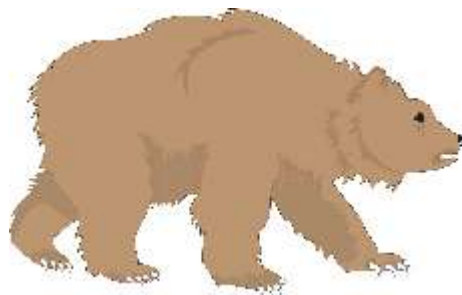


Ursus Philosophicus

Essays dedicated to Björn Haglund on his sixtieth birthday



Aspect change, phenomenology, and the testability of religious belief

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Abstract

In this essay I start from two theories on the nature of religious belief, one claiming it to be the result of an inborn propensity or disposition, the other maintaining that it is related to the non-religious position as the mutually exclusive apperceptions of an ambiguous figure.

These theories are discussed with the help of some ideas and results from the phenomenological movement, but I also bring in some notions from the philosophy of Martin Buber. In the process, some light is also thrown on some much discussed suggestions from Hare and Wisdom.

After a brief sketch of how scientific hypotheses are tested, I argue that so long as the personal religious belief of a person retains some cognitive content, it is open to scrutiny in a corresponding way.

The modern discussion of the problems of the philosophy of religion in Sweden has almost exclusively taken place in the context of analytical philosophy, and very scant attention has been paid to theories and results from other traditions.

In this short essay, I would like to make an attempt to show that a more many-sided approach may be of value, at least in connection with one issue still often debated, that of the nature of religious belief and its possible cognitive content and testability. And I shall try to do so by taking some basic notions from the phenomenological movement as my point of departure.

Of old, it has often been claimed that religious beliefs are the result of an inborn propensity, a sort of religious disposition common to all human beings, and there is no serious gainsaying the claim that religious beliefs are now present and have always been present among the vast majority of human societies so far as we are able to trace them.

Even in the remains from early Cro Magnon and Neanderthal peoples we find things that are most readily interpreted as vestiges of religious ceremonies, and religious beliefs have played a major role in many human conflicts of recent history - from the Thirty Years War, a not so distant effect of the Reformation, to the ongoing conflicts of the Middle East. But religious beliefs have also played an important part in many more praiseworthy contexts, e.g., in the establishment of schools and hospitals in the western world.

The recognition that some kind of religious belief is (almost) ubiquitous in this way may quite reasonably be taken as evidence for the position just mentioned, viz., that there is some sort of innate disposition common to all (or most) human beings, making us open to religious beliefs. It does not, however, make it necessary to conclude that this propensity is specifically religious, nor does it show that the religious beliefs that possibly derive from it are true or valid.

In modern Swedish philosophy of religion, the question of the nature of religious belief has also often been approached from the quarter of religious conversion, and it has thus been claimed that a religious and a non-religious attitude are related to each other somewhat like the opposed but mutually exclusive ways of perceiving an ambiguous figure. But as a defence of religious belief, this position has its obvious weak point, for if both ways of seeing the world are really on the same footing, why should one choose one rather than the other?

In what follows, I shall discuss these issues and also try to show to show how these two approaches can be interpreted so as to throw light both upon each other and upon some other suggestions and problems discussed in analytical philosophy of religion during the previous century. To do this, I shall make use of some ideas and results from the phenomenological movement, but I shall also bring in some notions from another side, that of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.

But what exactly *is* a religious belief? What are the central tenets of all religions? I do not think that there is any single and simple answer to these questions, and I do not propose to present one. In fact, a thorough discussion of these issues is clearly beyond the scope of any short essay. Instead, for the time being I propose to take as a point of departure the fact that many - but not all - religions contain a belief in the world as developing in a certain direction or towards a specific goal under the guidance of one or more personal beings, who are often thought of as the originator(s) of the world and as capable of interfering into its workings. It is furthermore usually thought that as human beings we can know of the purposes and desires of these super-human beings, either directly by way of our natural capacities (natural theology) or through some sort of revelation (revealed theology).

