

FICTION AND THE AGNOSTIC

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Abstract. Consider the agnostic who thinks that reason and evidence are neutral on the question of God's existence, and as a result neither believes that God exists nor believes that God does not exist. Can such an agnostic live a genuinely religious life—even one in which God is the central animating idea? They might do so by accepting Pascal's Wager: the expected rewards will always be greater if one bets on God's existence than if one does not. Or they might accept William James's argument that religious beliefs are properly activated by our passional nature. But both of these routes involve abandoning the initial agnosticism, and so are open to charges of irrationality. In this paper I explore a third route to the religious life, suggested by Pascal's discussion, one which uses fiction and make-believe as the central prop. It might seem that this too entails abandoning agnosticism in favour of the view that religion just *is* fiction. I suggest, however, that there is a phenomenon which I term "serious make-believe" in which one can remain agnostic about whether the object of make-believe is real or a useful fiction. Applied to religion, the result is a religious life that is both genuinely engaged (and not merely experimental) and yet, by remaining agnostic, cannot be accused of irrationality.

I. THE AGNOSTIC'S DILEMMA

Agnosticism comes in different shades. Someone counts as "agnostic" if they simply do not know, and profess not to know, whether or not God exists. Self-awareness here is essential. It would be misleading, at least, to call newborn babies "agnostics", though it's undoubtedly true that they don't yet have a considered view on the question of God's existence. On the other hand, critical reflection is not generally thought necessary for the label. Perhaps the agnostic in question has not given the matter prolonged consideration, or perhaps they are not too concerned one way or the other. They may perhaps be inclined to think that such things are unknowable, and that is why it isn't worth giving much thought to the question. But the first person publi-

cally to label himself “agnostic”, the great Victorian scientist and man of letters Thomas Henry Huxley¹, was both self-aware and highly reflective. In his mouth, “agnosticism” had a very particular meaning: it meant subscribing to a principle, namely that “it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty”². Put that way, it seems quite reasonable. But what of belief that falls short of certainty? How compelling does the evidence need to be for that? Is it sufficient if it makes the probability of the belief’s being true higher than the probability of its being false?

The kind of agnostic I am interested in has reflected long and hard on the evidence for and against the existence of God — evidence ranging from the apparent miracle of life to the reality of suffering — and concluded that the evidence is so conflicted and ambiguous that the probabilities are pretty much the same on either side. (And by “probabilities” here I do not mean objective probability, but rather the subjective probability that reflects degrees of belief.) Moreover, they cannot imagine any evidence, however apparently overwhelming (a particularly vivid religious experience, for example), whose import could not be disputed. So they are evenly balanced between belief and disbelief. This is, perhaps, something of an idealised agnostic. The reality may be something rather more unstable, with attitudes oscillating between belief and disbelief, or a predominance of disbelief with doubts as to whether that disbelief is justified. But the idealised agnostic, who has principled reasons to suspend judgement on the question of God’s existence, will be a useful case study. To add a little more to this bare characterisation, the agnostic I want to focus on is a *religiously interested* one. It is not that, having come to the conclusion that the issue of the existence of God is an undecidable one, they are religiously indifferent. Whether or not actively to engage with the religion with which they are most familiar, the one, perhaps, with which they grew up and to which they feel a profound cultural affinity, is a matter of considerable import.

The question I want to ask about the agnostic, so characterised, is this: can they lead a genuinely religious life, where that life is informed by a *theistic* religion, that is, one centred around the concept of God? There are, of course, non-

1 Huxley’s account of how he came to apply the term “agnostic” to himself is given in Thomas H. Huxley, “Agnosticism”. In *Collected Essays Vol. V: Science and Christian* (Macmillan, 1889 [1904]).

2 Thomas H. Huxley, “Agnosticism and Christianity”. In *Collected Essays Vol. V: Science and Christian* (Macmillan, 1889 [1904]).

theistic religions, and our agnostic could presumably engage with those. But it might seem that there would be an obstacle of a rather obvious sort preventing agnostic engagement with a theistic religion — after all, its central, motivating idea is one about which the agnostic is professedly uncertain and uncommitted. They can, to be sure, engage with it at the purely aesthetic level: enjoying the language of scripture as literature, religious art, church music, buildings, etc. But full religious engagement means internalising the language and imagery at a deeper level, in such a way that it informs the way one lives one's life.

