Who or what is God, according to John Hick?

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Abstract. I summarize John Hick’s pluralistic theory of the world’s great religions, largely in his own voice, so as to avoid the charge of misrepresentation. I then focus on the core posit of his theory, what he calls “the transcategorial Real,” but which I less tendentiously call “God\(_\text{hick}\)”. God\(_\text{hick}\) is, by definition, transcategorial, i.e. necessarily, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property \(F\), it is neither an \(F\) nor a non-\(F\). Hick’s six arguments for this principle fail. Moreover, it could be true only because God\(_\text{hick}\) suffers from massive indeterminacy. As such, God\(_\text{hick}\) is impossible, as shown by the Pairing Problem. But, even if that’s wrong, God\(_\text{hick}\) is impossible because of the Number Problem. And, even if God\(_\text{hick}\) is possible, it is explanatorily and religiously irrelevant. John Hick’s God, therefore, is unworthy of further interest.

Key words. God, God\(_\text{hick}\), the Real, ultimate reality, John Hick, religious pluralism, ineffability, transcategoriality

“Who or what is God?,” asks John Hick.\(^1\) Good question. Hick denies the usual theistic answer that God is an infinite person or personal being.\(^2\) His own answer arises out of his “pluralistic theory” of “the world’s great religions,” which he introduces by way of several alleged facts.

The first alleged fact is “the religious ambiguity of the universe, the fact that it can be understood and experienced both religiously and naturalistically”; the total evidence does not settle the matter.\(^3\) Despite this ambiguity, it is “entirely rational for those who experience religiously to trust their religious experience and to base their living and believing on it,” a conclusion Hick draws from the “critical trust principle,” according to which “it is rational to trust our experience except when we have some [good enough?] reason to doubt it,” and the fact that those who experience religiously lack such reason.\(^4\) However, “religious experience sometimes differs widely between, and indeed within, the religious traditions,” ranging from experience as of “personal gods,” e.g. Yahweh, Vishnu, Shiva, the Trinity, Allah, etc., to experience as of “non-personal absolutes,” e.g. Brahman, the Tao, the Dharmakaya, etc., resulting in incompatible belief-systems.\(^5\) Since the critical trust principle applies universally, and since the people of no world religion have good enough reason to doubt their own religious experience, the critical trust principle “validates a plurality of incompatible religious belief-systems”.\(^6\)

\(^1\) Hick 2009.
\(^2\) Hick 2010a, 22; Hick 2010b, 27. Howard-Snyder unpublished a assesses Hick’s reasons.
\(^3\) Hick 2004a, xvii; Hick 1989, 73-125.
\(^4\) Hick 2004a, xvii; Hick 1989, 210-228.
\(^5\) Hick 2010c, viii; Hick 2004a, xviii, xix; Hick 1989, 228.
\(^6\) Hick 2004a, xix.
Apprised of this situation, those of us who experience the world religiously cannot “reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not,” “as virtually every religious tradition has done.” That’s because, says Hick, the people of each religion lack good enough reason to regard their religious experience as more veridical than that of other religions, aside from “the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own.” In addition, each religion uses “moral and spiritual transformation,” from “self-centeredness” to “reality-centeredness,” as the criterion for veridical religious experience, and all religions seem to be on a par on that score. But then the people of each religion face a difficult pair of questions: “if the different kinds of religious experience justify people in holding incompatible sets of beliefs developed within the different traditions, has not our justification for religious belief thereby undermined itself? Does it not offer an equal justification for acceptance of a number of mutually contradictory propositions?”

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

1. Hick’s pluralistic theory and the “apparently anomalous situation”

According to Hick, “there is an ultimate reality”—which he calls “the Real,” but which I will less tendentiously call “Godhick”—“which is in itself transcategorial (ineffable), beyond the range of our human conceptual systems, but whose universal presence is humanly experienced in the various forms made possible by our conceptual-linguistic systems and spiritual practices.” Hick gives this thought a Kantian twist, “suggesting that we use something analogous to Kant’s distinction between noumenal reality and its phenomenal appearance(s) to human consciousness…. [T]he noumenal [Godhick] is thought and experienced by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of divine personae and metaphysical impersonae, [the “personal gods” and “non-personal absolutes”] which the phenomenology of religion reports.” (Hick uses “mentalities” in its historiographical sense, as in the phrase “histoire des mentalités,” i.e. “mindsets” or

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7 Hick 1989, 235.
10 Hick 1989, 228.
11 Hick 2004a, xix.
12 Hick 1997, 279; Hick 1989, 236; Hick 2004b, 9; Hick 2004a, xix; Hick 2007, 220-221; Hick 2009, 4. Why less tendentious? Because to speak of Hick’s God as “the Real” is to import into its conception connotations of “real,” “reality,” “realistic,” and so on, none of which can be underwritten by its transcategoriality. I use a neutral term, although “X,” which Hick sometimes uses, would be even more neutral, and accurate, as we will see.
13 Hick 2004a, xix.
“worldviews,” complexes of conceptual, cultural, historical, linguistic and other conditions that form a way of understanding and experiencing the world.) To spell this out a bit, Hick says that, “when we are open to [Godhick’s] universal presence,” it sometimes “impinges” on us, “impacts” us, “affects” us; “transmitting information” “that the human mind/brain is capable of transforming into what we call religious experience”.14 Our mind/brain transforms this “information,” however, only through specific religious mentalities that “particularize” or “schematize” the “universal presence” of Godhick into the diverse kinds of religious experience reported by the variety of religions.

Those mentalities can be divided into two groups: first, those that deploy “the concept of God, or of [Godhick] as personal, which presides over the various theistic forms of religious experience,” and second, those that deploy “the concept of the Absolute, or of [Godhick] as non-personal, which presides over its various non-theistic forms”.15 So the Zen disciple, after years of tutelage and meditation, may “finally attain satori and become vividly aware of ultimate reality as immediately present in the flow of ordinary life”; or, the advaitic Hindu, upon a different regimen, “may in due course attain the awareness of oneness with Brahman and become jivanmukti”; or, the Christian, in times of prayer, may sense the presence of the loving Father, Abba, forgiving, guiding, and strengthening her.16 And the same goes for other mentalities.

