

REPLY TO DENG, HESSE AND GÄB

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I am very grateful to Natalja, Jacob and Sebastian for their kind attention to my paper, and for their many insights on this topic, which have materially helped me get clearer about some of the issues. All the points of disagreement are constructive and it has been both a pleasure and an education to engage with them. I'm also happy to note some points of agreement, too! Here I attempt to reply to some of the objections.

I. REPLY TO NATALJA DENG

Natalja begins by asking who gets to decide what counts as a “deep” engagement with a religion, and whether or not a purely aesthetic appreciation can ever be as deep as one based on non-aesthetic considerations. Let me say at once that I did not mean to imply that there would be something necessarily superficial about a purely aesthetic appreciation: this can range in intensity and meaningfulness from the kind of experience behind the comment “Nice church” inscribed in the visitor book, to a feeling of wonder and stillness and that here, as Philip Larkin put it, is a “serious house on serious earth”.¹ But I concede that the way in which the distinction between deep /non-deep is drawn will be culturally specific. I no doubt reveal something of my own cultural background when I say that what I have in mind in the context of this discussion is an engagement with the imagery and discourse in such a way as to modify one's outlook and relations with others, and to guide one's moral decisions. What makes those decisions *good* may or may not be culturally specific: on that I prefer to remain neutral.

1 Philip Larkin, “Church Going”. In *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (Faber and Faber, 1988).

Turning now to religious fictionalism: how is this best characterised? Natalja counsels against building in an assumption of atheism. This rules out positions we might want to consider, she argues, and makes a conflict with agnosticism automatic and not particularly revealing. Take descriptive, or hermeneutic, fictionalism: the view that as a matter of fact people have treated religious discourse as fictional. If we take “fictional” to imply “false”, then we rule out, suggests Natalja, a position according to which, as a matter of fact, God exists, but people have nevertheless treated God as fictional. I don’t see this. Even if descriptive fictionalism ascribes to people the view that God does not actually exist, this is presumably perfectly compatible with his actually existing. Now consider prescriptive, or revolutionary, fictionalism, according to which we *should* treat God as fictional. If “fictional” entails “non-existent”, then, says Natalja, we have to label as non-fictionalist a theistic position according to which, although God actually exists, it is better to have non-doxastic, non-truth-normed faith in God. I agree, but then I have to confess that I struggle to understand that position. Cases where we might be tempted to think “*p* but it’s better not to believe that *p*” tend to be cases where the belief that *p* might be harmful, or debilitating – for example the belief that we have no free will. But theists are not going to hold that belief in God is harmful, surely? If God actually does exist, and this is a good thing, then in what sense would a non-truth-normed acceptance of this be preferable to full belief? Non-doxastic trust may be a welcome, perhaps essential, supplement to belief, but as a *substitute*?

These points aside, however, I willingly accept the point that it is sometimes an overly narrow reading of “fictional” to take it to imply “false”. Writers of novels are alive to the fact that their inventions may occasionally match reality, which is why we often see the disclaimer attached to fictions “Any correspondence to actual people or events is purely coincidental”. As for fictionalism (and from now on we will be exclusively concerned with the prescriptive varieties of fictionalism and its rivals), it is undoubtedly true that a number of fictionalisms are error theories: they explicitly state that, although *F*-discourse is based on the assumption that *F*s are real, in fact there are no real *F*s. This is true of, e.g., moral or mathematical fictionalism. Arguably, however, it is not true of Bas van Fraassen’s constructive empiricism, a view which

has been labelled fictionalist.² Perhaps, then, it would be better to frame fictionalism in these terms: whether or not discourse about *Fs* is true, the *truth does not matter* for full engagement with such discourse. So, for constructive empiricists, what matters about scientific theories is not their truth but their *empirical adequacy* (consistency with and ability to predict observed facts). Similarly, what matters about religious discourse, fictionalists assert, is not its truth but its moral/spiritual adequacy (possibly relative, as noted above, to cultural context). We can accept religious discourse on this basis without taking it to be true.