What I have now said does not hold of all generally recognized religious systems or beliefs; it does not hold, for instance, of classical or Theravada Buddhism, but to an eminent degree it holds of all classical forms of Christianity, Islam and Judaism - the three major monotheistic religions.

With this preliminary understanding as a background, I would like to start by arguing that a religious perception of the world, if there is one, is intimately connected to perception in the normal sense of the word, and that it is not immune to intellectual appraisal in the way now often claimed, but open to trial and testing in roughly the same way as any other serious position on the nature and workings of the world as we know it.

All our knowledge of the world, all empirical scientific knowledge, is ultimately founded on observation, on what we perceive by way of our senses. The nature of sensation and perception was thus a main issue in early modern philosophy, both with Descartes and the rationalists and with Locke and the empiricists. The final great synthesis was reached by Kant in his monumental *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.¹ But the problems of perception and empirical knowledge were also main issues in early analytical philosophy, both with Russell and Moore in Great Britain and with the Logical Positivist in Vienna.

¹ Kant, Immanuel (1781); *Critique of Pure Reason*

It is therefore a most curious fact that the most important contributions to the analysis and understanding of the nature of perception in recent time, those of Edmund Husserl and the phenomenological movement, have been totally neglected in the analytical tradition.

I have discussed those things in several places before,² and there is thus no reason to go into any detailed discussion; it may, however, be apposite to give a brief summary. Edmund Husserl was originally interested mainly in the problems of mathematical knowledge and his important work in this field has also been sorely neglected in the analytical tradition. From this field, however, he turned to the problems of knowledge in general, and in his *Logische Untersuchungen*,³ he presented his first theory of sensation and perception. There he postulated the existence of some basic elements, *Empfindungen* (sensations),⁴ which were taken to be the raw material of perception. In the act of perception, the *Empfindungen* are combined with and interpreted by what might be called "the subjective elements" of the act, its matter and quality, to form the full perceptual act, in which we are conscious of something as an intentional object, as the object of our attention.

This theory was further developed and modified in his next great work, the *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Psychologie*,⁵ where Husserl presented a theory where the perceptual act is analysed into hyletic data, which are the matter to the form provided by the noetic side of the act so as to constitute a full noesis, directed towards an object of perception.

One important difference between Husserl's analyses and those common within the analytical tradition was Husserl's insight that the full perceptual act is the result of a combination or fusion of supposedly independent sensory information with interpreting contributions from the mind itself. Our perception of the intentional object of any individual act or experience is thus neither exclusively determined by what derives from the senses nor by the mind itself; the intentional object is constituted in the perceptual act on the basis of the hyletic data (or *Empfindungen*), but according to notions inherent in the mind.

As a matter of fact, Husserl's mature theory may perhaps best be interpreted as a development within a Kantian frame of thought, although this was not the way it developed historically - Husserl's teacher Brentano was very critical of Kant and saw Kant's critical philosophy as a great step downward in the history of philosophy, causing the final plunge into irrational speculation which, to him, was represented by the post-Kantians Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.

In my own work on Husserl's theory,⁶ I have also argued that Husserl was not quite radical enough; he did not see that the hyletic data are really postulated or theoretical entities like the fields and forces of modern physics, arrived at in the analytical process, and never available for any direct or independent human knowledge.

Anyway, in this way we have arrived at a sketch of Husserl's theory of constitution. In brief, this may be said to argue that things are perceived in the way they are as the

² Cf. e.g. Haglund, Dick (1977), (1983), (1984), etc.

³ Husserl, Edmund (1900-01); *Logical Investigations*

⁴ Corresponding rather closely the sense data postulated in the analytical tradition.