To make the question interesting, I am assuming that the evidential base does not dramatically change for the agnostic. They do not, that is, encounter a new observable fact, or range of facts, about the world or themselves which makes belief irresistible. That is not to say, though, that their *attitude* towards the existing evidence base is necessarily unchanging too.

In what follows, I will look at three possible routes by which the agnostic might come to engage fully with a theistic religion: Pascal's Wager, William James's "Will to Believe", and religious fiction. The first two, much-discussed, routes both require the agnostic to give up their agnosticism at some point, before fully religious engagement is possible. The key issue here is whether taking any of these routes to religion involves irrationality. The third route might seem to threaten agnosticism, by offering a different conception of religious language as fictional, for someone who thought of theistic language as *purely* fictional would not, surely, be agnostic. However, I shall argue that agnosticism may be maintained through a certain kind of make-believe that I shall call "serious make-believe".

First, however, let us look at the route from agnosticism to faith suggested by Blaise Pascal.

II. PASCAL'S WAGER

In the *Pensees*, Pascal writes:

Let us then examine this point, and let us say, 'Either God is, or he is not.' But to which view shall we be inclined? Reason cannot decide this question. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you wager? Reason cannot make you choose either, reason cannot prove either wrong.

...Yes; but you must wager. There is no choice, you are already committed. Which will you choose then? Let us see: since a choice must be made, let us see which offers you the least interest. You have two things to lose: the true and the good; and two things to stake: your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and misery. Since you must necessarily choose, your reason is no more affronted by choosing one rather than the other. That is one point cleared up. But your happiness? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss in calling heads that God exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win you win everything; if you lose you lose nothing. Do not hesitate then; wager that he does exist.

...Concentrate then not on convincing yourself by multiplying proofs of God's existence but by diminishing your passions. You want to find faith and do not know the road. You want to be cured of unbelief and you ask for the remedy: learn from those who were once bound like you and who now wager all they have. These are people who know the road you wish to follow, and who have been cured of the affliction of which you wish to be cured: follow the way by which they began. They behaved just as if they did believe, taking holy water, having masses said, and so on. That will make you believe quite naturally, and will make you more docile.—'But that is what I am afraid of.'—'But why? What have you to lose?...'³

I am going to set aside the question of what exactly Pascal's intentions were, and what his target audience. Was he attempting to persuade uncommitted agnostics, or help the faithful resist occasional doubts? We need not decide that here. I want to pursue the question of whether this is in fact a viable route to a religious life for our idealised agnostic. This agnostic will, after all, agree with Pascal that reason can decide nothing on the question of God's existence. And they may also agree that it is no good looking for further proofs: in all likelihood, none are to be found. What Pascal seems to be offering here is two independent steps. The first is the recognition that there are pragmatic reasons for faith. If you believe, and your belief is true, then you gain eternal happiness. If you believe, and your belief is false, then you lose nothing (except whatever purely secular losses are entailed by a life of faith). There is even the chance (though Pascal does not explicitly say this) that a false belief will bring considerable benefits. On the other hand, if you disbelieve, and you are wrong to disbelieve (for God in fact exists) then you lose the eternal happiness that could have been yours. And, finally, if you disbelieve, and you are

3 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. Translated and edited by Alban John Krailsheimer (Penguin, 1670 [1966]), 122–5.

right to disbelieve (for God does not exist) then you gain only those modest advantages entailed by refusing the religious life. So your expected rewards if you believe will outweigh (in fact, far outweigh) the expected rewards if you do not. That is the first step. The second step is the mechanism by which you, having accepted the pragmatic argument, actually attain faith. This second step is essential, for conceding the first step will not be sufficient for faith: one cannot simply decide, for pragmatic reasons, to believe. Belief is, arguably, involuntary: it automatically follows from recognising the reasons in favour. So the agnostic will need to put themselves in a situation where belief is the inevitable consequence, and this involves active engagement (though initially only in a practical sense) with religion, for example by taking part in the liturgy. By acting, as Pascal says, *as if* one believes.

