satisfies the necessary conditions of ambiguity

My main interest is in the payoff of these notions for the case of religion. The believer who, in the extreme case, at almost every waking moment encounters what he takes to be evidence of the presence of God does not consider the world to be religiously ambiguous. How could he? He sees evidence on all sides. And the unbeliever who, in all honesty, can see nothing that seems to her to give any reason to think that God exists and to whom religious belief seems nothing more than, say, wishful thinking, is in the same boat. These two camps, at least, will deny that the phenomena that religions purport to describe exhibit rich ambiguity, or for that matter ambiguity of any sort. They both consider the facts of the situation to be obvious – although there is a remaining detail about which they disagree, namely what the facts in question are. I will argue that we should not purchase the wares of these merchants of certainty. In doing so I will focus primarily on the issue of the existence of God.

There is at any rate considerable reason to believe that the necessary conditions of ambiguity of any sort are satisfied in this case. It seems, for a start, that neither the evidence for, nor the evidence against, God's existence is overwhelming. For example, it appears that neither a proof nor a disproof of God's existence – which is to say a sound deductive argument with the relevant conclusion – is available to us. Next, to narrow the discussion still further, I argue that the evidence surrounding the existence of God provides a clear case neither for nor against the existence of God. I will present five reasons for believing that this is so. In doing so I understand myself to be identifying a significant necessary condition of this being an ambiguous issue.

First, I would mention the fact that people of integrity take both positions. This suggests that a clear case cannot be made for one rather than another position concerning this matter. If reasonable people hold each position, probably both positions are reasonable.⁸

Second, the topic of religious experience is relevant in a number of respects. It is sometimes proposed that in virtue of certain experiences they enjoy, people are aware of God or of God's actions or character in such a way that they have available to them a compelling case for God's existence. And it is uncontroversial that the lives of theists include much experience that seems to them to be indicative of the truth of their theistic beliefs. Both manifestly religious experiences and ordinary experiences that are interpreted in a theistic way are relevant here. Such experiences call into question the proposal that there is available a clear case against the existence of God.

On the other hand, believers often characterize their awareness of the presence of God as sketchy. Thus William P. Alston, in the course of his sustained, and rightly celebrated, defence of the reliability of practices in which people understand themselves to perceive God, says that the perception of God is usually 'dim,

meager, and obscure'.⁹ Experience that is dim, meagre, and obscure is not the sort of experience that would provide a clear case for any particular religious perspective. It may be that not all putative perception of God is of this sketchy and indecisive character but it seems that much of it, at any rate, is.

Actually, the fact that people of integrity in different traditions regard various parts of their experience as supporting tradition-specific interpretations of God's nature, purposes, states of mind, activities and so forth, has a relevance here. One possibility that is suggested by this variety of construals of the experiences that are reported upon is that those parts of their experience to which believers appeal do not clearly lend themselves to being interpreted in one way rather than another. This is, we might say, to consider whether religious experiences are themselves ambiguous – without being terribly careful about what is here meant by 'ambiguous'. Jacob Joshua Ross nicely refers to this issue as the question of whether there is 'a sort of under-determination belonging to the experience as such'.¹⁰

For example, suppose that a theist loses her way in a forest and asks for God's help to find her way out. And then she finds her way out. She takes what she has experienced as involving divine intervention. But any experience of the divine that is involved in such a case is not unambiguous. Or a theist feels discouraged and prays for strength and then finds herself strengthened. Did the prayer help in a purely psychological way or was there an actual divine intervention? And so on. However, lest there be any confusion about this, my overall case in this paper does not assume or entail, though it may suggest, that religious experiences are themselves ambiguous.

To return to the main issue in hand, it is not out of the question that some group is special in that they alone have special feelings or experiences of some sort that put them, alone, in a unique position to determine with clarity what is the case. We should not rule this out. More generally, it is possible that some have reasons that others lack. But it is obvious that each tradition feels special in such respects as this. It seems to be an unimpressive aspect of human beings that each of us thinks that we are special in a variety of respects so it is no surprise to observe such thinking in the area of religion. We should, of course, be wary of all claims to be unique in the respect under discussion.