But how, exactly, does this solve the anomaly Hick identifies? The answer hangs on the ontological status of the personae and impersonae of Godhick, of which Hick proposes “two models,” patterned after “two different understandings of the ontological status of the [heavenly] Buddhas” in the trikaya doctrine of the Buddhas.17

According to the first understanding, Amida, Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, and the other Buddhas, are “mental creations,” “ideations of the Bodhisattvas: to the Bodhisattva his ideal becomes so vivid and alive that it takes shape as a subjective reality”.18 Amida, etc. are thus, “projections of the religious imagination,” but not mere projections: “they are modes in which the limitless Dharmakaya affects our human consciousness”.19 As such, although these modes of human consciousness may seem to the Bodhisattva as though they are “real persons,” they are not; nevertheless, the Dharmakaya “transmits” “authentic information” to the Bodhisattva in whose

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14 Hick 2010, 71; Hick 1989, 243-244.
16 Hick 1989, 294.
consciousness such modes are produced. 20 Using this understanding to model the ontological status of the personae of Godrick, Hick says that “Jahweh, the heavenly Father, Allah, Shiva, Vishnu and so on are not objectively existent personal individuals with their own distinctive powers and characteristics,” but rather ways (“modes”) in which human consciousness is modified by “the universal presence” of Godrick, shaped by the category of deity, resulting in “a powerful and deeply resonant sense of personal presence,” further schematized by distinctive aspects of the mentalities of specific theistic traditions. “In worshipping this divine Thou”—this “mode of human consciousness,” this “mental creation,” this “projection of the religious imagination”—“we are accordingly relating ourselves to [Godrick]—whether or not we are aware of the complex way in which the relationship is being mediated.” 21 On the first model, then, the noumenal Godrick manifests itself through these phenomenal projections, which, for the personae of Godrick, are identical with Jahweh, etc. and, for its impersonae, are identical with Brahman, etc. 22

According to the second understanding of the ontological status of the heavenly Buddhas, they are “objectively existing, supramundane and subtle beings”. 23 Furthermore, “Amida, [etc.] are real persons, of immense but not limitless proportions”. 24 Using this understanding to model the personae of Godrick, Hick says that “Jahweh, [etc.]…are real personal beings, independent centres of consciousness, will, thought and emotion”. 25 However, each of them is finite; for each exists alongside and is limited by the others with their own particular natures and capacities. Although the power of any one of this plurality cannot therefore be infinite it may nevertheless be so great as to be virtually infinite from our human point of view, as the gods exercise their powers in response to prayer and in the providential ordering of nature and history. 26

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

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22 Hick 1989, 278-296, has a parallel discussion of the impersonae of the Real, but no explicit application of the two models. No explicit application in Hick 2004 either. However, at Hick 2010, 69, we find an explicit application.
24 Hick 1989, 274.
Two concerns about the second model. First, it implies polytheism; Hick wants to avoid that. Second, as William Hasker points out, it contradicts Hick’s pluralism, since the personae are supposed to exist in virtue of different mentalities “schematizing” the “universal presence” of Godhick into distinctive religious experiences.

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

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

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

So on the first model, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are human projections, “so vivid and alive,” they seem to be real persons, though they aren’t; “Yahweh”, etc. name these projections. On the revised second model, however, the thous experienced in prayer and revelation are a plurality of intermediate beings, so that “a Christian in prayer is addressing an angel, or indeed different Christians [are] addressing different angels.”

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27 At least the implication holds if we say that “x is a god,” with a little g, means by definition “x is a very powerful non-embodied rational agent” (Swinburne 1970, 53).
30 Hick 2011, 201.
unbeknownst to the Christians. And the same goes for Hindus and their divas, Buddhists and their Buddhas, and so on for other “spiritual beings” each of whom exists independently of any human mentality.31

Now we can see how Hick addresses the “apparently anomalous situation” of religious experience equally justifying contradictory propositions. He proposes that the propositions in question are not contradictory since they are about different objects.32 On the first model, the objects of belief are distinct imaginative projections. So if, by way of his experience, Christopher comes to believe that God is F, and if, by way of his experience, Mohammed comes to believe that God is not F, for Christopher, “God” “refers” to a Christian projection of the Christian community whereas, for Mohammed, “God” “refers” to a Muslim projection. Since the Christian projection is distinct from the Muslim projection, Christopher’s beliefs are compatible with Mohammed’s. On the second model, the objects of beliefs are distinct “spiritual beings,” with distinct “spheres of operation”. So if, by way of her experience, Christina comes to believe that God is F, and if, by way of her experience, Khadijah comes to believe that God is not F, for Christina, “God” “refers” to, say, the archangel Michael, whose provenance is the Christian community, whereas, for Khadijah, “God” “refers” to, say, Ridwan, the guardian of heaven, whose provenance is the Islamic community. Since Michael is distinct from Ridwan, Christina’s beliefs are compatible with Khadijah’s.33

How does Godhick figure in all of this? As follows:

[W]e are led to postulate [Godhick] an sich as the presupposition of the veridical character of this range of forms of religious experience. Without this postulate we should be left with a plurality of personae and impersonae each of which is claimed to be the Ultimate, but no one of which alone can be. We should have either to regard all the reported experiences as illusory or else return to the confessional position in which we affirm the authenticity of our own stream of religious experience whilst dismissing as illusory those occurring within other traditions. But for those to whom neither of these options seems realistic the pluralistic affirmation becomes inevitable, and

32 Hick 1997, 716; Hick 2004a, xxx.
33 Four observations. (i) Plantinga 2000, 49-52, misrepresents the referential situation. (ii) On the first model, for nearly any F, belief that God is F will be false since, for nearly any F, no projection can be F. (iii) The angels of various religions overlap extensively; so the second model will need finessing. (iv) Tricky questions about reference abound. For example, on a descriptivist theory of reference, “God” and its natural language equivalents refer on an occasion of use only if the intended referent satisfies a certain description. If the intended referent must satisfy a description that no projection or angel can satisfy, e.g. is neither imaginary nor a creature, then, on no occasion of use will “God” refer to a projection or an angel. On reference, see Reimar and Michaelson 2014.
with it the postulation of \([\text{God}_{\text{hick}}] \text{ an sich}\), which is variously experienced and thought as the range of divine phenomena described by the history of religion.\(^{34}\)

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

But what about the penultimacy option, according to which there are many penultimate gods and absolutes, each of which is variously experienced in a veridical fashion? To be sure, claims to one’s own god or absolute as the “sole creator or source of all finite existence” will have to go, but penultimacy resolves the “anomalous situation” at least as well as Hick’s pluralism, and it arguably does so while preserving more of what the traditions say about the objects of their experience and thought, without positing a transcategorial \(\text{God}_{\text{hick}}\).\(^{35}\)

Others have adjudicated Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis and its rivals more thoroughly than I will here.\(^{36}\) In what follows, I will focus exclusively on its centerpiece: \(\text{God}_{\text{hick}}\).

