

METALINGUISTIC AGNOSTICISM, RELIGIOUS FICTIONALISM AND THE REASONABLE BELIEVER

JACOB HESSE
RUHR UNIVERSITY BOCHUM

I. RELIGIOUS FICTIONALISM AND METALINGUISTIC AGNOSTICISM

With the position, he labels as “new” or “metalinguistic agnosticism” Robin Le Poidevin can avoid some problems with which fictionalists about religious language are confronted. Religious fictionalism is a position according to which all religious claims¹ are considered to be false when taken at face value. But because fictionalists about religious language think that certain religious worldviews have pragmatic benefits, they interpret several claims in such worldviews as true in fiction. This enables them to gain pragmatic benefits because they live *as if* a certain religious worldview were true. Nonetheless, they don’t believe that the respective worldview represents the non-fictional reality.²

Benjamin Cordry argues that religious fictionalism has, among others, the problem that its adherents can’t be regarded as full members of a religious community in good standing because they can never be honest with their fellow members. If fictionalists about religious language for example admit that they don’t believe in the existence of God, many members of a community of a theistic religion would be confused and irritated. To avoid such irritations the atheistic fictionalist would have to lie and pretend that she really believes that God exists although

1 In the following I understand a “religious claim” either as the claim that God exists or as a claim that presupposes the existence of God. Since also Le Poidevin focuses on theistic religions I want to keep this focus in my response. Nonetheless, it should be kept in mind that religious fictionalism is not restricted to theistic religions. I also think that metalinguistic agnosticism and the argumentation in this paper could in principle be extended to non-theistic religions.

2 A defense of religious fictionalism can be found in for example Andrew S. Eshleman, “Can an Atheist Believe in God?”, *Religious Studies* 41, no. 2 (2005) and Andrew S. Eshleman, “Religious Fictionalism Defended: Reply to Cordry”, *Religious Studies* 46, no. 1 (2010).

she thinks that God is only a useful fiction.³ Therefore, it seems that fictionalists about religious language can be accused of deceiving their fellow members in a religious community. This problem becomes especially severe when fictionalists about religious language have leading positions within religious communities.

Since metalinguistic agnostics can't decide where exactly the demarcation line between fiction and reality can be drawn, they don't deceive or patronize their fellow members. They leave it open if the respective religious claims might not only be true in fiction but also when taken at face value. This ignorance saves metalinguistic agnostics from the accusation of being deceitful.

Furthermore, the pragmatic benefit that a fictionalist about religious language gains from living a religious life is strongly diminished by the fact that she thinks that all religious claims are false when taken at face value. It does for example seem difficult to live as if one is saved by the grace of a loving and forgiving God while one doesn't really believe that such a God exists. Such a life seems to some degree to be irrational. A fictionalist about religious language might reply that she is behaving similar to an actor in a play and, therefore, can't be accused of being irrational because also actors wouldn't be accused of acting irrational when performing a play. But such a reply isn't convincing. An actor can always draw a line between the fictional reality of the play and the non-fictional reality. If an actress for example plays a queen she would because of that not think that she is also entitled to live her real life outside of the respective play as if she were a queen. It isn't clear how fictionalists about religious language can account for this difference. They seem to live their whole lives as if a fictional world were real although they don't believe that this world represents the non-fictional reality.

Metalinguistic agnostics, in contrast, can't be accused of acting irrational when they live a religious life. They aren't living in contradiction to their beliefs since they don't maintain that all religious claims are false when taken at face value. Therefore, they can also gain a much greater pragmatic benefit from living a religious life. They can, for example, reasonably hope that a loving and forgiving God exists because they don't deny this possibility such as fictionalists about religious language. It's the ignorance where to draw the line between fiction and reality which saves several pragmatic benefits and prevents the metalinguistic agnostic from the accusation of acting irrational.

3 See Benjamin S. Cordry, "A Critique of Religious Fictionalism", *Religious Studies* 46, no. 1 (2010), 83f.

II. THE RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW OF METALINGUISTIC AGNOSTICS

A religious worldview isn't just given. Also among traditional religious believers within a single tradition there is a debate about which religious claims should be considered to be true. Therefore, even if they want to live according to a certain religious tradition, metalinguistic agnostics have to choose which of the several competing theological claims that are discussed within the respective religious tradition they incorporate into their, potentially fictional, religious worldview. One central criterion for the religious worldview that metalinguistic agnostics develop is the pragmatic benefit of it. In this procedure they have four categories according to which they could classify different religious claims when they are understood at face value. These are:

- a) False and pragmatically beneficial
- b) False and not pragmatically beneficial
- c) Maybe true and pragmatically beneficial
- d) Maybe true and not pragmatically beneficial

Claims which fall under a) and c) are candidates to be incorporated into the religious worldview of the metalinguistic agnostic. Claims which fall under b) and d) will most likely be dropped by the metalinguistic agnostic. In the process of developing a religious worldview the pragmatic benefits and the potential truth of the respective claims are weighed against each other. This procedure can be exemplified based on the problem of evil. It might seem pragmatically attractive to think of God as generally protecting the faithful believers from all harms in this world. Believers who act in accordance with central claims of a certain religion could in this worldview be sure that no serious threats such as severe diseases will ever happen to them. They might also think that they can protect the people they love with their prayers from serious troubles. Despite its attraction, such a worldview isn't likely to be true because in the world as it is also religious and pious people from all religions are confronted with all kinds of harms and troubles. One might try to improve this worldview by arguing that those people who are religious and suffer made, perhaps unknowingly, some mistakes because they for example didn't pray with the right attitude. But also this position isn't very satisfactory. In such a worldview the acts of God would seem arbitrary because it isn't transparent

according to which rules people will have to act in order to be protected by God. Another theoretically possible but pragmatically very unattractive option would be to think of God himself as evil. Because all the delineated options are either pragmatically unattractive or theoretically inadequate, most people will look for other options to deal with the problem of evil.

Metalinguistic agnostics will most likely try to develop religious worldviews that are to the highest possible degree pragmatically attractive and which they consider at the same time, at least in its core, as maybe true when taken at face value. I will call arguments which come from the pragmatic attraction of a claim “pragmatic reasons” and arguments on how likely a claim is to be considered as true when taken at face value, “theoretical reasons”. From the considerations made so far it should be clear that in the process of developing a religious worldview pragmatic and theoretical reasons dynamically interact with each other.

A crucial difference between fictionalists about religious language and metalinguistic agnostics lies in the fact that for the latter also theoretical reasons play a significant role in the development of a religious worldview. Metalinguistic agnostics don’t *prima facie* rule out the possibility that some religious claims might be true. It’s, in contrast, not clear which role theoretical reasons play for the fictionalists about religious language since they are convinced that all religious claims are false when taken at face value. Therefore, they will only incorporate those claims into their fictional worldview which seem pragmatically attractive while putting aside the question of how likely it is that these claims are also true when taken at face value. In contrast to metalinguistic agnostics, fictionalists about religious language only choose between the categories a) and b) when they classify religious claims taken at face value. They can make up fictional worlds they like without paying much attention to the question of how adequate these fictional worlds represent reality.

III. THE METALINGUISTIC AGNOSTIC AND THE REASONABLE BELIEVER

In the following I want to focus on the differences and commonalities between metalinguistic agnostics and what I call “reasonable believers”. I will try to show that this comparison is illuminating to better understand metalinguistic agnosticism. A reasonable believer can be described as a person who believes that certain religious claims are true and at the same time tries to stay reasonable.

She for example considers the arguments against the existence of God as well as problems with the concept of God in general. As a result of this reflection reasonable believers might classify many religious claims as useful fictions that aren't true when taken at face value. Reasonable believers do for example not necessarily believe that all stories in the holy scriptures of their respective religions are historically correct. Most reasonable believers for example don't believe that the earth was created in seven days as described in Genesis 1,1–2,4a. Nonetheless, they might see this biblical description as a useful fiction that makes it possible to illuminate certain theological insights. Reasonable believers also critically reflect upon what religious authorities declare and try to develop their own opinions on these matters.

There is a large number of such reasonable believers within most religious communities. Reasonable believers develop their worldview by critically evaluating which religious claims are worth to be incorporated into it. As metalinguistic agnostics also reasonable believers look for religious worldviews that are pragmatically attractive and worth to shape one's life accordingly. Reasonable believers would for example similar to metalinguistic agnostics reject scenarios of an evil God although it might be theoretically possible to develop such a worldview. There are also some religious claims concerning which reasonable believers can't decide if they should be considered to be true or false. Candidates for such claims are for example statements about the relation between God's foreknowledge and human freedom. Reasonable believers might argue that they are agnostic about some of these claims because good reasons are speaking in favor of as well as against them.