Third, there are some considerations having to do with the fact that people sometimes change their religious beliefs that are relevant. Consider first the possibility of loss of theistic belief. Theists generally consider such a loss to be something that it is important to take steps to avoid. This indicates that they think that there is a danger of losing belief. Also, many believers of the most devout and convinced sort sometimes find themselves wondering quite sincerely whether or not God exists, perhaps when they are in circumstances of difficulty or hardship, or when they find others in such circumstances. But if they had at their disposal a clear case for the existence of God they probably would never find themselves so

situated. Nor would loss of belief be something that it would be necessary to guard against. Moreover, the fact that theists sometimes lose their belief in God suggests that they did not have at their disposal in the first place a clear case for the existence of God. Corresponding reasoning applies to the fact that people of integrity adopt religious beliefs: this speaks against the availability of a clear case against the existence of God.

Fourth, here is a consideration that bears specifically on the absence of a clear case *for* theism. Theists have proposed many explanations of why people do not have a clear case for God's existence, and indeed of why it is a good thing that this is so.¹¹ They have said that this provides us with moral autonomy or with the freedom to make up our minds about what to believe, for example. The abundance and variety of these explanations bespeak a widespread recognition among theists that a clear case for God's existence is lacking.

Fifth, and this bears too on the absence of a clear case for theism, the dominant cultural ethos at some times and in some places makes belief that God exists easier than it is at other times and in other places. Thus, many people in Buddhist countries, for instance, just do not encounter the belief that God exists as a viable, or live, option for belief. It is not among the array of possibilities that their culture delivers to them. In general the role of tradition in the area of religion is very great. Thus typically it is only if the traditions, practices, and institutions of a group are thriving that the beliefs associated with it are maintained and transmitted successfully. I take the fact that cultural transmission of religious belief is so important in determining whether someone accepts it, with some cultures or groups making this belief available and some failing to do so, to be a function of the fact that a clear case for the truth of the belief is not available.

Together these points provide considerable evidence that people are not in possession of a clear case on either side.¹²

Religion exhibits rich ambiguity

The issue of the existence of God, and indeed religious issues in general, do not exhibit simple ambiguity. For one thing, there is an abundance of evidence that is relevant to them. In addition, it is doubtful that the relevant evidence has the particular feature of 'balancing out' or parity that is a defining feature of simple ambiguity. It may be that if you restrict your reflections to some portion of the available evidence – to, perhaps, on the one hand, the fine-tuning evidence (in virtue of which conditions on earth are remarkably well suited for life) and, on the other hand, the problem of evil or some version thereof – the evidence may seem to balance out. But even that would be a questionable 'seat-of-the-pants' judgement. And the proposal that the complete evidence does so is even more questionable. So simple ambiguity is not the right furrow to plough. What about rich ambiguity? Actually the issue of the existence of God exemplifies all five of

the conditions that characterize rich ambiguity. (But let's face it: pulling a previously planted rabbit out of a hat does not count as magic.)

Indeed, I would suggest that one merely needs to state the distinguishing features of rich ambiguity and then to consider the question of the existence of God to see that this is so. The defining features, recall, were that there is an abundance of relevant evidence; that this evidence is diverse in its character, multifaceted, and complicated; that it contains discrete pockets of evidence that are particularly congenial to the advocates of particular interpretations of the evidence; that one group regards as evidence phenomena that are not so regarded by other groups; and that it is extremely difficult to tell whether there is more evidence for one side or the other.