### 2. Hick’s principle of transcategoriality: five observations

According to Hick, \(\text{God}_{\text{hick}}\) is “transcategorial”. But what, exactly, does that mean? After distinguishing “the Real as it is in itself and as it is thought and experienced through our religious concepts,” Hick tells us that “it follows” from this distinction that

we cannot apply to the Real \textit{an sich} the characteristics encountered in its \textit{personae} and \textit{impersonae}. Thus it cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive. None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperiencable ground of that realm…. We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity.\(^{37}\)

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

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\(^{34}\) Hick 1989, 249.


\(^{37}\) Hick 1989, 246. Of course, it’s false that “it follows” from this distinction that we cannot apply to the Real \textit{an sich} the characteristics encountered in its \textit{personae} and \textit{impersonae}. For critical remarks on this passage, see Quinn 2000, 229-230, with partial reply at Hick 2004a, xxii.
Observation 1. Hick conflates contraries and contradictories. Surely he does not mean to allow that God\textsubscript{hick} is neither good nor evil but indifferent, neither substance nor process but stuff, etc. Rather, “[t]ranscategoriality excludes the attribution of properties either positively or negatively”; God\textsubscript{hick} “is beyond assertion and denial”.\textsuperscript{38} So God\textsubscript{hick} is neither good nor non-good, neither a substance nor a non-substance, etc.

Observation 2. Transcategoriality cannot exclude the attribution of all properties since, as Hick concedes, “it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of ‘being able to be referred to’. Further, the property of ‘being such that our [categories] do not apply to it’ cannot, without self-contradiction, include itself”.\textsuperscript{39} “It cannot therefore be absolutely transcategorial”.\textsuperscript{40} So: which properties are in? Which out?

Hick divides properties into the “purely formal” and the “substantial”; the former are in, the latter are out. The formal include being able to be referred to and being such that our categories do not apply to it, while the substantial include being good, being powerful, and having knowledge.\textsuperscript{41} More generally, formal properties “do not tell us anything significant,” “do not tell us anything about the divine nature,” “do not tell us anything about what the Godhead in itself is like,” and “[do] not give us any information about its nature”; they are “logically generated,” “linguistically generated,” “devoid of descriptive content,” and “trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them concerning the intrinsic nature of the Godhead”. By contrast, substantial properties “tell us something significant,” “something positive about the divine nature,” “something about what the Godhead in itself is like,” something about its “intrinsic nature”.\textsuperscript{42} These contrasts run orthogonal to each other, however; and they invite tempestuous disagreement.\textsuperscript{43} Nevertheless, it’s what we have to work with.

Observation 3. It appears, then, that according to Hick’s “principle of transcategoriality,”

- Necessarily, for any substantial property F, God\textsubscript{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

Critics object. First, for any substantial property F, nothing can fail to be an F or a non-F; so God\textsubscript{hick} is personal or non-personal, etc. Second, God\textsubscript{hick} is not green, so non-green, not a tricycle, so a non-tricycle.\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{39} Hick 1989, 239.
\textsuperscript{40} Hick 2000, 41.
\textsuperscript{41} Hick 1989, 239.
\textsuperscript{43} As Hick discovered from the protest to his claim that “[t]he most famous instance in western religious discourse” of a formal property “is Anselm’s definition of God as that than which no greater can be conceived” (Hick 1989, 246). Eddy 1994, 472; Ward 1990, 10; Quinn 2000, 233. Hick recanted: Hick 1995, 60, n12; Hick 2010, 91.
\textsuperscript{44} Quinn 2000, 243, n7; Rowe 1999, 146; Plantinga 2000, 45. Mavrodes 2010b, 75, misrepresents Hick on negation.
Here’s Hick’s reply to the second objection. (I will return to the first one in section 5.) …I do indeed hold that the Real cannot properly be said to be either a tricycle or a non-tricycle, and either green or non-green, on the ground that the concepts of tricycality and greenness do not apply to it either positively or negatively. But I now want to add a distinction between properties such as being green or being a tricycle that are religiously irrelevant, in the sense that in religious discourse no one would think for a moment of attributing them to the ultimate divine reality, and those that are religiously relevant, such as being personal, good, loving, wise, etc. Although still in my view a mistake, it would do no harm religiously to say that \( \text{God} \) is non-green, non-blue, a non-teapot, a non-tricycle, a non-heap of manure, a non-Mount Everest, etc., etc., because from a religious point of view these are trivial truths from which nothing significant follows.\footnote{Hick 2004a, xxi-xxii.}

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

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

Observation 4. Critics complain that Hick repeatedly puts “his fingers in the jam pot” of substantial properties.\footnote{Alston 1995, 56. Cf. Mavrodès 2010b; Yandell 1999, 71; Netland 2012, 39.} \( \text{God} \) is “the ground” of religious experience, even “the ground of our being”; indeed, it is “the source
and ground of everything”! Moreover, it is “the necessary condition of our existence and our highest good”.\textsuperscript{48} Furthermore, although it is a “transcendent reality,” it has a “universal presence,” which “impacts” and “affects” us.\textsuperscript{49} In addition, it is “infinite, self-existent,” “self-subsistent,” and possesses “ultimacy”.\textsuperscript{50} Moreover, Hick speaks of its “nature,” and he refers to it in the singular: “the Real,” “it”.\textsuperscript{51} None of these properties are logically or linguistically generated, and each is significant, informative, descriptive, non-trivial, and consequential.

Hick replies that in some of these cases—i.e. those implying causal or explanatory relations with the world, e.g. sourcehood and grounding—he’s speaking only metaphorically.\textsuperscript{52} This is unfortunate, however. A merely metaphorical “source and ground of everything” is a source or ground of nothing. But Hick needn’t go this route; after all, his transcategoriality principle, by way of his formal/substantial distinction, allows God\textsuperscript{hick} to bear significant relations; it only precludes significant in-itself properties.\textsuperscript{53} Transcendence and presence are relations as well. Hick’s response in other cases—e.g., having a nature—is retreat: God\textsuperscript{hick} neither has nor lacks a nature since “the concept of a nature…belongs to the network of human concepts which [it] totally transcends”.\textsuperscript{54} Self-subsistence, self-existence, infinity, and ultimacy require retreat too. I will address number later.