Much critical attention has been devoted to the first step. Representing the choice as a simple dichotomy — believing that God exists versus believing that he doesn't — oversimplifies things, it is objected. What kind of God is in question here? What further beliefs are required in order to obtain eternal life? And how sure are we that it is eternal life that is the reward for believing in God? There are as many choices, and consequences of those choices, as there are religions — more, in fact. Then there are concerns about probability. If we take the probability of God's existence to be equal to that of his non-existence, then we might perhaps reasonably take pragmatic reasons into account as a tie-breaker. But suppose the probabilities are heavily weighted in favour of God's non-existence. Is the mere possibility of (supposedly) infinite reward sufficient to compensate for the improbability of its actually being available?⁴ This latter problem is not one of ignorance of the "real probabilities". As noted above, the agnostic is not taking a view on the objective probability of God's existence. Here, "probability" is simply a measure of how inclined the agnostic is to believe that God exists. But the point remains that the pragmatic reasons may only properly be appealed to as a tie-breaker, and not as something that trumps all considerations of theoretical reason.

Perhaps less attention has been paid to the second step, the mechanism by which belief is to be achieved. The agnostic should behave *as if* they believe in God. This step is, to say the least, underdescribed by Pascal. Is the suggestion

4 See, for example, the discussion in John L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Clarendon Press, 1983), 200–3.

that by simply going through the motions of attending mass, saying the words of the creeds, kneeling to pray, and so on, one will bring about a transformation of one's attitudes? Mere movements of one's body, including mouthing appropriate words, cannot surely do this. There has to be some cognitive, and emotional, engagement with the (perhaps non-existent) divine objects these actions are directed towards. In fact, what Pascal seems to be alluding to here is precisely a game of make-believe. You begin by *pretending* that God exists, you *pretend* to pray to him, to praise him, to worship him, to ask for forgiveness. But immersion in the game of make-believe eventually brings about a transformation of attitude. One's critical senses are dulled. The ritual, the language and the imagery have a mesmeric effect, and the participant forgets their intellectual scruples, and starts truly to believe.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that such a process involves deliberate irrationality, a suppression of the reasons the agnostic had for doubting. Reason here is not being supplemented, but rather silenced. Pascal appears to concede as much when he says that saying masses will "make you docile"⁵. Abandoning agnosticism, while at the same time not reviewing one's reasons for being agnostic in the first place, is a failure of reason. And although one can argue that faith and reason will in any case be at odds, and that faith is only possible given a willingness to set aside the fallible dictates of reason, I propose that we look at another route, not unrelated to Pascal's, which promises less of an affront to rationality.

III. JAMES AND "THE WILL TO BELIEVE"

William James does not entirely approve of Pascal's Wager. In his famous essay, "The Will to Believe", originally an address to the combined philosophical clubs of Yale and Brown Universities, he remarks, no doubt expressing his own view of the matter, "You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself thus, in the language of the gaming-table, it is put to its last trumps."⁶

5 *Cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira*. As we might put it, that will make you believe and become like the beasts. The verb *abêtir* in this passage is often, however, rendered "stupefy". Whether or not Pascal intended any reference to animal consciousness is discussed in Benjamin F. Bart, "Abêtir' in Pascal and Montaigne", *Romance Philology* 9, no. 1 (1955).

6 William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Longmans Green, 1897), 6.

And, a little further on: "The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile."⁷ That second remark chimes with a principle articulated by William Kingdom Clifford, a principle which nevertheless is James's explicit target in the essay. Clifford's dictum is a particularly uncompromising version of the agnostic principle: "it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"⁸. This is not just a principle of rationality, but also an *ethical* principle (Clifford entitles the essay in which he puts the principle forward, "The Ethics of Belief").

Do we, as a matter of fact, abide by this principle? No, says James. There are many things we believe on authority. Of course, this need not offend against reason if we have good reason for accepting that authority, but is this invariably the case? More significantly, we are influenced in our judgements by emotional factors—"passional tendencies" as James calls them. This should not be seen as a failing, for emotions can usefully guide our actions where reason alone cannot. And emotions affect not only the formation of individual beliefs, but also the adoption of belief policies, in the sense of the level of scepticism or credulity we bring to bear on our considerations, and whether and how this varies with the subject matter. Is it reason acting alone which recommends Clifford's principle? James suggests not:

I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life. Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says, "Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!" merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical of many of his desires and fears, but this fear he slavishly obeys. He cannot imagine any one questioning its binding force. For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped; but I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world: so Clifford's exhortation has to my ears a thoroughly fantastic sound. It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories either over enemies or over nature gained. Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf.⁹