I will not make this case in any detail. But here are a few relevant considerations. That there is relevant evidence in the case of the existence of God is clear enough. The evidence in question includes every phenomenon and consideration that either supports or counts against belief in God. The evidence *for* the existence of God includes, as mentioned, the fine-tuning data. In addition widespread reports of experience of God on the part of honest and intelligent people provide everyone with some evidence for God's existence. This is so even in the case of those who do not enjoy such experiences, and who only hear about them from others whom they deem reliable. Of course, in assessing the import of this evidence, we have to take into account the fact that these reports are provided from within a bewildering array of traditions. And we have to take into account the fact that participants in the non-theistic traditions also report on experiences that seem to them to confirm the account of reality that their tradition presents. But it hardly follows from these qualifications that apparent experiences of God provide no evidence for the existence of God.

On the other hand the evidence *against* God's existence includes, as mentioned, the presence of evil in the world. Serious attempts have been made to explain how it is that all the evil in the world is consistent with God's existence. But it is not clear that these attempts succeed. And I think it is reasonable to conclude that the evils in question provide some evidence against God's existence. Again, a consideration to which believers in God are inclined to appeal in support of their beliefs, such as the fact of apparent design in the world, obviously is open to non-religious interpretations. By way of example, appeals to the fine-tuning of the universe confront the challenge of naturalistic appeals to the many-universes hypothesis, to the possibility that we are the immensely fortunate beneficiaries of sheer good luck, and to the possibility of an as-yet-undiscovered scientific explanation of fine-tuning. Moreover, as a general rule, large-scale apologetic manoeuvres that can be made on behalf of one religion can be made on behalf of the others.¹³

These considerations can be further buttressed by what we might call the argument from philosophical and theological debate. Much of the work of theistic,

atheistic (and other) philosophers of religion and theologians is relevant here, in particular those aspects of such work that go beyond the arguments and considerations alluded to in the last paragraph. And there is much more to be taken into account, such as relevant parts of the modern biological sciences. Moreover, always barking at the heels of anyone engaging in reflection about religion come the hounds of naturalism. It is dishonest to pretend that they are not to be heard, or to create enough of a racket of one's own that they are drowned out. The honest approach is to incorporate an awareness of the possibility that religion is entirely a human construct.

I want to highlight the application of item (4) in the account of rich ambiguity: the fact that some see as evidence for an hypothesis they favour what others think not to be such evidence. By way of exemplifying the application of this element to the choice between large-scale religious worldviews, consider the following sort of case. A believer in God prays to God for help. Perhaps he faces a difficulty in his life. Perhaps he is in physical pain or feels distress of some sort. Perhaps he is being tortured by people who demand that he provides them with information that he does not have. He is getting weaker, has not had anything to eat or drink, has not been allowed to sleep, and has been insulted, sexually humiliated, and abused. He prays to God for help. Having engaged in prayer he feels strengthened. He feels that a weight has been lifted from him. Perhaps he finds that he now has ways of thinking that enable him to deal with his difficulties. He thanks God and, if he were to think in terms of how much evidence he has for his beliefs, he would feel that he has encountered fresh evidence for those beliefs.

If his problem remains unsolved and his situation does not seem to improve in any respect, he may feel that he is meant thereby to learn a lesson. Perhaps he is to acquire patience or fortitude, or to cultivate acceptance. Perhaps he is meant to understand better the suffering of others. This is, he surmises, just the sort of lesson that you would expect to receive from a good and worship-worthy God. In fact, God is to be thanked for this lesson as it is a form of guidance that has been carefully tailored to his needs. In addition, the character of his pain or distress is altered by making it the object of prayer. It is more manageable, being construed now as a burden to be borne with patience and fortitude. And his ability to adapt in such respects may be seen by him to provide further evidence for his beliefs. Moreover, the character of the difficulty he confronts has changed just in virtue of the fact that he has taken control of his situation by making it the object of prayer. Rather than passively being at the receiving end of events, he has taken action, invoking the resources that he has at his disposal. He is thankful for the ability to do so. 'Show me the evidence for God's existence', says the non-believer. 'But I have it at almost every moment', says the believer. Or at least, so say many believers much of the time.