\textit{Observation 5.} Hick with his fingers jam free has to make you wonder, though. For, if God\textsuperscript{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F, for any substantial property F, then “the ultimate reality, which we are calling God, is an empty blank”; there is no difference between an empty blank and nothing at all.\textsuperscript{55} Call this the \textit{Empty Blank Problem}.

In reply, Hick stresses that transcategoriality only entails that God\textsuperscript{hick} “is beyond the range of our human conceptual resources,” that it has “no \textit{humanly} conceivable qualities”.\textsuperscript{56} The implicit speciesism cannot be taken seriously, however; and he rejects it when he applies Gregory of Nyssa’s words to God\textsuperscript{hick}: it is “incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence”.\textsuperscript{57} Nor can the restriction to \textit{actual} creatures be
taken seriously either. For, as we will see, Hick’s reasons for thinking that God\textsubscript{hick} is beyond the conceptual systems of humans and Alpha-Centaurians apply with equal force to those of, say, Perelandrians and Hobbits. So charity requires us to understand transcategoricality like this:

\textit{Principle of Transcategoriality (PoT).} Necessarily, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God\textsubscript{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F.

PoT provides a handy reply to the Empty Blank Problem. For it leaves it wide open whether something might have no \textit{creaturely} conceivable substantial properties, positively or negatively, but yet have some substantial properties by virtue of having some \textit{non-creaturely} conceivable substantial properties. Indeed, Hick insists that, although God\textsubscript{hick} has no creaturely conceivable substantial properties, positively or negatively, it “is not nothing!”\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, he insists that it is “so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the variously partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes”.\textsuperscript{59} That couldn’t be unless it had some non-creaturely conceivable substantial properties.

Non-creaturely conceivable substantial properties do a lot of work for Hick. As we just saw, they solve the Empty Blank Problem. They also ground significant relations God\textsubscript{hick} bears to the world. Due to them, God\textsubscript{hick} is “the source and ground of everything”. Due to them, it is “that which there must be if religious experience, in its diversity of forms, is not purely imaginative projection but also a response to a transcendent reality”. Due to them, it “is such that in so far as the religious traditions are in soteriological alignment with it they are contexts of salvation/liberation”. Due to them, it “is that reality in virtue of which, through our response to one or other of its manifestations as the God figures or the non-personal Absolutes, we can arrive at the blessed unselﬁcentred state which is our highest good”. Due to them, it “is such that it is authentically responded to from within the different world religions”.\textsuperscript{60} And so on.

3. The Property Bivalence Problem

According to PoT, God\textsubscript{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F. How could that be? After all, according to the venerable property bivalence principle, which we find in Aristotle

\textsuperscript{58} Hick 1995, 60.
among many others before and after him, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F.

(Here we return to the first objection of Observation 3.)

Hick is aware of the *Property Bivalence Problem*, as I’ll call it. He notes that his PoT “has been challenged on the logical ground that anything, including the Real, must have one or other of any two mutually contradictory qualities, x and non-x, and therefore cannot be outside the domain of our human concepts”. He replies:

My response has been to appeal to the familiar idea of concepts which do not apply to something either positively or negatively. It does not make sense, for example, to ask whether a molecule is clever or stupid, or whether a stone is virtuous or wicked, because they are not the kinds of thing that can be either. And I have suggested that it does not make sense to ask of the transcategorial Real whether it is personal or non-personal, good or evil, just or unjust, because these concepts do not apply to it—either positively or negatively.61

What should we make of these words?

We can’t take them seriously, as they stand. Once again, Hick conflates contraries and contradictories. *Being clever* and *being stupid* are contraries; something of average intelligence or of no intelligence at all might be neither clever nor stupid. *Being virtuous* and *being wicked* are contraries too; something of average goodness or of no goodness at all might be neither virtuous nor wicked. Neither pair is a case of “two mutually contradictory qualities, x and non-x”.62

If we eliminate Hick’s error, we can discern two lines of thought. The first is an analogy. It makes no sense to ask whether a molecule is clever or non-clever, or whether a stone is virtuous or non-virtuous, because they are not the kinds of things to which the concepts of cleverness and non-cleverness apply, they are not the kinds of things to which the concepts of virtuousness and non-virtuousness apply. Analogously, it makes no sense to ask whether God_hick is personal or non-personal, etc. because it is not the kind of thing to which the concepts of being personal and being non-personal, etc. apply. Of course, if it makes no sense to ask whether something is an F or a non-F, then it is neither an F nor a non-F. PoT follows.

The problem with the analogy, however, is that molecules and stones are the kinds of things to which the concepts of non-cleverness and non-virtuousness apply. Divide reality into what is clever and what is not, and you’d

62 Others also ignore the relevance of the contrary/contradictory distinction. See, e.g, Harrison 2015, 264.
be wise to look for molecules in the second class. Divide reality into what is virtuous and what is not, and you’d be foolish to look for stones anywhere but in the second class.

We could, however, express Hick’s line of thought in a second way, as a formal argument against property-bivalence, as follows:

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

This line of thought is fine as far as it goes. But until we identify something which is such that “it does not make sense” “to ask whether” it is an F or a non-F, we won’t be able to instantiate the antecedent of (3) and infer its consequent, i.e. the denial of property-bivalence. Hick offers molecules and stones. My reply is the same as William Rowe’s. Even though to ask whether a molecule is clever or non-clever, or whether a stone is virtuous or non-virtuous, may be to presuppose that they are entities that can be clever or non-clever or virtuous or non-virtuous, and would thus be inappropriate or senseless questions if asked by someone who knew that they can be neither clever nor virtuous, it hardly follows that the proposition that molecules are non-clever or the proposition that stones are non-virtuous is false or in some way meaningless. On the contrary, each of these propositions is necessarily true.63

Something like the line of thought in the passage we just examined sometimes appears in Hick’s writings under the label “category mistake”:

[O]ur entire range of attribute-concepts do not apply to God at all, either positively or negatively. To apply them to God in God’s ultimacy is, in modern philosophical terms, a category mistake. To say, for example, that molecules are not stupid, although true, is misleading because it assumes that molecules are the sort of thing of which it makes sense to say that they are either stupid or not stupid. And to say that God is not ‘one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness’, although true would

likewise, by itself, be deeply misleading because it assumes that God is the kind of reality to which such qualities could be rightly or wrongly attributed.\(^{64}\)

Hick’s comment here on “molecules are not stupid,” when applied to “God is not good,” seems to imply that, although it is “true” that God\(_{\text{hick}}\) is not good, etc., it is “misleading” to say “God\(_{\text{hick}}\) is not good, etc.” because such qualities as non-goodness, etc. cannot be “rightly or wrongly attributed” to it. This is puzzling. How can it be that it is \textit{true} that something is not good while—assuming, as Hick does, that there is such a thing as non-goodness—non-goodness is \textit{not} rightly attributed to it? Charity invites us to read “true” differently from “rightly”. Unfortunately, the context gives us no basis to accept the invitation.

