

## On behalf of Pascal: a reply to Le Poidevin

When we were on the subway back from his lecture, I said to Robin: 'I'm not sure there actually are any religious fictionalists.' We keep talking about them in papers and lectures, acting as if fictionalism in religion is a real possibility, but to be honest, I haven't been able to spot one in the wild so far. The only potential candidate who comes to mind is Don Cupitt, who wrote things like: 'I still pray and love God, even though I fully acknowledge that no God actually exists.' (Cupitt 1997, 85) Perhaps this is as fictionalist as it gets. But then again, Cupitt never explicitly declared himself a fictionalist (at least to my knowledge). Moreover, on other occasions he sounds more like an expressivist than a fictionalist, e.g. when he says: 'The Christian doctrine of God just is Christian spirituality in coded form.' (Cupitt 1980, 14) So, if there are any actual fictionalists out there, please step forward.

I begin my reply with this observation because I believe it clashes with one of Robin's fundamental assumptions. The guiding question in Robin's paper is this: Can the agnostic live a genuinely religious life? (And by 'can' he means 'without falling prey to irrationality and inconsistency'.) He offers three options: (a) just taking a shot because you got nothing to lose (the Pascalian way); (b) letting your passions decide when evidence fails you (the Jamesian way); and (c) taking no stance on whether what you believe is real or fictional (Robin's way). Needless to say, he thinks the first two options are flawed because they cannot avoid the charge of irrationality, and so suggests the third option as a way to reconcile agnosticism, rationality, and religious life. Now, all three options presuppose one fundamental assumption: that the agnostic actually *wants* to lead a religious life. But why would an agnostic be interested in leading a religious life in the first place? One imagines her looking jealously at her realist friends and sighing: 'I wish I had what they have!' But what is the point of leading a religious life if you don't actually want to subscribe to the worldview it is based on? Is there anything desirable about the religious life which is not available to the agnostic? Robin doesn't really give an answer in his paper. Occasionally, he speaks of the agnostic 'internalising the language and imagery [of religion] at a deeper level, in such a way that it informs the way one lives one's life' (p. 3) or hints at the possibilities of 'moral growth' (p. 11) which engagement with fiction offers. So, perhaps this is about finding answers to existential questions, giving meaning to your life and cultivating a moral character. But, as any passionate humanist will tell you, you can have all these great things – profound moral values to guide you, an admiration for the beauty of the universe, a deep sense of living a meaningful life – without subscribing to any religious worldview. Or at least no *theistic* worldview, if you prefer to give the term 'religion' a broader meaning than usual. As Ronald Dworkin put it in his *Religion without God*: 'Religion is a deep, distinct, and comprehensive worldview: it holds that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order. A belief in a god is only one possible manifestation or consequence of that deeper worldview.' (Dworkin 2013, 1) Some might prefer to call this a *spiritual* worldview, but let's not squabble over words here. If this kind of spirituality is what makes the religious life so attractive (and not your predilection for incense and chanting hymns), and if you can have all this and still call yourself a plain, old agnostic – why even bother with fictionalism? Robin asks us whether an agnostic can live a truly religious life, and to be sure, this is a perfectly meaningful question. I just have doubts whether it is also a

*genuine* question (by which I mean, in analogy to William James' genuine options, a question where the possible answers are interesting to us and it isn't obvious which one is true). Religious fictionalism seems to me a little like solipsism – a nice exercise in philosophical concept-juggling, but ultimately something in which nobody really believes, even if the position *per se* is not inconsistent. Maybe this explains the irritating lack of actual fictionalists. For us to become religious fictionalists, fictionalism needs to offer something neither realist theism nor secularist spirituality can offer, and I don't see what this could be.

But let's assume we have before us the rare case of an agnostic who is dissatisfied with her situation and is looking for a way to live a religious life. She then turns to Pascal, naturally, who offers a recipe for those who find themselves in a tie between the two options of believing and not believing, unable to make a decision based on evidence. His advice: Just take a shot at believing and you'll be better off in any case. But what if you find yourself unable to conjure a belief in you at will in something you don't believe yet? Pascal recommends letting go of all attempts to solve the matter by means of rational arguments:

*So concentrate not on convincing yourself by increasing the number of proofs of God but on diminishing your passions. [...] Learn from those who have been bound like you, and who now wager all they have. [...] Follow the way by which they began: by behaving just as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. That will make you believe quite naturally, and according to your animal reactions. (Pascal 1995, 155f.)*

Robin dismisses this approach as deliberately irrational and accuses Pascal of trying to silence reason. Essentially, he says, Pascal is asking us to make a pragmatic decision for believing and to use the fictionalist approach to overcome our doubts. But how can these two be reconciled? As agnostics, we need to keep an open mind towards religion (it might be true after all), but as fictionalists, we cannot but regard it as false. Unlike Robin, I think that Pascal's advice is neither irrational nor does it imply an inconsistent stance towards religion. On the contrary, it might be the only promising route open to the dissatisfied agnostic. So, my second point is this: If you are a dissatisfied agnostic and for some reason wish to live a religious life, Pascal's way is still your best choice.