On the other hand, the non-believer, thinking that there is nothing beyond the physical and what is dependent upon or emergent from the physical, or at any

rate that the religiously significant realities posited by the believer are non-existent, has a different perspective. Problems and situations are approached differently. What the non-believer encounters probably does not seem as if it needs to be accounted for in the way in which the believer proposes to account for what she encounters. And solutions that the believer feels she has to her problems seem otiose and unnecessary and may even seem unintelligible. Making up his mind about what to do in some situation feels just exactly like that: making up his mind. There is no sense of being guided or directed by the sorts of beings or entities or states that religions uniquely posit, or of reliance on a wisdom not his own. He reflects about how to respond in some situation and it comes to him what he should do. But he has no sense of this coming to him from anywhere other than from himself. He may be happy to acknowledge that it is psychologically beneficial to pray to God for help – or rather to engage in an activity that the believer characterizes in this way. But he sees no reason to believe that any such help is forthcoming. In fine, in the debate between the believer and the non-believer, there is an important respect in which there is a lack of agreement about what the relevant evidence is.

No doubt there are ways of characterizing what the believer takes to be her evidence for her position such that the non-believer will readily concede that the evidence in question is a reality. Obviously, they can both agree that the believer feels she is divinely guided and divinely strengthened or that the believer's prayers are psychologically beneficial. And so on. And, to some extent, the non-believer can understand the experiences that the believer reports on. Still, there will be cases in which to characterize the experiences of the believer in a neutral way that both can sign off on will be unfair to the believer, setting her at one remove from what she actually encounters, rendering her experience in a key that will seem to her not to do justice to it.

So, to repeat, if you consider what it is for there to be rich ambiguity and then contemplate our situation vis à vis matters of religious import, it is apparent that this situation is richly ambiguous.

In addition, the fact that large numbers of people of integrity have come to such different conclusions can do double duty. It serves not merely as a reason to believe that a significant necessary condition of ambiguity has been met: it is also a reason to believe that the relevant matters are richly ambiguous. It is obvious that for every careful theist who adds up what he thinks to be the relevant evidence and gets a result that supports theism, there is an equally careful non-theist who gets an entirely different result. For every theist to whom the facts of her experience appear to confirm that God exists, there are apparently equally well-qualified non-theists, including members of non-theistic religions, agnostics and atheists, to whom the facts of their experience appear to have no such significance, but rather appear consistent with what they believe. Apparently painstaking attempts to assess the import of the evidence arrive at utterly different

conclusions. In a number of traditions there are people of integrity who feel that they are on the correct path and who are utterly convinced of the truth of their tradition, and whose own experience seems to them to fit with what they believe.

While it is not the only conceivable explanation of why all of this is so, rich ambiguity is an excellent candidate for such an explanation. Moreover, debates about religion exhibit a sort of stalemate in which everyone, or at least many people, feel eminently entitled to believe as they do and yet find themselves unable to make much headway in persuading others that they are right. This too is just what you should expect if there is rich ambiguity. In fine, rich ambiguity provides a very good explanation of the fact of diversity and we have a lot of other evidence for it too.

Religion exhibits extremely rich ambiguity

Part of my case for the issue of the existence of God exhibiting *extremely rich ambiguity* is this. Suppose that I am, say, a Wesleyan Methodist who can attest to a sense of having felt my heart 'strangely warmed' by what I take to be the presence of God. In that case an important part of my evidence for God's presence, and hence God's existence, is provided by just this very sense of the presence of God. This experience of mine is, moreover, part of the evidence that anyone who is thinking about this matter would need to take account of, even if the significance of the experience is reduced for others once it is filtered through my testimony. Someone who is assessing the evidence for and against the existence of God and who is unaware of my experience, and of the difference it has made to me (or at any rate of experiences like mine and of the difference they make to those who have them) is missing something very important and relevant.

But then the same reasoning applies to the religious experience of others, including others about whom I know little or nothing. Some may indulge in the fantasy that only their religious experiences are to be counted. But that sentiment cannot be taken seriously. Probably it is particularly common among those with little acquaintance with religious traditions other than their own. From within the shadow of the parish pump even a hazy sense of distant landscapes is hard to achieve. (And that fact too – the fact that this is so – is one that is hard to discern from that particular location.)¹⁴ Advocates of particular traditions, therefore, should recognize that they are not qualified to talk comprehensively. They are mainly qualified to talk about their home territory, religiously speaking. And there are many such home territories.