Leave that aside. The argument seems to be this.\(^{65}\) To say that molecules are non-stupid is to assume that they are the sorts of things that can have or lack stupidity. But they are not. To suppose otherwise is to make a “category mistake”. It is to assign to them a property—\textit{being stupid} or \textit{being non-stupid}—neither of which they can have. It is to display a failure to understand the category to which they belong. The same goes for God\(_{\text{hick}}\). To say that God\(_{\text{hick}}\) is personal is a category mistake. It is to assign to it a property—\textit{being personal} or \textit{being non-personal}, etc.—neither of which it can have. It is to display a failure to understand the category to which it belongs. And the same goes for saying God\(_{\text{hick}}\) is non-personal.

What should we make of this argument? In my opinion, we should say what I’ve already said: molecules are not stupid and so, given Hick’s assumption that there are negative properties, they are non-stupid. Divide reality into what is stupid and what is not, and you’d be unwise to look for molecules anywhere but in the second class.

Elsewhere, Hick replies to the Property Bivalence Problem, as put by Rowe, with these words:

…Rowe still insists that it is logically necessary that if the attribute of being personal does not apply to [God\(_{\text{hick}}\), then it] has the attribute of being non-personal. For ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ are logically interdependent, in that if X is not personal, it is necessarily non-personal. But the inference from ‘X is not personal’ to therefore ‘X is a non-personal, or impersonal, reality’ only holds within the domain of things to which the concepts ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ apply. The transcategorial [God\(_{\text{hick}}\)] is not in that domain…. To deny—as in effect Rowe does—that there


\(^{65}\) Others, e.g., the “alterity theists” referenced in Stenmark 2015, repeat it.
can be a reality beyond the scope of human conceptuality seems to me to be a dogma that we are under no obligation to accept.66

If I’m not mistaken, we have latent here the following general argument against property bivalence:

1. There can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality.
2. If there can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human conceptuality, then there can be an x such that, for some substantial property F, x is neither an F nor a non-F.
3. If there can be an x such that, for some substantial property F, x is neither an F nor a non-F, then it’s false that, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is either an F or a non-F.

The denial of property bivalence follows. Is this a good argument?

Consider premise (1). Two observations are in order. First, Hick thinks that everything has formal properties, including God; thus, charity requires that we restrict premise (1) to substantial properties. Second, premise (1), so restricted, is ambiguous between two claims:

1a. there can be a reality some of whose substantial properties are beyond the scope of human conceptuality

and

1b. there can be a reality all of whose substantial properties are beyond the scope of human conceptuality.

Suppose premise (1) means (1a). Then premise (2) must be read as

2a. If there can be a reality some of whose substantial properties are beyond the scope of human conceptuality, then there can be an x such that, for some substantial property F, x is neither an F nor a non-F.

Premise (2a) seems dubious. For suppose there is a reality some of whose substantial properties are beyond the scope of human conceptuality. What, exactly—in that supposition alone—settles the question of whether or not, for any property beyond the scope of human conceptuality, that reality, or any other reality, for that matter, has it or its logical complement? Nothing. The matter is left wide open.

66 Hick 2010, 84-85; Hick 2000, 42-43. Cf. Rowe 1999, 149-150. Let’s ignore the name-calling (“dogma”), the modal confusion (Rowe asserts the necessity of the conditional, not the necessity of the consequent), and the misrepresentation (Rowe asserts that even if ‘personal’ and ‘non-personal’ are not logically interdependent, they are nevertheless necessarily interdependent).
Now suppose premise (1) means (1b). And suppose that, in light of our earlier reflections, we expand “human” to “creaturely”. So understood, premise (1) is logically equivalent to the proposition that there can be an x such that, for some non-creaturely conceivable substantial properties, $G_1, \ldots, G_n$, x is a $G_1, \ldots, G_n$, and, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property $F$, x is neither an $F$ nor a non-$F$. I submit that no good argument for the denial of property bivalence has that question-begging italicized proposition as a conjunct of one of its premises.

Here’s another line of thought:

…[God$_{hick}$] *an sich* is the ultimate mystery. For the relationship between [God$_{hick}$] and its personae and impersonae is, epistemologically, the relationship between a noumenal reality and the range of its appearances to a plurality of perceivers. It is within the phenomenal or experienceable realm that language has developed and it is to this that it literally applies. Indeed, the system of concepts embodied in human language has contributed reciprocally to the formation of the humanly perceived world. It is as much constructed as given. But our language can have no purchase on a postulated noumenal reality which is not even partly formed by human concepts. This lies outside the scope of our cognitive capacities.67

Perhaps we can put the argument here fairly like this:

1. Human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it has developed within that world.
2. If human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it has developed within that world, then it can have no purchase on the noumenal world.
3. If human language can have no purchase on the noumenal world, then it cannot have a purchase on God$_{hick}$.
4. If human language cannot have a purchase on God$_{hick}$, then, for any humanly conceivable substantial property $F$, God$_{hick}$ is neither an $F$ nor a non-$F$.
5. So, for any humanly conceivable substantial property $F$, God$_{hick}$ is neither an $F$ nor a non-$F$.

Presumably, the argument could be run for any possible creaturely language; Hick’s PoT follows.

The problem, however, is premise (1). Even if human language has developed within the experienceable world, it has a purchase on that world *not* because of where it developed but rather because it embodies a system of

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concepts some of which apply to that world. A concept within that system applies to that world just when the world is as that concept describes. That’s how human language has a purchase on the experienceable world.