First of all, it is not irrational. Pascal doesn't ask us to ignore the reasons against believing (or for suspending belief). These reasons (as well as the reasons on the other side) are acknowledged – it's just that in the end, none of them are decisive. We don't have to place our bet until reason has reached a dead end. He makes this clear when he says: 'But at least realize that your inability to believe, since reason urges you to do so and yet you cannot, arises from your passions.' (Pascal 1995, 155) Reason is fine; it's our emotions which are blocking our progress towards faith.

Second, and more importantly, Pascal doesn't recommend a paradoxical attitude towards religion. Yes, he wants us to approach religious belief with an open mind, but he is not recommending a fictionalist understanding of religious beliefs. If we take another look at the text, we will find that he does not say: 'Pretend that God exists!', but rather: 'Act as if you believed!' Is there a difference? Yes, in two respects. First, Pascal recommends a kind of action or practice, not an attitude. Fictionalism is best characterized as a kind of attitude towards a certain set of propositions: we think of these propositions as fictional. And Pascal doesn't tell us what to think, but what to do. Second, the content of the relevant fiction is not

that God exists; it is that I am a believer. There is a subtle difference between these two. To illustrate it, compare the following two situations: (a) You are reading the first book of the *Odyssey* where Athena is mentioned. As a modern reader, you don't believe in the existence of the Olympian gods and therefore regard the dialogue between her and Telemachus as fiction. You are a fictionalist with respect to ancient Greek gods. (b) You are an avid cosplayer participating in a reenactment of Perikleian Athens. This time, you are playing a priest of Athena. And while you personally (once you have put off your toga) still don't believe in the Olympian gods, the priest you are playing *does*. You are not playing a fictionalist priest, you are playing a priest who really believes in Athena. It is this second case which Pascal is suggesting. We are supposed to pretend to be believers. But when you are pretending to be a believer, you are not pretending to be a fictionalist – you are pretending to be a real believer. We are creating a fiction around ourselves, and *within this fiction* we don't regard God's existence as fictional. Pascal's fiction is about us, not about God. He is not asking us to write a novel, but to become actors in a play. And eventually, the line between actor and character will blur and the fiction will become reality. Fake it 'til you make it.

How does this help our dissatisfied agnostic? Let's call the first case *theoretical* fictionalism and the second one *practical* fictionalism. I believe that for those agnostics who wish to live a religious life, practical fictionalism is the only meaningful way to do so. If our dissatisfied agnostic decides to 'take holy water, have masses said' as Pascal suggests, she will start as a pretend believer, but over time turn into a real believer. Her thinking will adjust to her practice, making her slip into the religious life maybe without even noticing it. This is a bit like teaching children to say 'please': The difference between 'I want a cookie!' and 'Can I have a cookie, please?' is the one between demanding and asking. It means acknowledging that the other person is free to fulfill your wish or not. So, by teaching children to say 'please' instead of shouting 'Cookie!' (in other words: by making them pretend to be polite) we teach them to actually be polite. Engaging them in a practical fiction will result in the fiction becoming reality.

But, one might object, in this scenario, the agnostic will eventually stop being an agnostic. Pascal's way doesn't reconcile agnosticism and religious life, it is a method to overcome (or abandon) agnosticism in favor of faith. Isn't this worse than Robin's proposal to become a metalinguistic agnostic? The metalinguistic agnostic, he suggests, remains neutral with regard to the kind of semantic theory they apply to religious language. They simply *do* religion (like you do mathematics or science) and leave it open whether religious entities are real or fictional or where the line between fiction and reality is drawn. It seems like this is a way to have your cake and eat it – to be truly agnostic and truly religious. Regrettably, I see two problems with this view. (a) The notion of doing religion. Robin admits (p. 14) that religion is not wholly reducible to a set of practices, but this is not the main problem. Doing mathematics or science in a fictionalist spirit has a point – it *yields* something (new insights or practical applications). No matter what your take on the theoretical status of photons is, lasers work. In contrast, practicing religion has nothing particular to offer if religion is really just a fiction.<sup>1</sup> (b) The second problem is that there seems to be no real difference between the new,

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<sup>1</sup> I realize this may not necessarily be true. The ancient Confucian philosopher Xunzi advocated a fictionalist understanding of religious rituals while at the same time being an outspoken naturalist. His argument is that engaging with these fictions is an important way to cultivate moral attitudes, even if we are fully aware of their fictional character. But still, there is no *religious* point in doing religion. For an accessible introduction to Confucian fictionalism see Puett/Gross-Loh 2016, ch. 3.

metalinguistic type of agnosticism and its plain old cousin. The new agnostic engages in a practical fiction and suspends belief on the theoretical status of the propositions entailed by this practice (Robin calls this 'serious make-believe'): they are either actually true or they may be just useful fictions. But if they are useful fictions, then they are simply false, too. As Robin himself acknowledges (p. 12), fictionalism presupposes treating religion as fiction, i.e. as not actually true. So, the new agnostic is just like the old one – undecided between the truth and falsity of religious claims; he just frames the dilemma in semantic terms. And if the new agnostic is essentially the same as the old one, he will face the same problem: make a decision between Dworkin-style non-religious spirituality or the Pascalian treatment. Each is fine and will lead to the kind of spiritual, moral, or meaningful life he desires. Why need there be another option?

References:

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