7 Ibid., 7.

8 William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief", *Contemporary Review* 29 (1877), 295.

9 James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 18–19.

We can follow two policies in forming our beliefs, and cultivating our belief-forming habits: avoid error and pursue truth. These two together might characterise the ideal of scientific enquiry. But they will sometimes come into conflict, especially if we try to be punctilious in pursuit of them. Avoiding error at all costs will mean that we miss some truths in our anxiety not to be fooled. But if we are particularly anxious not to miss the most significant truths, we must risk the probability of error. Where these two policies come into conflict, reason cannot decide the issue (and so cannot condemn our choice of one over the other). It is our passional nature that chooses for us. That perhaps needs some qualification. We should attend to the costs and potential rewards involved. Where adopting a belief promises to confer only relatively modest advantages on us, we can afford to be relatively sceptical. And where the consequences of error are very serious (as in Clifford's example of a shipyard owner judging the seaworthiness of his ships¹⁰) we should likewise demand powerful evidence before reaching a judgement. On the other hand, where the costs of error are relatively slight, but the rewards of being right are huge, we should suppress such scepticism, and be prepared to be more credulous. Now, the truths of religion, says James, *if* they are truths, are so momentous that credulity, rather than scepticism, is preferable. This provides a much more nuanced and varied approach to belief-forming strategies than Clifford's black-or-white dictum. But reason alone cannot dictate where precisely we should locate ourselves along the scepticism-credulity spectrum for any given enquiry. Where we do locate ourselves must in part be a passional matter.

So credulity in matters of religion is not necessarily irrational. Recognising this, the agnostic may come to see their own belief-forming strategy in religious matters as excessively sceptical, and so relax it. And we might advance James's argument still further. The agnostic's attitude towards religion may not only be sceptical, but actually unstable. Suppose we recast the two belief policies — "Believe truth!", "Shun error!", as James expresses them — in terms of propositions: "One should adopt a policy which ensures that one believes significant truths", and "One should adopt a policy which ensures that one will not believe falsehoods", respectively. Adopting the second of these is likely to backfire, for the scepticism it recommends should make us reluctant to adopt it — how do we know that extreme caution is the best policy? The

10 Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief", 289–90.

policy recommending credulity will, in contrast, be self-reinforcing. However, it is only a relatively extreme form of the “Shun error!” policy, one which recommends a very high degree of scepticism when considering *any* given proposition, which is self-defeating. A more moderate one is not so vulnerable. Similarly, only a “Believe truth” policy which recommended a very high degree of credulity would be self-reinforcing.

If it is unclear whether agnosticism is the target of Pascal’s Wager, it is clear that agnosticism, or rather, the agnostic principle, is James’s target. James’s intention was to provide a justification of faith, in the sense, not of a defence of the tenets of faith, but rather a defence against the charge of irrationality. Agnostics can relax their scruples, and so abandon their agnosticism. Yet the shadow of irrationality has not yet gone away. As John Mackie puts it:

While we must, as James says, reject as irrational a rule of thinking which would prevent us from acknowledging certain kinds of truth even if they were really here, we must equally reject as irrational a rule of thinking which would prevent us from denying such supposed truths even if they were not really here.¹¹

What James appears to be recommending, in matters of religion, is precisely a policy which would prevent us denying that God exists if atheism turns out to be true. The atheist scruples to which the agnostic wishes to do justice are silenced.

Here is a further worry. Suppose we accept that belief policies are in part motivated by emotional factors. Suppose further that we, like James, are more tempted by the “Believe truth!” policy in religious matters. That does not itself licence adoption of theism. For, granted that the policy will make us more credulous, that does not in itself direct our beliefs. Perhaps our credulity will direct itself to atheism rather than agnosticism. We may be attracted by what we see as the selfless and courageous nobility of atheism. Allowing emotions in, although itself not irrational, does not necessarily confer rationality on the epistemic choices we then make.

So, rather than pursuing other paths by which the agnostic can shed their agnosticism, I want to look at a path by which full religious engagement can be reached without leaving agnosticism behind. This will involve a return to the second step of Pascal’s Wager.

11 Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, 209.