⁵ Husserl, Edmund (1913); *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Psychology*

⁶ E.g., in Haglund, Dick (1977) and (1984); especially in the work last mentioned.

result of an interpretation by the mind, by consciousness, on the basis of information processed by way of our conceptual system, and thus also on the basis of our previous experiences, our conception of the world in which we live. This is not to be taken as a conscious, volitional activity, but as something pre-conscious, occurring automatically, and there is no doubt that most neurologist and psychologists will recognize this as a version of a position they already hold on the basis of empirical research.

The philosophical importance of Husserl's stance to our present discussion may be seen partly to reside in the insight that we can never pass this process by, that we can never reach any "external" or "absolute" objects behind our perceptions - fundamentally a restatement of Kant's position with regard to the *Ding an sich* (Thing in itself).

It is important to observe, however, that Husserl's conclusion is an epistemological and not a metaphysical one. He does not want to discuss or deny the existence of an external world "behind" our perceptions, he wants to point out that by the very nature of the perceptual process, it is impossible to perceive any such "hidden" things, and that it is thus superfluous to postulate their existence.

It is also, perhaps, important to underline that Husserl's is no theory of the mind as the source of the existence of the intentional objects. We do not "produce" them in the process of constitution. The word "constitute" ("*konstituieren*") is used to bring to mind the fact that the only way we know of them is by way of the mode in which we perceive them.

Husserl is thus fundamentally an epistemological idealist, not a metaphysical one. The constituted intentional object of the perceptual act is the object as we perceive it but not a product of the mind. Maybe this might also be expressed by saying that Husserl's is a way of speaking of the process of perception in the objective mode of speech in place of the processual mode - prompted by the fact that we are wont to speak of the objects we perceive and not of our processes of perception.

This may perhaps also be the right place to speak of what Husserl calls "*der Generalthesis der natürlichen Einstellung*" ("the general (or fundamental) thesis of the natural attitude").

By this expression, Husserl refers to the fact that in our normal or natural daily life, we always presume that when we see or hear something, there is such a thing present; it is "there", in front of us, in our common external world. We perceive ourselves as concrete ("physical") persons present in a single concrete ("physical") world, surrounded by other things and people. In calling this "the general thesis of the natural attitude" (GTNA), Husserl wants to point out that this attitude is not the result of any philosophical deliberations or scientific inquiries; it is simply an expression of the way we normally act and think.

To say that when we see something, we accept it as being there, as present, is not to make any far-reaching philosophical assumptions, and it is also absolutely not to deny that we sometimes make mistakes. It may happen, e.g., that we see a reflection of something only to observe a moment later that the thing we thought to see was not there, in the direction we thought, but in another place. In a similar way, we may seem to recognize an old friend at some distance only to observe, when we get closer, that the person in question was a total stranger.

In some of his works, Husserl has a very colourful way of describing what happens in such a context. He says, in effect, that when the discrepancy between the information carried by the *Empfindungen* or hyletic data and the interpretation forced upon them by the subjective side of the act becomes too great, the act "explodes" and is replaced by another act, in which the fit between the data and the interpretation is a more satisfactory one.

It is also worth noting that we constitute this every-day world as a *common* world, containing many subjects who are often both aware of each other and observing the same things, although from partly different angles and so forth.

We might possibly say, however, that the GTNA contains the seeds of a metaphysical realism or objectivism. And so long as we understand that metaphysical realism in this sense is precisely that, a metaphysical position that has no conclusive evidence as its basis, there is no danger; we might even use it, as Sir Karl Popper did, to formulate the goal of all scientific endeavour as being to approach as closely as possible to this ideal "objective reality" in our scientific theories.

To repeat: According to the phenomenological point of view, which closely agrees with the Kantian tradition on this issue, the world we know, and the *only* world we know, is the constituted world, the world as perceived.

But what is argued here is not the rather primitive empiricist or phenomenistic position that the world we know, the constituted world, is built up solely on the basis of our own sensory experiences or sense data.