Of course, if we modify (1) in light of this fact, premise (2) must be modified too: “If human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it embodies a system of concepts some of which apply to it, then it can have no purchase on the noumenal world, i.e. the world as it is in itself”. So modified, (2) seems false. For just as human language has a purchase on the experienceable world because it embodies a system of concepts some of which apply to that world, so human language has a purchase on the noumenal world because it embodies a system of concepts some of which apply to the noumenal world. Thus, it is left wide open whether human language has a purchase on the noumenal world. If it turns out that some of the concepts embodied in human language apply to the noumenal world, then the noumenal world does not “lie outside the scope of our cognitive capacities”.

Yet elsewhere, Hick tells us that, if God is either a personal or a non-personal reality,”

this would at a stroke falsify either all the theistic or all the non-theistic religions—for the argument can be deployed equally well either way according to preference! But either way it would be unacceptable from a global religious point of view.68

So far as I can see, the deepest idea here is that property bivalence, with its rejection of Hick’s PoT, is “unacceptable from a global religious point of view”. But what is “a global religious point of view,” exactly, and what about it renders property bivalence “unacceptable,” and why is it more acceptable than property bivalence? Hick doesn’t say.

So far as I have been able to discover, Hick has no other response to the Property Bivalence Problem. The responses he gives, however, are dubious at best, by my lights.

### 4. How to Solve the Property Bivalence Problem

So our question is this: how could it be that God is neither a flubdub nor a non-flubdub, neither personal nor non-personal, etc.? How can we understand the idea that there is a third option?

The only way, it seems to me, is illustrated by a homely example. Consider the property of being bald.

Now imagine a man who is a borderline case of baldness, a man who is such that no amount of empirical research or armchair theorizing can decide the question of whether the quantity and distribution of his hair renders him bald. In

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such a case, some philosophers—notably those who characterize vagueness as metaphysical rather than epistemic or linguistic—say that there is nothing determinate about him in virtue of which he is bald. Likewise, there is nothing determinate about him in virtue of which he is non-bald. Thus, he is bald and he is non-bald are neither true nor false; likewise for he is bald or non-bald. He lacks the property of being bald and he lacks the property of being non-bald; moreover, he lacks the property of being bald or non-bald. There is nothing determinate about him in virtue of which he could have these properties.

Here Hick might well take note. For what these philosophers say about our borderline case of a bald man and being bald, he can say about Godhick and every creaturely conceivable substantial property (that admits of a borderline case, a qualification I’ll leave implicit). For any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, there is nothing determinate about Godhick in virtue of which it is an F. Likewise, there is nothing determinate about Godhick in virtue of which it is a non-F. Thus, for example, Godhick is personal and Godhick is non-personal are neither true nor false; likewise for Godhick is personal or non-personal. Godhick lacks the property of being personal and it lacks the property of being non-personal; moreover, it lacks the property of being personal or non-personal. There is nothing determinate about Godhick in virtue of which it could have these properties. And the same goes for other creaturely conceivable substantial properties.

This way of understanding Godhick’s transcategoriality is a significant advance, for three reasons. First, it enables us to understand what might be said in favor of Godhick’s transcategoriality. It is transcategorial because, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, there is nothing determinate about it in virtue of which it has the property of being an F or the property of being a non-F. For every such property, it is a borderline case. It is no more surprising, therefore, that Godhick is neither personal nor non-personal than it is that a borderline case of a bald man is neither bald nor non-bald. In neither case is there enough determinately there, so to speak, in virtue of which our man or Godhick could be, respectively, bald or non-bald, personal or non-personal.

Second, we can also understand why property bivalence fails more generally. It is not true that, necessarily, for any x, and for any property F, x is an F or a non-F, because there could be borderline cases of something that is an F. In such a case, there is nothing determinate about the thing in question in virtue of which it has the property of being an F or being a non-F. So it is an F and it is a non-F is neither true nor false.

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69 Van Inwagen 1996; Merricks 2001; Sorenson 2013.
70 On my view, Godhick has to be indeterminate only with respect to its creaturely conceivable substantial properties, whereas on the view of others, it “has to be utterly indeterminate” (Smart 1993b, 62). Cf. Yandell 1993, 197.
Third, this way of understanding transcategoriality avoids Hick’s errors. It does not confuse contraries and
contradictories. It does not affirm the premise that “There can be a reality that is beyond the scope of human
conceptuality,” neither of whose disambiguations is useful in arguing against property bivalence. It does not affirm
the idea of a “category mistake,” with its weird claim that molecules are not among the non-clever things. It does not
affirm the bizarre thesis that language has a purchase on reality because of the location of its development, nor does
it appeal to a “global religious point of view,” whatever that is.

My hypothesis is that if Hick’s PoT is true, it is true because of Godhick’s extensive indeterminacy. Thus, in
what follows, I will assume that, on a proper understanding of Godhick, there is nothing determinate about it in virtue
of which it could be an F or a non-F, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F. I note, however, that my
hypothesis presupposes that, if PoT is true, then there is something about Godhick in virtue of which it is true. It’s not
just magic; it’s not just a brute, inexplicable fact. This could be denied. But, in fact, Hick affirms it, as evidenced by
his attempts to explain how it could be, and it is with Hick’s view that I am engaged.

5. Three Problems for Godhick

Godhick suffers from three problems: the problems of pairing, number, and insignificance.

The Pairing Problem. There are pairs of creaturely conceivable substantial properties, F1 and F2, such that,
necessarily, for any x, if x is a borderline case of an F1, then x is not a borderline case of an F2. For example, if
something is a borderline case of being located all and only in Australia, then it is not a borderline case of being
located all and only in Brazil. That’s because, necessarily (and holding fixed the actual locations of Australia and
Brazil), if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of being located all and only in Australia, then
it is determinate enough not to be a borderline case of being located all and only in Brazil; it is not located all and
only in Brazil. Likewise, if something is a borderline case of being bald, then it is not a borderline case of being a
physical object. That’s because, necessarily, if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of being
bald, then it is determinate enough not to be a borderline case of being a physical object; it is a physical object.