IV. THE USES OF FICTION

Pascal urges us (or the doubter, or agnostic) to act *as if* God existed, *as if* the tenets of religion were true. As we remarked above, this looks very much like an invitation to play a game of make-believe. Now, it is well known that engagement with fiction evokes emotion, and the same will undoubtedly be true of a religious fiction, in which some of the most powerful ideas we can encounter (creation, miracle, suffering, love, death, betrayal, sacrifice, and so on) are employed. Emotional reactions are not only evoked by fiction, but they also help to sustain it. We continue to remain in the fictional world in part *because* of the emotions it evokes. But of course, most fiction, however involving and powerful, will not fool us into thinking that it is reality. So the step Pascal recommends is unlikely to lead to faith unless we enter the fiction with an open mind — unless that is, we keep open the possibility that it is *not* fiction. This suggests an intriguing mixture of agnosticism and make-believe. It is that combination I want now to explore. Is it stable, or is it apt to collapse either into fictionalism about religion, or into Pascalian faith? Let me say more about the first of these.

Everyone but a fundamentalist will concede that at least part of the holy text or texts on which a theistic religion is based contains fictional elements, parables or allegories illustrating moral truths, or truths about human nature, or recommendations for how to live. The typical believer, however, will regard the central religious ideas animating the text (for example the idea of a divine creator) as a non-fictional matter. Those believers influenced by the tradition of negative theology may even take some of the characterisations of deity to be fictional — our best attempt to represent the nature of a God which will always be beyond our comprehension. But the existence of God, even if minimally conceived, will still be treated as non-fictional. The *fictionalist*¹², in contrast, takes the existence of God to be fictional: God, that is, is a

12 I have chosen a rather uncompromising characterisation for the purposes of this discussion; there are others in the literature. And I should, for clarity, narrow my use of the term still further. It is customary to distinguish between *hermeneutic* and *revolutionary/revisionary* fictionalism (Michael Scott, *Religious Language* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)): that is, between the view that the discourse in question is actually understood (even by its originators) as fiction and the view that, however it is or has been understood, it should be approached as fiction. From now on in this discussion, “fictionalism” (without qualification) should be read as “revisionary fictionalism”. A classic source of hermeneutic fictionalism in religious matters (where it is, perhaps not entirely comfortably, combined with a non-cognitivist account of statements

fictional character, a character in a story which we have made up. The fictionalist will similarly take theological doctrines, as expressed in the creeds, to be fictional, that is, true in the story. Those drawn to such a position are typically not agnostic. Indeed, they may have been persuaded by the arguments for atheism, but are nevertheless seeking a meaningful way of engaging with the religion they have grown up with which goes beyond aesthetic appreciation of religious language, music and imagery. Treating it as on a par with the best fiction, and letting it make the emotional demands that the best fiction provokes, is an attractive means of achieving just that fuller engagement. Moreover, fiction offers a means to moral growth, first by making moral ideals or challenges especially salient by casting them in the form of particular events in the lives of particular characters, and secondly by motivating us to follow those ideals, or resolve those challenges, by means of the emotional responses that the particular events and characters evoke.

On the face of it, this fictionalist approach, which views religious language as (largely, if not wholly) false if taken at face value (that is, as a description of the actual world), is utterly different from an agnostic approach to religion. The agnostic, it seems, will be susceptible to the pragmatic reasons offered by Pascal and James: this religion *may be true*, and if it is, it is the most momentous truth, one you cannot afford to miss out on. It is therefore prudent to believe, or at least, to adopt a belief policy which makes the acquisition of religious belief more likely. If it turns out to be true, then the leap of faith will have been vindicated. If false, then of course there is no vindication, but at worst only finite loss. But the fictionalist has already bypassed this step, in opting to treat religion as fictional.

Let's try to develop the contrast a little further. Fictionalism is a position one might take in relation to various subject matters: God, numbers, moral values, sub-atomic particles, etc. The common denominator is the thesis that, although propositions concerning the objects in question have a truth-value, full acceptance of those propositions is not, or need not be, *truth-normed*: that is, it is not to be identified with belief, and so answerable to the way the

concerning religious doctrine) is Richard Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of Religious Belief", in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Basil Mitchell (Oxford Univ. Press, 1955). For more recent discussion of hermeneutic fictionalism, see Michael Scott, *Religious Language*, and for revisionary fictionalism, Robin Le Poidevin, *Religious Fictionalism* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019).