According to the phenomenological position, the process of constitution is influenced in a fundamental way by our general knowledge, which, in turn, is the result not only of our own previous primary experiences, but is also largely built upon our (perceived) interaction with other sentient beings, with our parents, teachers, colleagues, but also - by way of lectures, books and essays, by TV and radio programmes and so forth - on the opinions and experiences of other persons, with some of whom, like Aristotle, Newton, and Kant (or Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammad), we come into contact only in a very indirect way.

Depending upon our own capacity and the family and society in which we grow up and live, various persons, ideas and theories exert their influence upon us to very different degrees.

The way we all constitute or life world, the world of our every-day environment, is thus influenced not only by our own basic experiences, but also by knowledge or pseudo-knowledge absorbed from others throughout our lives. And this life world (or worldview) may also be more or less clearly religious; it may possibly include a view of the world as being identical with or as being governed by one or more superhuman entities, by God(s).

As I have stated above, this is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of Husserl's theory of our perception of the material world. But there are two related aspects of this that need to be mentioned in a few words.

One of these is the fact that we perceive not only very simple qualities like being red or blue, hot or cold, but also rather complicated ones like shapes, spatial relations, cardinality (up to 7 or so) and also temporal and spatio-temporal (dynamic) qualities like rhythmic and melodic patterns, patterns of movement, and so forth.

These things have been extensively studied, especially in Gestalt psychology, and it is no coincidence that Gestalt psychology developed in close contact with the phenomenological movement; Christian von Ehrenfels was a pupil of both Brentano and Alexius Meinong and Wolfgang Köhler studied with Carl Stumpf.

Personally, I am quite convinced that even such a complicated thing as the understanding (constitution) of meaning is closely related to the perception of complex or Gestalt qualities in spoken or written language,⁷ and the interesting thing is that in a trained speaker or reader of the language, this process of apprehension is usually unconscious; our attention is normally totally focussed on the message and not at all on the sounds or letters, although we may well observe them, too, as when we notice a misprint in a book or the dialect used by a certain speaker.

The second and related aspect is that the most important distinction with regard to the objects in our every-day world is that between unconscious material objects and other living and conscious beings. While not a simple or a clear-cut one, this is a fundamental distinction in our way of perceiving the world, and a distinction that is clearly reflected in most languages. As a matter of fact, there is a whole set of concepts (and corresponding words) that can only be applied in a meaningful way to other conscious beings, and as yet, it has proven impossible to reduce these concepts to purely non-intentional ones.⁸

To return to the presentation of Husserl's theory of secondary intentionality, when we see another person move or hear him or her talk, we usually immediately understand what he or she intends to do or say in the sense that this is not knowledge reached by any process of internal reasoning. We see him or her raising a cup of coffee in order to drink, we hear him or her wishing us a pleasant journey; there is no need and no place here for any lengthy reasoning. This is not to say, of course, that we are never mistaken in this kind of observation - in the perception of secondary intentionality there is a possibility of mistakes just as in any other kind of perception.

In German, this ability was talked about by Husserl as our capacity of *Einfühlung*, a word that is usually translated as "empathy". Both this word and the original "*Einfühlung*" are, however, partly misleading since in common parlance, they both primarily relate to our capacity to understand or share the feelings of another person, whilst in this context, *Einfühlung* concerns states of mind in general; not just emotions but states of volition, intention, understanding, and so forth.

This capacity of empathy is obviously an inborn faculty, present in most human beings from a very early age. This has been shown by studies of newborn babies, who are immediately able to follow their parents' movements with their eyes and to mimic their facial expressions and movements to an uncanny degree - an ability obviously not based on any previous experience.

We now also know, however, that this ability is sometimes weakened or absent. What is usually called autism seems to be a case in point; an autistic baby has difficulties in relating to its parents or other persons in a normal way, and at a somewhat later age we might say that he or she cannot fully perceive other persons as intentionally acting other

⁷ I am quite prepared to concede, however, that this is probably something that is learnt, at least partly, as a system of conditioned reflexes.