It is an interesting fact that people who consider the religious experiences of others to be part of the evidence have reason to believe that no one can have access to all of the available evidence. Assuming that no one is faking their experience – and that is out of the question once we are dealing with people of integrity – there are great swathes, vast stretches, of relevant evidence (in

particular the religious experiences of most others) to which each of us does not have access, and of which we cannot but be abysmally ignorant. Being human experience, the experience of others is not beyond the ability of human beings to grasp. Yet each of us lacks access to what it would be like to adopt numerous other perspectives, with whatever experiences are attendant upon doing so.

What has to be considered includes the warp and woof of the lives of many devout practitioners over centuries. I have in mind in particular access to experience that requires authentically living a certain sort of life and navigating one's way through daily dilemmas and challenges while in the grip of the relevant religious interpretation of reality. And there are additional daunting questions such as this one: how many perspectives deserve to be taken account of? For example, should we include only experiences that are associated with major historically significant religious traditions? And only with those that continue to be major players on the world stage? And so on. In any case the extraordinary variety of types of religious experience, especially across traditions, itself provides the basis for a case for extremely rich ambiguity.

Of course, religious experience is only a fragment of the relevant total evidence. Everything mentioned in the last section, including the multitude of types of evidence and the argument from philosophical and theological debate, is relevant here too. In general the multi-various character of the evidence is such that people in different communities have much to go on. And this applies to atheists and agnostics as well as it applies to Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and so forth. Everyone has a great deal to point to. We can think in a theoretical way about all of the evidence being considered from all perspectives. But that is about as far as we can go. If the evidence really exhibits extremely rich ambiguity, there is no possibility that a single individual can make much progress in this regard. Different people have access to different bodies of evidence, and there is no such thing as having access to all of the evidence. There is no suggestion in any of this that anyone arbitrarily selects his worldview. Nothing could be further from the truth. People make sense as best they can of their situation and draw on what they are familiar with. However, because of ambiguity there are many legitimate and understandable responses to the human condition.

Some final thoughts

First, as mentioned, I do not propose to probe the implications for belief of the phenomenon of extremely rich ambiguity. I will merely make a few comments concerning the case of belief about matters of religious significance. Certainly there is no reason to deny that there is a way that things are, religiously speaking. Nor is there reason to deny that if – *per impossibile* – we had access to all of the evidence, a particular account of those phenomena that religions

purport to interpret would present itself to us as manifestly correct. It might even turn out that the position that would present itself as manifestly correct if, again *per impossibile*, we had access to all of the evidence is, say, Orthodox Judaism, or Sunni Islam, or Zen Buddhism, or Wesleyan Methodism.

In addition, a recognition that there is extremely rich ambiguity concerning religious matters may reasonably be combined with confidence or hope or faith on the part of people in various traditions that if – yet again, *per impossibile* – all of the relevant evidence were to be taken into account, some of the central tenets of their tradition would be preserved relatively intact. Perhaps those tenets would emerge in modified form. Or perhaps – a weaker thesis – some of their beliefs would be found to have some special relevance or to exhibit some special insight. This too might occur in ways that one cannot now anticipate.

Moreover, even if you accept that an area of religious significance exhibits extremely rich ambiguity, I think that you can nevertheless without inconsistency see things from a particular religious point of view. For one thing it is natural to pay especially close attention to, and to give priority to, the body of data that is most familiar to you, where this includes your own experience. For your own experience has a special immediacy, a special intimacy, and a special accessibility. It probably is experience that is to be had within the tradition with which you are most familiar, to which you are most loyal, and with which you identify yourself. The experiences of others are often poorly understood and mediated through testimony, if there is any acquaintance with them at all.