world is.¹³ The qualifier “full” here is crucial. In any area of discourse, we may tentatively accept a proposition as an experiment, to see where it leads. That does not make us fictionalists with respect to that discourse. Such tentative acceptance could simply be a position on a continuum of degrees of belief. Contrast this with pretence. In games of make-believe, we pretend to assert, or assent to, propositions about various characters and situations. This is full acceptance, in that our engagement with the game is not falling short in some way; it is not tentative or experimental. But it is clearly not answerable to the way the world is. The religious fictionalist pretends to assert religious propositions, and this kind of religious engagement is not truth-normed. In contrast, the standard agnostic *does* take full acceptance of the discourse to be truth-normed, and this is precisely why they avoid such acceptance. Of course, the standard agnostic will recognise that there are ways of evaluating the discourse other than as “true” or “false”, but these will remain the most important ways of doing so.

There is a sense, then, in which Pascal’s two steps pull in different directions: the first step, the Wager, is a pragmatic argument in favour of believing. To engage with this stage, we have to regard full acceptance of religious (or at least theological) discourse as truth-normed. The second step, the mechanism by which faith is to be reached, looks like a recommendation towards fictionalism, and so towards *ceasing* to regard full acceptance (in the recommended sense) as truth-normed. Now either of these might be a viable means of engaging with religion, but they seem to be incompatible. Agnosticism and make-believe appear not to be good combination. Until we choose between them, then, how is the religious life possible?

In at least some other fields, we can make considerable progress without taking a stance on whether we are engaging with fiction or not. Take mathematics, for example. What objects is mathematics concerned with? Numbers, is the obvious answer. Now consider two very different accounts of numbers. The *mathematical platonist* account treats numbers as real, mind-independent objects, existing outside space and time. It is in virtue of the properties of and relations between these abstract objects that arithmetical statements are true. The standard *mathematical fictionalist* account agrees that the truth-conditions of mathematical statements are as the platonist portrays them,

13 Mark E. Kalderon, ed., *Fictionalism in Metaphysics* (Clarendon Press, 2005), 2.

but also holds, against platonism, that there are in reality no such objects. In consequence, mathematical statements are false. Numbers are, however, a useful fiction, a convenient way of representing facts which in reality are to do with complex relationships between physical objects.¹⁴ Suppose, as is almost certainly the case, that most of us have no settled view as to which of these accounts, if either, is the correct account of mathematics. Will such agnosticism prevent us from actually doing mathematics? Not in the slightest. Mathematical practice can float entirely free of any view on the existence or fictionality of the objects it is apparently concerned with.¹⁵ We see a similar phenomenon in the case of the unobservable entities of science — entities such as “neutrons”, “quarks”, “strings” and so on. The scientific realist treats these as theory- and mind-independent objects, whose properties and behaviour causally explain scientific observations. The instrumentalist regards them as useful fictions, enabling us to codify phenomena and to make predictions. Again, scientific practices can remain untouched by any uncertainty as to which of these two accounts to adopt.¹⁶

So why should the religious case be different? We find it plausible that failure to decide the status of abstract numbers does not interfere with mathematics if we think of the latter primarily in terms of practices, of constructing proofs, or applying mathematical principles to concrete cases for engineering purposes, for example. A similar failure to decide the status of theoretical entities is compatible with science as long as we think exclusively in terms of scientific practice: prediction of phenomena and manipulation of the physical environment. The question of *truth* need not arise. But religion is not wholly reducible (or at least, some of the most prominent religions are not wholly reducible) to a set of practices. It is in part a world view which

14 Hartry Field, *Science without Numbers* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1980) and Hartry Field, *Realism Mathematics, and Modality* (Basil Blackwell, 1989).

15 One reason to think that mathematical practice is independent of any ontological commitment is that mathematical (or least arithmetical) statements are true independently of the world: being analytically true, they need no truth-makers outside themselves. Both platonist and fictionalist would resist that explanation, however.