Natalja suggests that, given a wider conception of religious fictionalism that doesn't build in atheism, any conflict with agnosticism disappears. If "agnosticism" means agnosticism as it is standardly understood, then I disagree. For the standard/traditional agnostic typically thinks it *does* matter whether religious discourse is true or not, and is unable to engage with it fully (as they conceive of full engagement) precisely because they are undecided about its truth. Now, such an agnostic may well be attracted to non-doxasticism, which holds that non-truth-normed acceptance of the discourse is not only permissible but desirable. But fictionalism is not just non-doxasticism – or at least, if we conflate the two we lose sight of an important distinction. The key questions are: does truth matter? does *full* acceptance presuppose truth? The fictionalist will answer "No" to these; the non-doxasticist (at least of some varieties) will answer "Yes, but there is religiously valuable acceptance which is less than full, and which does not presuppose truth." So even the religiously-engaged agnostic will feel that they are falling short in some way. The fictionalist will not. There remains, then, a conflict between fictionalism and agnosticism, even if it is not the same as the more obvious conflict between atheism and agnosticism.

Given that there is an interesting and significant difference between fictionalism and (traditional) agnosticism, on this issue of the importance of truth, it follows that someone who is undecided on that very issue, can't simply be identified with the traditional agnostic. The question they are trying to resolve, but find themselves unable to, when approaching religious discourse, is "should I be aiming at a truth-normed attitude towards this or not?" That is not the same as the question "is this true or not?" I suggested that a meta-lin-

2 Bas van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Clarendon Press, 1980).

guistic agnosticism characterises our engagement with historical fiction, and this might help us to define a position concerning religious discourse. Natalja agrees that there may be an interesting analogy between engaging with historical fiction and religious engagement, but thinks that meta-linguistic agnosticism is a “red herring”. Here is her description of consuming historical fiction: “at the metalevel one is a decided “fictionalist” with respect to historical fiction. One treats it as non-truth-normed, like all fiction. But because it is historical fiction, one is...delightfully aware of the constant intriguing possibility that the novel may also be offering insights into actual historical events.”³ I rather like this description, but I think it underplays the cognitive dissonance we feel as consumers of the genre. It is significant, I think, that writers of historical fiction do *not* insert the customary novelist’s disclaimer “Any correspondence to actual persons or events is entirely coincidental.” That would be a very disingenuous statement!⁴ They are not indifferent to the possible truth of their inventions, and nor are we, as consumers of them. Yet we will also be inclined sometimes, perhaps often, to set that interest aside, for the purposes of full enjoyment of the fiction. So there is some dissonance, but one which we seem to be able to manage, perhaps by oscillating between consuming and critical modes, between concerns with what is true *in* the fiction, and what is true *of* it. That same oscillation may characterise the religious meta-linguistic agnostic. Full emotional engagement with religion may be best served by adopting a fictionalist attitude, but if we do leave room for religious truth, we will not be indifferent to it. Nor will we think that, if part of it is true, that is entirely coincidental, as if we were firing off lots of arrows randomly in the dark, and some of them just happened to hit the target. If part of the religious narrative is true, this may well have implications for our ability to track the truth.

3 Natalja Deng, “Agnosticism and Fictionalism: A Reply to Le Poidevin”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 3 (2020), 187.

4 If not coincidental, would any correspondence nevertheless be supererogatory, as Natalja suggests? Arguably not. Writers of historical fiction are presumably very interested in the project of uncovering the past, and this surely features among their aims.

II. REPLY TO JACOB HESSE

Jacob kindly suggests some ways in which the meta-linguistic agnostic might have an advantage over the fictionalist: the former has a better chance of integration into a predominantly realist religious community, is better able to rationalise religious behaviour, and in doing so will rely less heavily on purely pragmatic reasons. I take that to be an assessment that is broadly sympathetic to meta-linguistic agnosticism. However, ironically, the agnostic may not be able to agree with all of it! In particular, they may not be able to accept the suggestion that fictionalists, in letting their behaviour be guided by beliefs they consider false, are open to charges of irrationality. For the agnostic, fictionalism is very much on the table: it is a live option, just not the only option. So the agnostic is likely to accept the fictionalist's insistence that there is no irrationality in their use of religious discourse. True, it does not rationalise their behaviour in the same way as beliefs taken as true rationalise behaviour, but there is no self-deception involved. The agnostic will accept that religious language can motivate behaviour by evoking certain affective responses, or getting us to contemplate certain counterfactual scenarios, as fiction does. It might be wondered, indeed, whether, when it comes to rationalising behaviour, meta-linguistic agnostics will actually be in a *worse* position than fictionalists. For fictionalists will know not to appeal to any reasons which depend on the truth of religious propositions. But the meta-linguistic agnostics will not know whether they can do this or not. So is it best, under those circumstances, to play safe and stick to the same kinds of reasons as the fictionalist, or can they risk appealing to truth-sensitive reasons, while admitting that these are defeasible? Take religious activity such as worship. I am inclined to think that agnostics can offer a disjunctive rationalisation of their engaging with worship: theism (where this is adequately defined) is either true or false; if true, then worship has a real object; if false, then worship can be rationalised as a way of refining religious sensibilities.