⁸ I have touched upon these things both in Haglund, Dick (1983b) and, in a more detailed way, in Haglund, Dick (1986).

people, but tends to perceive them more or less as moving entities on the level of other material objects.⁹

Autism is now thought to be related to a deficient development of some parts of the brain, and it is also known that primates, including humans, have an exceptionally well developed (and anatomically well localized) capacity for recognizing facial expressions, which are obviously Gestalt qualities in the sense indicated above.

Precisely this capacity is also known to play a great part in human communication. Persons with Asperger's Syndrome are known to concentrate their attention almost exclusively on the oral region when listening to other people, thus missing many extra-linguistic clues to the interpretation of the spoken message - clues given by facial expressions like the raising or lowering of the eyebrows, the direction of the gaze etc. Recent investigations have also shown that certain bodily movements, like gestures with the hands and arms, are regularly connected to certain linguistic utterances as integrated parts of the message.

But this capacity of empathy is not, of course, restricted to the human species. Everyone who has had a dog or other pet will know that it is present to an astonishing degree also in other mammals, especially, it seems, in our closest relatives, the chimpanzees and gorillas, but also in dogs, horses and other domesticated animals - in fact, I would suppose, in all animals with some kind of herd behaviour or with at least a moderate degree of caring for their offspring.

In conclusion, it is thus precisely by way of this capacity that we are able to interact in a profound and complex way with our fellow human beings, it is on account of this capacity that we have developed into a social animal, a *zoon politikon*, to use Aristotle's phrase, and it is thus also by way of this capacity that we have been able to develop our complex cultural systems, our science, art and religion, and so forth.

What, then, is the connection between this capacity of *Einfühlung* and religion?

To explain this, I would like to draw the attention to the great Jewish philosopher Martin Buber. In his important essay *Ich und Du*,¹⁰ published quite independently of Husserl and his theories of secondary intention and empathy and much before modern research on autism etc., he argued that there are, in human beings, a capacity for two quite different attitudes, the Thou-attitude, where we perceive a person confronting us as a conscious being, perceiving, feeling and reacting just like ourselves, and the It-attitude, where the object is perceived as a non-sentient body, as a thing.

Buber's contention is that it is only when we take the Thou-attitude to other human beings that we are truly human. The question here is where to draw the line between what should be regarded with a Thou-attitude and what should not - or, indeed, if there is to be drawn such a line.

Buber himself may be interpreted as arguing that it is when we extend the Thou-attitude to the universe as a whole that we attain the true, religious understanding of the world, that we experience it as a divinely governed, fundamentally harmonious whole.

⁹ Sociopathy might be another case in point. Sociopaths seem able to observe and interpret only some of the signs to which other people intuitively react as revealing the thoughts and feelings of their fellow men.

¹⁰ Buber, Martin (1922); *I and Thou*

But let us first look at the other end of the spectrum. In my opinion (and, I submit, that of almost everybody else), suffering is something intrinsically bad and we should thus abstain from inflicting (unjustified) suffering on anybody or anything. Suffering is, however, something subjective, something experienced, and thus something that can be present only in conscious beings, i.e., beings towards whom it is appropriate to adopt the Thou-attitude - or something like it.

It is thus obvious that we should adopt the Thou-attitude not only to other human beings, but also to most (or all) other animals. But what about plants? To me there seems to be no evidence that plants experience pain or anything whatsoever. Thus there would be no obligation for us to adopt the Thou-attitude towards them. But this does not mean that it is unreasonable to behave towards plants and other non-conscious things in a thoughtful and circumspect way; on the contrary, I think that such behaviour will usually turn out to have good secondary effects.

But here we obviously meet with a problem. Entities in this world are obviously conscious to a greater or lesser degree, and there is clearly also a great variety of complex or Gestalt qualities signalling aspects of consciousness and secondary intentionality. We should thus observe a certain measure of caution when discussing these things, and it would probably be best to regard the full Thou- and It-attitudes rather as extremes on a scale.