And the point holds for religiously relevant substantial properties as well. For example, if something is a
borderline case of being perfectly loving, then it is not a borderline case of being obstinately wicked. That’s because,
necessarily, if something is indeterminate enough to be a borderline case of being perfectly loving, then it is
determinate enough not to be a borderline case of being obstinately wicked; it is not obstinately wicked. And the
same goes for other pairs of substantial properties, e.g. *being almighty* and *being wimpy*, *being omniscient* and *being irrevocably ignorant*, *being wholly independent* and *being wholly dependent*, etc.

To see the relevance of this observation, suppose, for *reductio*, that Hick’s PoT is true. That is, suppose that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. That’s true only because God_{hick} is a borderline case of being an F. Therefore, God_{hick} is neither almighty nor non-almighty, and that’s only because it is a borderline case of almightiness. So, God_{hick} is a borderline case of almightiness. But if it is a borderline case of almightiness, then it is not a borderline case of wimpiness. Indeed, it is so far removed from being a borderline case of wimpiness that it is non-wimpy, perhaps akin to Chuck Norris, at least Mr. T. So, God_{hick} is non-wimpy, a non-wimp. However, if God_{hick} is a non-wimp, then there is some creaturely conceivable property F such that God_{hick} is a non-F. And if there is some creaturely conceivable property F such that God_{hick} is a non-F, then it is not true that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. So, it is not true that, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property F, God_{hick} is neither an F nor a non-F. *Contradiction*. Therefore, our initial supposition that PoT is true is, in fact, false. But if PoT is false, then God_{hick} is impossible; for PoT is definitive of God_{hick}. So God_{hick} is impossible.  

In short, the impossibility of God_{hick} results from the indeterminacy required by its transcategoriality.

*The Number Problem*. Number is a creaturely conceivable substantial property. So, PoT implies that God_{hick} “does not have number,” an implication Hick affirms. Critics complain that, if God_{hick} really is “beyond number,” then Hick should not prefer the singular over the plural when he speaks of “it”, or “the Real,” which he uniformly does.

In reply, Hick makes four points. First, he says that there could not be a plurality of ultimate realities since, if there were, each would be “the sole creator or source of the Universe,” which is impossible. Second, “the postulation of the Real *an sich* [is] the simplest way of accounting for the data” of the history of the world religions, from a religious perspective. Third, and perhaps as a consequence of the first two points, “we affirm the true

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73 Smart 1993a, 100; Quinn 2000, 232-33; Mavrodies 2000: 66, 73.
74 Hick 1989, 248.
75 Hick 1989, 249; 2004a, xxvii.
ultimacy of the Real by referring to it in the singular”.76 Fourth, “the exigencies of our language compel us to refer to it in either the singular or the plural,” and “the plural would be more misleading than the singular”.77

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

The real worry here, however, is not that Hick has no basis to prefer the singular over the plural when he speaks of Godhick. Rather, the real worry is that, on the one hand, number does not apply to Godhick but, on the other hand, it does. In which case Godhick is impossible.

As for why number does not apply to Godhick, recall that PoT is definitive of Godhick, in which case nothing can be Godhick unless, for any creaturely conceivable substantial property, it is neither an F nor a non-F. So, since number is a creaturely conceivable substantial property, nothing can be Godhick while number applies to it.

As for why number does apply to Godhick, consider the following argument. Suppose, for conditional proof, that Godhick does not uniquely have at least one substantial, i.e. non-formal, property. Necessarily, for any x, if x does not uniquely have at least one substantial property, then x has no substantial properties in virtue of which x is distinct from everything else. So, Godhick has no substantial properties in virtue of which Godhick is distinct from everything else. But if Godhick has no substantial properties in virtue of which Godhick is distinct from everything else, then Godhick is not distinct from everything else. After all, by Hick’s multiply-equivocal criterion, no formal property can do the job; and the class of substantial properties and the class of formal properties are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive. So, Godhick is not distinct from everything else. Therefore, if Godhick does not

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76 Hick 1989, 249.
77 Hick 1989, 249; Hick 2010, 75.
uniquely have at least one substantial property, then God_{hick} is not distinct from everything else. (Conclusion for conditional proof.)

But that can’t be. As a matter of necessity, God_{hick} is distinct from everything else. For, first of all, you aren’t God_{hick}. But don’t take offense—neither am I. And neither is Barack Obama, Kim Kardashian, or even Donald Trump, despite what he might think of himself. Walk through the entire inventory of what there is and, when you ask, “Is this God_{hick}? Is that?,” you will rightly say on each and every occasion, “not this, not that”. With one exception, naturally. In general, everything is distinct from everything else; so, God_{hick} is distinct from everything else. Secondly, nothing could be a “transcendent reality” that is “the source and ground of everything” unless it was distinct from everything but itself. Therefore, in light of the conditional demonstrated in the last paragraph, it follows by modus tollens, that God_{hick} uniquely has at least one substantial property. And now comes the interesting part: if God_{hick} uniquely has at least one substantial property, then there is some substantial property G such that God_{hick} has G and nothing else has G. Moreover, if there is some substantial property G such that God_{hick} has G and nothing else has G, then God_{hick} is the one and only G. Furthermore, if God_{hick} is the one and only G, then number applies to God_{hick}. It follows that number applies to God_{hick}.

So: number applies to God_{hick} and number does not apply to God_{hick}. I conclude that God_{hick} is impossible.

The Insignificance Problem. But suppose God_{hick} is possible. Even then, matters look grim. For consider the property of having some intrinsic property or other that grounds something of explanatory or religious significance. By Hick’s multiply-equivocal criterion, this property is substantial. If something has it, then it has it in itself, it’s informative, significant, nontrivial, descriptive, and generated neither by logic nor language. Moreover, it is conceivable by us. So, given PoT, God_{hick} has neither it nor its logical complement; therefore, God_{hick} does not have some intrinsic property or other that grounds something of explanatory or religious significance.