Bearing in mind Natalja's point about the advisability of not building atheism into fictionalism, it might also be asked how many of the advantages Jacob lists the agnostic can claim over the non-atheistic fictionalist. For what seems to be the main obstacle for the fictionalist in the cases Jacob mentions is precisely the assumption of atheism (thus distancing them further than agnostics from believers). Still, even if fictionalists drop the assumption

of atheism, there will be a difference between fictionalists and agnostics, as compared with traditional believers. Believers will take their acceptance of religious propositions as truth-normed; fictionalists will disagree, but meta-linguistic agnostics not. That difference may well be reflected in their respective abilities to integrate themselves into the community of believers.

By way of another comparison, Jacob introduces the “reasonable believer”. The reasonable believer does not make extravagant claims for religious texts, but concedes that such texts will undoubtedly contain a (perhaps significant) degree of fictional narrative, conjecture, and metaphor. Moreover, the reasonable believer will be modest about their own capacity for religious knowledge. Doubts will be admitted over the extent to which religious propositions can be established. The reasonable believer’s acceptance of some of them may even, indeed, fall somewhat short of belief. I take it that Jacob intends this epistemically modest, thoughtful individual, who is certainly no straw person, to represent a challenge to meta-linguistic agnosticism.

Given that religious engagement is desirable (something that believer, fictionalist and agnostic can agree on), isn’t the religious believer in the best position to achieve this? For of these, the reasonable believer is the one who sets most store by truth, and therefore will attend most closely to theoretical reasons – though they will not be indifferent to pragmatic reasons either. And by responding to those reasons, the reasonable believer will maximise the chances that religious beliefs are true. As Jacob puts it, “reasonable believers will try to develop a religious worldview that is to the highest degree pragmatically attractive while at the same time to the highest degree theoretically adequate”⁵. In contrast, it is “not clear” what role, if any, theoretical reasons can play for the fictionalist, whereas the agnostic, who does not regard theism as more likely to be true than false, while not being at all indifferent to theoretical reasons, will nevertheless subordinate them to pragmatic reasons.

As far as the fictionalist is concerned, it is certainly the case that looking for reasons for taking theism to be true is a project that will have been abandoned – here, truth is either not to be found or is beside the point. But theism is still supposed to be a fiction about the actual world, and to that extent, facts about the actual world which the natural theologian takes to be significant

5 Jacob Hesse, “Metalinguistic Agnosticism, Religious Fictionalism and the Reasonable Believer”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 12, no. 3 (2020), 192.

(life, moral consciousness, beauty) will be given a (fictional) religious gloss by the fictionalist. “Theoretical reasons” reappear as fictional props.

The contrast Jacob draws between agnostic and reasonable believer where theoretical reasons are concerned, however, does not entirely take into account the route by which the meta-linguistic agnostic has reached their position. It need not have been by ignoring, or downplaying, or subjugating, theoretical reasons. The route to a reflective agnosticism is likely to involve giving full weight to theoretical reasons, and finding that they are inconclusive. It is at that stage that pragmatic reasons may start to have more influence, and motivate to a greater extent than the ambiguous evidence the agnostic’s religious life. To the reasonable believer’s question, “Shouldn’t you be attending more closely to the theoretical reasons in favour of belief?”, the agnostic may reply “Been there, done that.” Perhaps that suggests a rather closed-minded attitude, however, as if no further consideration could tip the scales. To the extent that theoretical reasons have not yet tipped the scales either way, the agnostic will be motivated, as Jacob rightly says, to maximise the pragmatic benefits of religion. But the fine balance of opposing beliefs is a precarious one, and the agnostic must be alert to changes in theoretical fortune.