With this proviso in mind, I think, however, that we may feel reasonably confident in saying that the adoption of some kind of a Thou-attitude towards unconscious things like trees, rocks, streams and mountains and the like plays a central part in much animistic religion.

If this interpretation is correct, I think that we may also feel reasonably confident in saying the the application of the Thou-attitude in these cases is misdirected; these things do not perceive or think, they do not act or react, and to believe otherwise is to make an empirical mistake. The same thing must naturally be said of similar attitudes towards statues and effigies in other religions. But as these last examples show, dead thing may function as symbols, and perhaps such an interpretation is possible in the case of animistic religions, too.

Turning now to the other end of the spectrum, it might seem that the adoption of the Thou-attitude towards the universe at large is precisely what is at stake in the so called cosmological or physico-theological argument for the existence of God.

From the very complex nature of the world as we experience it, religious apologists have often drawn the conclusion that just as an intricate mechanism like a clock cannot exist without a maker or designer, this complex world cannot exist without a creator.

The unsatisfactory nature of this argument was clearly shown already by Hume and Kant. But this discussion concerns an intellectual argument, and it might be argued that adopting an attitude is something quite otherwise.

To some extent this is true. In our ordinary every-day behaviour, we do not argue with ourselves whether or not to adopt the Thou-attitude towards our friends and foes or towards the cars and trams we encounter. That is done automatically, partly on the basis of previous experience. But as we all know, adopting an attitude of this kind will be justified or unjustified, and whether it is one or the other can be tested.

In a similar way, it might be argued, our adoption or not of the Thou-attitude towards the universe as a whole is something that takes place as a matter of fact, depending on our previous experiences, our upbringing and so forth. In former times, the adoption of a religious view of the world was almost universal in Europe. Eminent scientists like Sir Isaac Newton and Carolus Linnaeus both accepted a Christian outlook, albeit not quite an orthodox one. And during the Middle Ages it would certainly be difficult to identify many completely non-religious thinkers in spite of the fact that many theologians of those times were eminently intelligent and well educated.

As we have seen above, according to the phenomenological opinion the way I constitute the world is influenced to a great extent not only by what I experience directly, but also by what I have learnt before, both on my own and from other sources.

In a primitive, tribal society like that of ancient Israel, a considerable influence was obviously exerted by the books of what we now know as the Old Testament, and even directly by some of the very persons - kings, judges, prophets - whose sayings are preserved in them.

In a rather homogeneous society like Sweden of the 19th century with its Lutheran State Church and its compulsory basic education with its emphasis on Christian doctrine in the Lutheran version, most people were subjected to rather similar influences, resulting, we may presume, in a rather homogeneous Christian outlook on the world. The situation was similar in most European countries.

Now, with regard to the adoption of the Thou-attitude towards the universe as a whole, we are faced with two interesting possibilities. Either we might perceive the world in itself as the ultimate Thou, resulting in some sort of pantheism or panentheism, something like the process theology emanating from the philosophy of Whitehead and primarily advocated by Charles Hartshorne. Or we might perceive the world as disclosing the actions and intentions of a personal being acting in it. In both cases, God would be seen as a personal, acting Thou in line with the impression given, e.g., in the Old and New Testament and the Qur'an, and not as the impassible, inactive timeless entity of much of Christian theology. Both Buber and most Christian believers have formed their notion of God against the background of the Old Testament and (for Christians) the New Testament. In both, but especially in parts of the Old Testament, YHWH is presented as a very active God, interfering often and decisively in the history of the Jewish people.

It would thus be natural to look for signs of God's will and activity in what happens in the world, and as we know, things like storms, floods, fires, and earthquakes were often taken precisely as such signs.

Inexplicable diseases and equally inexplicable recoveries might also and quite reasonably be seen as divine interventions at a time when mortality was high and help difficult to find.