Now, notice something about the property of having some intrinsic property or other that grounds something of explanatory or religious significance. It knows no restriction to creaturely conceivable substantial properties. So, necessarily, for any x, if x does not have some intrinsic property or other that grounds something of explanatory or religious significance, then x does not have some non-creaturely conceivable substantial property that grounds something of explanatory or religious significance. Therefore, God_{hick} does not have some non-creaturely conceivable substantial property that grounds something of explanatory or religious significance. That is, none of God_{hick}’s non-creaturely conceivable substantial properties ground anything of explanatory or religious
significance. But then, since none of Godhick’s *creaturely* conceivable substantial properties ground anything of explanatory or religious significance either (since Godhick has no such properties), and since the class of substantial properties is exhausted by the creaturely conceivable and the non-creaturely conceivable, it follows that none of Godhick’s substantial properties ground anything of explanatory or religious significance. But if none of Godhick’s substantial properties ground anything of explanatory or religious significance, then, since, by definition, none of its formal properties ground anything of explanatory or religious significance either, and since, by definition, its properties are exhausted by the substantial and the formal, it follows that none of Godhick’s properties ground anything of explanatory or religious significance. But if none of Godhick’s properties ground anything of explanatory or religious significance, then Godhick itself does not ground anything of explanatory or religious significance. For how else could Godhick ground something of explanatory or religious significance unless it had some properties that did as much? Therefore, given PoT, Godhick grounds nothing of explanatory or religious significance.78

If this argument is sound, it poses no small difficulty for Godhick. For, as we saw earlier, Hick repeatedly states that, even though Godhick has no creaturely conceivable substantial properties, it is “rich in content,” indeed, “infinite in richness,” so “infinitely rich” that it is “the source and ground of everything,” etc. for many explanatorily and religiously significant relations Godhick bears to the world. But, as we’ve just seen, Godhick grounds nothing of explanatory or religious significance. So Godhick is not “the source and ground of everything,” etc.

Here’s another implication of the point just made. Hick makes a big deal of the distinction between what he calls “literal truth” and “mythological truth,” the former of which consists in a statement’s “conformity to or lack of conformity to fact” and the latter of which consists in its not being literally true but rather “tend[ing] to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude” to what it’s about.79 Hick says that, with the exception of formal statements, no statement about Godhick is literally true; rather, a statement about Godhick is true if and only if it is mythologically true, if and only if it has the “capacity to evoke appropriate or inappropriate dispositional responses to [Godhick].”80 Of course, as Hick rightly observes, this raises the question: “what is it for human attitudes, emotions, modes of behavior, and patterns of life to be appropriate to [Godhick]?”81 Here is his answer:

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

But there’s a problem with all this.

For, as we’ve seen, God\textsuperscript{Hick} cannot ground anything of explanatory or religious significance. Therefore, it is impossible for any “god or absolute to which we relate ourselves to be an authentic manifestation of [God\textsuperscript{Hick}]”; moreover, no “\textit{persona} or \textit{impersona} can be said to be in soteriological alignment with [it]”. Consequently, it is false that “‘the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ is indeed an authentic \textit{persona} of [God\textsuperscript{Hick}], constituting the form in which [God\textsuperscript{Hick}] is validly thought and experienced from within the Christian strand of religious history”.

Moreover, it is false that “the eternal Buddha nature” “is an authentic \textit{impersona} of [God\textsuperscript{Hick}], validly thought and experienced from within the Buddhist tradition”. That’s because that claim is true only if God\textsuperscript{Hick} grounds something of explanatory and religious significance. But, it does no such thing. Consequently, it is also false that “an un-self-centred openness to the world and compassion for all life” and “life in accordance with the Dharma” are “an appropriate response to [God\textsuperscript{Hick}]”. Generalizing, there are no mythologically true statements about God\textsuperscript{Hick}.

(We might go further: for any true non-formal statement, it is either literally true or mythologically true. On Hick’s view, no statement about God\textsuperscript{Hick} is literally true. We’ve just learned that no statement about God\textsuperscript{Hick} is mythologically true either. So, a statement is true of God\textsuperscript{Hick} if and only if it is a formal statement. But that’s not

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\textsuperscript{82} Hick 1989, 353.
possible. So, necessarily, no statement is true of God\textsubscript{hick}. But something is possible only if, possibly, some statement is true of it. Therefore, God\textsubscript{hick} is impossible.

According to some of Hick's critics, given Hick's PoT, we could never know whether God\textsubscript{hick} was explanatorily or religiously relevant, we could never know whether there were any mythologically true statements about it.\textsuperscript{83} Hick replies that he never said anyone know such a thing. Rather, he postulates God\textsubscript{hick}, with its non-creaturely conceivable substantial properties, distinguishes its \textit{personae} and \textit{impersonae}, and uses them to explain the data of the history of religions and to solve the “apparently anomalous situation” he identified. Hick and his critics are both wrong, in my opinion. Hick is wrong because his PoT implies that God\textsubscript{hick} has no explanatory or religious relevance at all, and so cannot explain or solve anything. His critics are wrong because his PoT implies that we \textit{can} know whether God\textsubscript{hick} is explanatorily or religiously relevant, we \textit{can} know whether there are any mythologically true statements about God\textsubscript{hick}. Indeed, we \textit{do} know. We know that God\textsubscript{hick} is explanatorily and religiously \textit{ir}relevant, we know that there are \textit{no} mythologically true statements about God\textsubscript{hick}.

\textbf{6. Conclusion}

Hick's pluralism has been extensively criticized in the literature and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{84} In a revealing passage, Hick complains that “the great majority” of his critics start from the presupposition that there can be at most only one true religion, and the fixed conviction that this is their own. A hermeneutic of suspicion cannot help wondering if their search for anti-pluralist arguments, usually philosophically sophisticated arguments, is driven by a need to defend a highly conservative/evangelical/sometimes fundamentalist religious faith. For it is noticeable that thinkers, within both Christianity and other traditions, who are more progressive/liberal/ecumenical in outlook tend to have much less difficulty with the pluralist idea….Needless to say, and as the religiously conservative critics would probably be the first to point out, this does not show that they are mistaken in their beliefs. But, together with the fact that their holding their conservative Christian, rather than conservative Muslim or Hindu or other,

\textsuperscript{83} E.g., Mavrodes 2010b, 74; Plantinga 2000, 56-59.
\textsuperscript{84} Elsewhere: Vatican 1997. For reply to this dismal document from the Vatican, see Hick 1998.
beliefs is precisely correlated with their having been raised in a Christian rather than a Muslim or Hindu or other society, it does ‘make one think’.85

Three observations about this passage are in order.

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

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

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

It is my contention that, when we do that, we will discover that Hick is wrong when he writes that his God—“the transcategorial Real”—is “the ultimate mystery”.86 For, if my arguments are sound, there’s nothing

85 Hick 2010, 72.
86 Hick 1989, 349.
mysterious about Hick’s God at all. It is manifestly impossible and, even if it possible, it has no explanatory or religious significance whatsoever.87

References


87 Acknowledgements….


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