Indeed, I take it to be obvious that many people in many religious traditions have reasons to be in their tradition. For a start, their tradition probably fits with their experience in a general sort of way in that the beliefs associated with their tradition provide them with a way to interpret much of their everyday experience. Again, people probably have learned the ways of their tradition, including both the beliefs and the practices that are associated with it, from sources that they have every reason to believe to be reliable, such as their parents or the elders in their community. The fact that you have heard from a reliable authority that such and such is true has to be counted as part of the evidence to which you have access. People may also feel a sense of obligation to be faithful to their religious community, or to their tradition, or to the ways of their ancestors, and so forth, and it may seem to them that they have every reason to take these feelings seriously. They may have a strong sense that doing so is extremely important. They may also be aware of themselves as members of a particular historical community of like-minded individuals, whose way of life appears to be valuable and worthy of preservation. This may in fact be the community in which they have acquired their evaluative criteria and their outlook on life, so that they cherish it on that account. Membership in it may be partially constitutive of who they are. And all of this can be so even if there is rich, or extremely rich, ambiguity, and even when this is acknowledged to be so.

A full discussion of the implications for belief would also expatiate upon the following points. The general human inability to grasp the experiences of others should be linked with a need for humility, for caution, and for re-examination. One can reasonably combine a recognition that there is rich ambiguity in a certain area, and all the more so in the case of extremely rich ambiguity, with a recognition that one sees but a small part of the picture, and that there is a great deal of relevant evidence to which one does not have access. Also, the phenomenon of rich ambiguity has the result that it is more reasonable than it otherwise would be to take seriously, and to examine, the worldviews of others, and to acknowledge the limitations of our own views. In addition, it would be reasonable for the grip that you have on your beliefs to become looser, and for confidence that any particular position is correct to diminish somewhat.¹⁵ A closely related area of enquiry is whether some religious positions can account better than others for the sort of ambiguity that we have found religious matters to exhibit. And, overall, is the conclusion that there is rich ambiguity good news from the point of view of the religions? A starting point for reflection here is that it is pleasing to the religions inasmuch as it says that there is much to be said for them. But it is displeasing in that it also says that on matters of religious import there is also much to be said for the competition. We might also broach the question of whether (or, more sensibly, when) there is an obligation to set out to disambiguate what is ambiguous.¹⁶

Second, ambiguity of the sort under discussion is, I believe, exhibited at the level of large-scale worldviews such as those associated with Buddhism, atheism, Islam, Christianity, and so forth. However, I have also indicated that this macro-level ambiguity is also exhibited in the case of particular issues or phenomena such as the origins of the universe, death, and the existence of God – the latter being the issue upon which I have bestowed particular attention. Yet it is entirely possible that the evidence with respect to some particular issue (say, the origins of the universe) would – if considered on its own – favour some particular hypothesis (say, atheism) but that when the evidence with respect to this issue is combined with all other relevant evidence, what you have overall, and at the macro-level, is extremely rich ambiguity. As it happens, broadly speaking, I think a case can be made for the particular issues that the religions purport to explain exhibiting extremely rich ambiguity although that would need to be shown on a case-by-case basis, and doing so would be a huge undertaking.

Lastly, and most important of all, I take the ambiguity under discussion to call for more fellow-feeling and empathy and recognition of kindred spirits and fellow-travellers across the major traditions. A practical advantage of the proposal that matters of religious significance exhibit extremely rich ambiguity is that it lends itself to a way to disagree with others without thinking less of them than you think of yourself or of your own group.¹⁷