16 That is not to say that scientific ontology is necessarily experimentally irrelevant. A scientist might be agnostic about the existence of certain entities, or a certain kind of force, and devise experiments precisely designed to test the existence of such things. The point being made above is that experiment can be informed by a theory, concerning which the experimenter is entirely neutral between a realist and an instrumentalist interpretation.

helps to orient us towards the cosmos and to each other. Of course, one might fairly say of mathematics and science that they also provide world-views that can similarly help orient us to the cosmos. But there is arguably a closer relation between practice and world-view in the religious than in the mathematical and scientific cases. There is little in mathematical platonism or realism about sub-atomic particles to engage the imagination and emotions: we are simply contemplating abstract specifications. So proof and prediction can go on without needing to be animated by an exhilarating world view. (This is not to say that proof and prediction are purely mechanical: considerable creativeness may be required. Nor is it to deny that the exploration of mathematical and scientific world views may be intellectually exhilarating.) But religious practice *is* animated by the religious imagination, which requires a religious object. And so in this context, neutrality on the status of religious objects is potentially more disruptive. Won't it make a difference to the religious life whether one takes oneself to be dealing with fiction or not? That neutrality on this question is compatible with a religious life can, I think, be shown by looking at the phenomenon of *serious make-believe*.

V. SERIOUS MAKE-BELIEVE

By "serious" I don't mean to suggest a contrast with the comic. Rather, I am interested in those cases where the line between fiction and reality becomes indeterminate, but *not* as a result of any general confusion as to the difference between reality and fiction. The case I want to focus on is the genre of historical fiction.¹⁷

Robert Graves's novels *I, Claudius*, and its sequel *Claudius the God*, present a fictional autobiography of the Roman emperor Claudius, telling his story from early childhood to old age. The plot is structured by actual, documented events and the prominent personalities of imperial Rome over a sixty-year period. Graves draws heavily on the *Annals* of Tacitus, and on *The Twelve Caesars* of Suetonius (Graves having previously translated the latter). Granted that a certain amount of reconstruction and fictionalisation is pre-

17 In Robin Le Poidevin, "The New Agnosticism", in *Agnosticism: Explorations in Philosophy and Religious Thought*, ed. Gavin Hyman and Francis Fallon (Oxford Univ. Press, 2020) I explore a rather different kind of serious make-believe: the experimental games children play, which seem to hover between make-believe and reality. There, too, I try to draw a connection with religious agnosticism.

sent even in works presented as histories, the probability of *some* correspondence, at least, between the events recounted by Graves, and those that actually took place, is high. Claudius himself did apparently write an autobiography, now lost, and so the intriguing question arises as to whether some of the feelings and personal reflections which Graves puts into the mouth (or pen) of Claudius correspond to those in the lost autobiography. That question is, of course, unanswerable, and the fact that it is unanswerable means that, in reading the Claudius novels, we can never be sure where the line between fiction and reality is drawn.¹⁸ Does that matter? We bring the same level of serious attention to all parts of the text, without needing to distance ourselves, epistemically and emotionally, from those parts which as a matter of fact are fictional. For we could regard the fictional parts (wherever they are) as providing a counterfactual elaboration of the actual events. If such and such an event did not actually happen, or such and such a thought not entertained, it still *might* have done. The possible world described in the novel is close enough to the actual world as to cast light on the latter, and on the personalities of actual individuals. Reading the novel provides the best means at our disposal of entering into the mind of the real Claudius, insofar as it is possible for a modern reader to enter into a first-century mind. Questions of whether we should treat the passage that we are currently reading as invented or based on record, or (and this, of course, is not an equivalent question) whether or not it is precisely true, are ones that need not, and perhaps should not, impinge on our serious engagement with the text. The novel could so fill our imagination that it becomes a filter through which we experience a past world.

There is a very close connection, I suggest, between the genre of historical fiction and *counterfactual history* — that is, imagining what might have happened, but did not, at a particular point in history and following its consequences — as a tool for examining the causal contribution and significance of actual events.¹⁹ Counterfactual history thus casts light on what actually happened, by pinpointing key episodes or actions. Now suppose there is a gap in our histori-

18 Of course, Graves knew where he was relying on record, and where he was inventing, but even he would not have known the precise degree of correspondence between his fictionalised account and the actual events (or the actual autobiography).

19 See, e.g., Martin Bunzl, "Counterfactual History: A User's Guide," *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 3 (2004) for a characterisation of counterfactual history, the difficulties this method encounters, and how they might be addressed.

cal record between one point of time and another—a “dark period”. We could then construct various possible narratives of what happened in the meantime, starting with an initial situation which can plausibly be represented as arising out of the last situation we knew obtained just before the dark period, and whose final outcome coincides with the situation we know obtained just after the dark period. We know that most, if not all, of these narratives are fictional (in the sense that they are the result of invention, rather than false), and also that even the closest available narrative to reality will contain fictional elements. So we will suspend belief in any of them, while still imaginatively entering into each in turn. The one that strikes us as the best explanation will have a continued hold on our imagination. This technique may, indeed, be precisely what the historical novelist will apply in advance of writing the novel. But plausibility is not the only consideration: some narratives will be chosen for their dramatic effect.