III. REPLY TO SEBASTIAN GÄB

Are there any real-life religious fictionalists, asks Sebastian, or is this just a fictional (!) group providing work for philosophers of religion? It’s a good question, because if there aren’t any, out there in the wild, the suspicion will remain that, however good an academic case can be made for its coherence, religious fictionalism is not, ultimately, a spiritually satisfying position. What we are looking for is someone who not only defends it in print (and there are certainly examples of such), but who intimates that this is actually something that informs their life. I agree that Don Cupitt is a somewhat ambiguous case, as there is an expressivist line throughout his writings. But in any case, Cupitt himself prefers to resist labels, and, as he himself has said, can’t help being “mobile, errant”⁶. My example of a practicing fictionalist would be someone who, sadly, is no longer with us after his premature death at the

6 Don Cupitt, *Is Nothing Sacred? The Non-Realist Philosophy of Religion: Selected Essays* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2002), 59.

age of 55 in 2007, but who I believe represents a living tradition. Peter Lipton was a prominent philosopher of science, and also a committed member of the Jewish community. He saw the potential for conflict between scientific and religious world views, and sought to reconcile them by a mixture of scientific realism and religious fictionalism. His Jewish identity was important, religiously and morally as well as culturally. His much-quoted essay “Science and religion: the immersion solution”⁷ was as much a personal credo as an academic defence.

One can also fairly ask “are there any religious agnostics?” Here, I suspect, one would uncover rather more, as agnosticism, as I suggested at the start of my paper, comes in different shades. There are degrees of doubt and certainty. Jacob’s reasonable believer would, as he points out, be agnostic on a number of religious issues. But the question Sebastian poses about agnostics is why they would be interested in living a religious life. If it is to give expression to one’s sense of moral value, of awe at the beauty and complexity of the universe and of life within it, and a conviction that life must have a purpose, well, humanist spirituality can offer all these things. Why bring God in? What is theistic language and imagery doing which could not be done by alternatives? Believers can reply: “Providing a true, ultimate, unified and genuinely explanatory description of where we came from and of what we should do and why.” But that answer is not available to agnostics and fictionalists. So perhaps they should seek that true, ultimate, unified and genuinely explanatory description in a humanistic world-view. The trouble is that if that world-view includes ideas of objective moral value and ultimate purpose, then agnostic and fictionalist positions will emerge here too. One can engage in nature worship, but nature often appears to be completely morally indifferent, and life cheap and expendable. The purely natural evidence available for objective moral value or purpose looks ambiguous. So agnosticism beckons us in this domain, as well as the theistic one. And if we think that objective moral value and purposiveness are useful fictions, then we can be humanistic fictionalists. If we have a strict regard for the truth, then we can translate all talk of religious things of which we know not into naturalistic things of which we do. The results may be important, but they may also be prosaic.

7 Peter Lipton, “Science and Religion: The Immersion Solution”, in *Philosophers and God: At the Frontiers of Faith and Reason*, ed. John Cornwell and Michael McGhee (Continuum, 2009).

The form of the language matters. I happen to prefer the Authorised Version of the Bible to the Good News version, and this has nothing to do with any differences in informational content. That's one reason why the agnostic might want to live a religious life: to stay in close contact, and not just as a tourist, with a certain kind of language and art. (Not a reason, I admit, which is likely to cut much ice with believers. I was told by an eye-, and ear-, witness that a rather fierce pastor working in the U.S. in the 1920s and 1930s once harangued his congregation with a sermon beginning "If you're in church because you think it's *pretty*...") Another reason, and one which will perhaps resonate rather more with believers, is that religion is part of cultural identity, the deep sense of community belonging that accompanies joint observance of the seasons of the church year, common worship, and shared language. And a third reason is to do with the emotional and moral power of the particular as against the general. Compare, for example, the effect of abstract moral principles (treat people as ends, and not mere means), however important, with that of contemplating the characters of the Christian narrative, their deeds, dilemmas, sufferings, and dealings with the embodiment of perfect love.