Notes

1. John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 12.
2. For an account of ambiguity that emphasizes both the rationality of the alternatives and the broad range of responses to religious issues that are rational, see ch. 6 ('Faith and ambiguity') of Terence Penelhum *Reason and Religious Faith* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1995).
3. For convenience I will generally mention hypotheses as what it is that evidence supports. Of course the cases that interest me most are large-scale worldviews that are matters of the greatest seriousness to many of those who endorse them.
4. Consider the property of being an Irish male (human being) between the ages of twenty and eighty. Call this property 'I'. Now consider some necessary conditions of having this property. Not being identical with a paperclip is a (very) minimal necessary condition of having I. On the other hand being an Irish male who is nineteen or older is a significant necessary condition of having I. If we establish that someone satisfies the latter condition we have thereby acquired important and weighty evidence that someone has property I. (In between, and listed in minimal to close-to-sufficient order, are, say, being a living thing, being human, being Irish, and being an Irish male.) Significant necessary conditions and minimal necessary conditions are at two ends of a spectrum. There are plenty of in-between possibilities – such as a condition that makes a non-trivial contribution to sufficiency but that does not on its own steam take you close to sufficiency.
5. We will assume that for some reason – left to the reader to concoct – there is no possibility that the suspects have collaborated in the crime. Also, you may wonder whether there could be the sort of exact equilibrium under discussion in cases in which the evidence is as different as is indicated. If you are troubled by this, change the case slightly so that all three parties are implicated by a small, and equal, amount of exactly the *same* sort of evidence in each case.
6. I will not be discussing simple ambiguity further since I do not think it has much application in the area of religion. But it is interesting to note the following. There may be, and probably are, cases of simple ambiguity in which the *only* reasonable way to respond is to suspend judgement. If such situations are to be classified as ambiguous, then its being rational to take a number of positions on the relevant issue is not a necessary condition of ambiguity. We could, on the other hand, define things such that this is in fact a necessary condition of ambiguity – in which case, of course, the instances of (what I am calling) simple ambiguity that are under discussion would not be instances of ambiguity at all.
7. In the second sentence of this section I mention the variety of interpretations of what ambiguity consists in. While, as I say there, I will make no attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the possibilities, some of the alternatives are already apparent. Thus we might consider there to be ambiguity whenever the necessary conditions of ambiguity are met. And if we consider the entire set of characteristics that we have found to be either necessary conditions of ambiguity or among the definitive features of either simple or rich ambiguity, there may be a number of subsets of this full set of characteristics that are candidates for interpretations of ambiguity.
8. I realize that there is something of a tension between my unwillingness to purchase the aforementioned wares and my invocation, here and earlier, of the notion of people of integrity. As I indicate above, I take the fact that others who hold certain views are people of integrity to provide us with some reason to take those views seriously. However the tension here is resolved somewhat by noting that we may take the views of others seriously while being unimpressed by the certainty with which they hold them.
9. William P. Alston *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 208.
10. Jacob Joshua Ross 'The hiddenness of God: a puzzle or a real problem?', in Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser (eds) *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 187.
11. I examine many such proposals in chs 2–4 of Robert McKim *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).
12. To follow up on an earlier theme (see n. 7) one could take this absence of a clear case to be what ambiguity consists in, or to be a form of ambiguity that is distinct from those already discussed – namely the simple, rich, and extremely rich varieties. However, since my interest is especially in extremely rich ambiguity I will continue to think of the absence of a clear case as a necessary condition of ambiguity, albeit a significant necessary condition.

13. To show that this is the case across the board would be a truly daunting project. However, by way of example, I have argued that the basic belief apologetic of Plantinga admits of application to other traditions in 'Theism and proper basicity', *The International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 22 (1989), 29–56. I have made the corresponding case for the doxastic practice apologetic of William P. Alston in ch. 11 of my *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*.
14. Ah, so you think that your experience is important, that it needs to be taken into account. Have no fear; we treat it with complete seriousness. But you are not the only person whose phenomenal states are to be taken seriously. Part of the appeal of the position under discussion is that it takes everyone's position seriously.
15. I discuss a sort of belief that would involve diminished confidence in ch. 8 of McKim *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*.
16. For some relevant discussion see Penelhum *Reason and Religious Faith*, 133ff.
17. Sincere (and plentiful) thanks to Matt Davidson, Walter Feinberg, Blair Goodlin, Terence Penelhum, and Michael Scoville. Each provided me with many thought-provoking and insightful comments.