Hence, it seems plausible that reasonable believers also classify religious claims taken at face value into the categories a) – d). But in contrast to metalinguistic agnostics, reasonable believers think of some religious claims to be more likely true than false also when they are taken at face value. These claims again divide into claims which are pragmatically attractive and claims which aren't. Therefore, reasonable believers have two more categories than metalinguistic agnostics to classify religious claims taken at face value:

e) True and pragmatically beneficial

f) True and not pragmatically beneficial

Under e) will fall the core claims of the religious worldviews of reasonable believers. Under f) fall religious claims which are pragmatically unattractive

but still seem theoretically conclusive. Generally, reasonable believers will try to develop a religious worldview that is to the highest possible degree pragmatically attractive while at the same time to the highest possible degree theoretically adequate.

Metalinguistic agnostics don't use the categories e) and f) to classify religious claims taken at face value because they don't consider any of these claims as more likely to be true than false. At this point it can be asked, why they can't find religious claims taken at face value that they classify into the categories e) or f). Prima facie this question can be answered with the circumstance that metalinguistic agnostics aren't convinced by the arguments for the existence of God and, therefore, are also not convinced that claims are more likely to be true than false which presuppose the existence of God. But this prima facie answer is too superficial since, as was argued, both metalinguistic agnostics and reasonable believers don't just choose their respective religious worldview as a whole but to some degree have to construct it. Hence, they have a considerable degree of freedom in developing their religious worldview. When a metalinguistic agnostic is unsatisfied with certain religious claims, she could simply modify them or choose others to make his religious worldview more adequate. From this follows that the question above can be reformulated as "Why doesn't a metalinguistic agnostic *develop* a religious worldview that she considers, at least in its core, as more likely to be true than false when understood at face value?" A possible answer to this question is that metalinguistic agnostics are in some sense more conservative than some reasonable believers because they want to stick to more traditional versions of certain religious worldviews. Some reasonable believers revise for example the conception of God because they want to have a religious worldview which they can, at least in its core, consider as *more likely* to be true than false when taken at face value⁴ even if they have to pay a crucial price concerning the pragmatic benefits of such a worldview. It isn't likely that metalinguistic agnostics choose the option of essentially modifying and revising certain traditional religious worldviews since they are attracted by the pragmatic benefits of the traditional versions.

4 Some might argue that some conceptions of God which seem to be revisionary were actually discussed in the history of theological thought and are, therefore, in some sense also "traditional".

Hence, I argue that a key difference between metalinguistic agnostics and reasonable believers lies in the fact that metalinguistic agnostics in some respect weigh pragmatical reasons higher than theoretical reasons when they construct a religious worldview. Whereas reasonable believers try to develop a religious worldview that is to the highest possible degree both pragmatically attractive and theoretically adequate, it seems that metalinguistics agnostics to some degree subordinate theoretical reasons under the pragmatic attraction. It's most important for them that the religious claims they incorporate in their potentially fictional worldview have a significant pragmatic benefit. Therefore, it's likely that metalinguistic agnostics won't put much effort into finding a convincing and plausible way to theoretically deal with for example the problem of evil or other theological issues in order to mediate the pragmatic attraction a certain religious worldview has for them with its theoretical adequacy. The option of considering the respective religious worldview, also in its core, as potentially fictional in some respect blocks the further development of theological models that are not only pragmatically attractive but also theoretically adequate. The reasonable believer, in contrast to the metalinguistic fictionalist, tries to bring together pragmatic attraction with the highest possible degree of theoretical adequacy of a religious worldview which might result in essentially modifying some religious claims that are considered to be traditional.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Metalinguistic agnosticism is an interesting position. It isn't in the same way threatened by some fundamental objections which can be made against religious fictionalism. In contrast to fictionalists about religious language, metalinguistic agnostics give significant weight to theoretical reasons. Their religious worldview isn't justified by pragmatic attraction only. Still, metalinguistic agnostics give theoretical reasons less weight than reasonable believers do. The latter try to develop a religious worldview that is both to the highest possible degree pragmatically attractive and theoretically adequate. Metalinguistic agnostics pay attention to the question if the worldview they develop is theoretically adequate because they don't maintain that all religious claims are false when taken at face value. Nonetheless, it seems that, in the process of deciding which claims they incorporate into their, potentially fictional, religious

worldview, metalinguistic agnostics focus more on the pragmatic attraction of religious claims than on their potential truth when they are understood at face value. It should be further discussed which of these strategies to construct a religious worldview is more adequate. *Prima facie*, it seems to be more appropriate not to downplay theoretical reasons in favor of pragmatic attraction.

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