Let me turn now to Sebastian's defence of Pascal. Pascal is not, Sebastian notes, inviting us to pretend that God exists, but rather to act as if one believed in God. So this isn't, after all, an invitation to engage in a fiction, or at least not a theistic fiction, but to practice a certain kind of behaviour. I entirely accept this distinction, and will not question Sebastian's understanding of Pascal: this is indeed, a plausible reading which takes Pascal as his word. But I want to ask whether simply acting as if one believed in God is at all likely to lead to belief, and, if it does, whether the process avoids the charge of irrationality.

Clearly, one way in which one can act as if one were a believer is simply to match the behaviour of a believer, without this being accompanied by any cognitive processing beyond that required to move one's body in certain ways. Some attention to the content of the thoughts which typically accompany the behaviour seems to be required. Sebastian gives the example of playing the part of a priest of Athena who believes in the Olympian gods. As he represents it, you don't, as the actor, believe in the Olympian gods, nor are you pretending to believe in them; rather you are pretending to be someone who does believe. But is this any more than just going through the motions? Certainly, playing the part in this way will not have any lasting effect on your beliefs. After the play, you shed the role as you shed the costume. If this is all

Pascal has in mind when he recommends acting as if one believed, then it is hard, if not impossible, to see how this could lead to a change in one's attitudes, to the extent that one is led to genuine faith. A cognitive effect, surely, requires a cognitive cause.⁸

If we imagine an ancient performance of say, *Oedipus Rex*, in the fifth century B.C., where the actors are declaiming their lines behind masks before a vast outdoor audience, then this model of what it is to act a part might be adequate. But now suppose we are dealing with a modern performance of, say, *Hamlet*, in the intimate setting of a small theatre. How would you prepare for the leading role? You could do it by maintaining a third-person perspective: if someone believed that their uncle had killed their father and then usurped his throne, how would they behave? Or you could, rather in the manner of a "method actor", adopt a first-person perspective: suppose *I* believed that... *etc.* The second of these is an attempt to get inside Hamlet's head, and let the behaviour follow naturally. This goes beyond simply acting as if one believed, and towards pretending to believe. Here you are trying to see things from someone else's viewpoint: this is a cognitive shift. But even this won't make one actually believe what Hamlet believes, unless the pretence starts making way for self-deception.

So, whichever of these is the Pascalian approach to imitating believers (and Sebastian may well be right that it is the first), there is no clearly rational route to belief: the first is powerless to induce a shift in our thinking, the second, if it succeeds in bringing about that shift, involves self-deception.

One common theme to all three commentaries is the view that meta-linguistic agnosticism has no significant, or perhaps any, advantage over already-recognised positions: fictionalism/non-doxasticism (Natalja), reasonable belief (Jacob), or traditional agnosticism (Sebastian). It is a red herring, a pointless complication, a senseless littering of logical space by an unwanted and unnecessary signpost pointing nowhere. Well, I will stick by my guns. First,

8 Sebastian suggests an analogy with learning to be polite. Children start by being taught to behave as polite people behave: saying "please" and "thank you", and not interrupting or grabbing. Eventually, they learn to *be* polite, by being naturally disposed to behave in this way. But then being polite is predominantly a matter of behaviour, as religious faith is not. And insofar as politeness is partly a state of mind, it is a state brought about, not simply by imitation, but by reflecting on the rights and feelings of others.

it is a distinctive position, not one which collapses into one of these others. It does not, with fictionalism, assert that full acceptance of religious propositions is non-truth-normed. It does not, with non-doxasticism, reasonable belief and traditional agnosticism, assert the conjunction “full acceptance *is* truth-normed, but non-truth acceptance is permissible”. Rather, it keeps both positions open. Second, it does not (as might be expected of an indeterminate position) fail to motivate or legitimise any sort of attitude towards religious discourse. Rather, it encourages a dynamic, mobile, fluid approach, even a degree of oscillation between contrasting fictionalist and non-fictionalist positions. And in so doing, it does greater justice than do its more determinate rivals to the actual character of religious life, with all its uncertainties and setbacks, as well as its moments of insight and flights of imagination.

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