All this time, however, there have usually been a few persons calling the religious worldview into question, at least partly. Already in the Old Testament the problem is treated in the book of Job, and both Newton and Linnaeus, just mentioned, took exception to parts of the orthodox view. And in the French Enlightenment we meet with a wide variety of dissenting views from the deism of Voltaire via the various positions of Diderot to the extreme materialism of de La Mettrie.

While I think that it is thus true that our basic attitude to the universe as a whole is usually and most of the time *not* the result of any specific rational deliberation or decision, this is evidently not always so.

In the cases indicated above, the changes as to religious attitude were probably gradual ones, resulting from extended reflection on difficult problems. But the change may also be a sudden one, often described by saying that things are suddenly seen in a new light or the like.

To a smaller degree, we are all familiar with experiences of this kind. They happen, e.g., when we perceive a threatening figure at the side of a dark road only to find, at closer quarters, that it was only a bush; when we suddenly understand that a certain text - or part of a text - carries a meaning previously undetected or misunderstood; when we realize that there were other and more sordid motives behind a certain political decision than we were originally given to believe, and so forth.

As we have seen, it has often been thought that such a sudden change of attitude and perception may best be likened to the sudden and surprising change observed when, for the first time, we perceive the sudden switch between one conflicting apperception and the other of an ambiguous picture like the well-known duck-rabbit of fame from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.¹¹

This is the position taken by what may be called the "basic pattern" theories of religious belief, which have been discussed quite extensively in modern Swedish philosophy of religion, e.g., by Anders Jeffner, Hans Hof and Mats Furberg.¹²

Many of those defending such an analogy have thought it to imply that such a change of attitude, of mode of perception, cannot be discussed and evaluated in a rational way.

In the case of the duck-rabbit, the two interpretations are obviously on a par; there is nothing to make one interpretation better or more correct than the other. To take the figure to be a picture of the head of a duck is just as reasonable as to regard it as a picture of the head of a rabbit. And, on the force of the analogy, looking at the universe as divinely created and governed by God would be just as reasonable as regarding it as developing according to a set of inexorable laws of nature from a random space-time singularity a number of billions of years ago.

Here, I think, we are drawing close to R. M. Hare's notion of a blik as the explanation of religious belief. In the famous "University debate",¹³ Hare took as an example a person believing that he was under the threat of being murdered by a number of university dons. Every action on their part was interpreted in this light, and whatever others saw as instances of quite normal or even friendly behaviour, he was interpreting as dissimulation due to their diabolical cunning.

From experience we all know that persecution and mobbing exist and that is quite a bad thing to be the victim of such behaviour. But we also know that other people are not usually overly concerned with causing trouble to each other. The difficult thing is to

¹¹ Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953); *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, published posthumously. The figure in question is found in II xi, p. 194.

¹² Cf. Jeffner, Anders (1972) and (1967); Furberg, Mats (1975) etc.

¹³ A symposium most easily found in Flew, A. and MacIntyre, A. (eds) (1955) and reprinted also in Mitchell, B. (ed) (1971) and in many other places.

discern the few bad apples from the many good (or indifferent) ones, and such a thing is not easy to argue. Just as suggested by Hare, we may sometimes take one concrete case after another and show that a certain interpretation was misguided, and in the end this process may lead to the insight that the basic conception, the *blik*, was mistaken. But - and this is the problem - it may also be retained.

From Hare's discussion, one might easily be led to the conclusion that the *blik* is rather of the character of an emotional state, a *Stimmung*, and I actually think that one of the good things with Hare's approach is that he drew the attention to this non-cognitive, this emotional (and volitional) side of religious belief.

Hare was, however, exaggerating the emotional aspect, the non-rational side of the *blik*, for - as shown by the short summary above - the *blik* as Hare describes it *has* a cognitive content; the dons *are* (falsely, it seems) suspected of murderous intents. This is further underlined by Hare's second example, viz., that one may lose confidence in the functioning of the steering gear of one's car. But here, too, Hare points to a possible empirical foundation - steel joints are known to part, etc.