At no point, in reading counterfactual history, or a historical novel, will we lose sight of the fact that there is, in general, a distinction to be made between the true and the false, and between what reliably tracks actual events and what is invented. But there will be a significant degree of uncertainty in applying those distinctions to the various parts of the narrative. And the key point is this: we do not have to subscribe to the view that, if the narrative is in fact pure invention, or in large part false, then it is without historical value. It may not be true *of* the period represented, but it may yet be true *to* that period.²⁰ What this permits, I think, is a good deal of uncertainty over whether or not full acceptance of the discourse need be truth-normed.

Now let us return to the religious case. Let’s say that the agnostic is uncertain whether to treat the religious narrative (at its core) in fictionalist terms or note. That does not prevent that agnostic from engaging with the narrative, applying its various morals, imitating some of the characters, and generally letting the narrative so infuse the imagination that it becomes a filter through which they experience the world. As with the historical novel, the agnostic need not think that, if the narrative is wholly fictional, it is therefore of no religious or moral value. But nor need the agnostic be indifferent to the question whether it does in fact get at the truth at various points.

20 C.f. what is true *in* a fiction versus what is true *of* a story. This useful distinction is introduced, explored and applied to the case of apparently impossible fictions in Craig Bourne and Emily Caddick Bourne, *Time and Fiction* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2016), ch. 12.

VI. A NEW AGNOSTICISM?

I have to confess to a sleight of hand in the foregoing discussion. I began this paper by characterising the agnostic as someone who assigns the same subjective probability to each of the contradictory propositions that God exists and that God does not exist. Such an agnostic would be taking those propositions at face value, as concerned with the actual state of the world, and so full acceptance of them as truth-normed. But in defending the thesis that the agnostic can lead a fully religious life I have ended up with a rather different characterisation: the agnostic does not know whether to treat full acceptance of (the core vision of) the religious narrative as truth-normed or not. This is agnosticism at a meta-linguistic level, concerning how properly to evaluate the discourse.

I tentatively suggest that we have defined here a new kind of agnosticism. The traditional agnostic, targeted by James (and perhaps also by Pascal) simply takes theological statements at face value. Such an agnostic may be willing to take Pascal's Wager, if only they can actually achieve belief. But they may stumble at the second step: acting *as if* they believed is unlikely to lead to belief. The kind of agnosticism we have arrived at is one which subsumes the traditional kind. The "new" agnostic not only suspends belief on whether theological discourse is true or false (a question they may also hold is undecidable), but *also* suspends belief on whether we should treat full acceptance of it as truth-normed or not. I suggest we are in a similar position with respect to historical fiction: we hover between treating it as a purely imaginative exercise and treating it as giving us an insight into the past. We can value it both for its power as fiction, and for the hope it offers of putting us in touch with the hidden. And so, for the meta-linguistic agnostic, for religious discourse. It is, I submit, this kind of agnostic who can take Pascal's second step, but in doing so does not take leave of reason.

In summary, then, we can imagine three ways of engaging with religious discourse and practice which offer alternatives to traditional faith:

- (i) As traditional agnostics: treat full acceptance of religious discourse as truth-normed, answerable to the world. If any given proposition of the discourse is true, then it is important and valuable, but we don't know whether or not it is true. (Cf reading something that purports to be a historical record.)

- (ii) As fictionalists: treat religion as pure make-believe, and so our full acceptance of/engagement with it as not truth-normed, but nevertheless important for its capacity to refine our moral sensibilities. (Cf reading a fantasy world novel.)
- (iii) As meta-linguistic agnostics: suspend belief on whether or not to be fictionalists with respect to the discourse, but both recognise its religious value irrespective of whether it is true *and yet* not be indifferent to the possibility that it reveals the truth. (C.f. reading a historical fiction.)

I contend that (iii) is interestingly and importantly different from (i) and (ii). It deserves fuller scrutiny.²¹

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