In both of these cases, one might thus speak of an emotional over-reaction to a perceived (but possibly non-existent) danger. If Hare's point is taken to be, however, that any one of these fears may be retained in face of solid evidence to the contrary with respect to its empirical foundation, it must be said to take on the character of an *idée fixe*.

How such a thing may happen was convincingly shown in John Wisdom's well-known fable of the Jungle Garden.¹⁴ There, two persons are presented as finding a clearing in the jungle, full of flowers and weeds and so on. One of them claims that it must be tended by a gardener, but whatever measures they take, it turns out to be impossible to find this gardener. He cannot be seen, so he is claimed to be invisible; he cannot be traced by dogs, so he is claimed to have no scent; he cannot be stopped by an electrical fence, so he is finally said to be immaterial.

What was once a straightforward empirical hypothesis is thus gradually emptied of all empirical content. But here we should exercise some caution, too. For as I understand Wisdom's story, what was shown to lose more and more of its empirical content was the specific explanation given for the presence of the Jungle Garden, viz., the existence of a gardener. But the fact to be explained, the presence of the garden, was still there.

This brief discussion might possibly be misconstrued to mean that I want to present all religious belief as irrational and that I think that the only thing that counts in religion is its cognitive side.

Against the second idea I have argued repeatedly,¹⁵ but as regards the first one I must point out that the only thing that can be concluded from the examples just discussed is that a religious belief may *sometimes* take on an irrational character - just like any other belief. I do not think, however, that we should take irrationality as some kind of defining character of religious belief like some philosophers and theologians defending the aspect change and the language game approaches.

Similar things are often found to happen with, e.g., political beliefs. Many people are quite unwilling to accept the facts of reality when they fly in the face of strongly held political opinions, and the case is similar with many scientific as well as every-day beliefs -

¹⁴ Wisdom, John (1944-45); reprinted in Wisdom, John (1953).

¹⁵ Cf. e.g. Haglund, Dick (1983b), (1987), etc.

just look at the proliferation of useless health cures and ineffective methods for losing weight.

This may thus be the place to consider one great difference between religious conversion and the case of ambiguous pictures like the duck-rabbit. In the latter case it is a question of interpreting a line drawing as being a picture of either a duck or a rabbit. But nobody would ever mistake the lines on the paper for a real duck or rabbit.

When we discuss the problem of religious belief, the case is quite otherwise. Only the most rabid critics of religion (and a few modern theologians) would say that religion is only concerned with painting a verbal picture without content, a fairy-tale without reference to the world we experience. The great majority of religious believers, both now and during past centuries, would no doubt claim that religion *is* concerned with reality, with this world and, possibly, with another, coming one.

The important question is thus; can such a picture of the world be tested? From a phenomenological or Kantian perspective it is obvious that it cannot be tested by comparing it to any "ultimate reality", to a Ding-an-sich-world behind and beyond it as seemingly implied by the GTNA.

Like any other theory regarding the world we live in, it has to be tested within the field of knowledge available to us, with regard to its relations to other features internal to the total constituted life-world of the person concerned.

To see how, we shall turn briefly to the case of science.

It is nowadays commonly accepted that a scientific theory cannot be tested in itself, but only on the basis of certain complementary assumptions. Nevertheless, science evolves, new theories are presented and (sometimes) rejected. How does this happen?

Mostly, I would say, in the way that a new scientific hypothesis or theory is (provisionally) accepted as an addition to an already accepted body of scientific knowledge. From this combination, predictions can be made as to the outcome of certain experiments, and if these predictions are found not to hold, the new theory (or hypothesis) is rejected or modified; otherwise it is retained - for the time being.

In certain cases, however, the new theory is regarded as so convincing or plausible that suspicion is instead thrown on "received knowledge", and in such a case it will be some old notion that is rejected or modified.¹⁶

Sometimes it also happens that new theories are pitted against old ones, as was the case with both the theories of relativity, which clashed with that very model of a scientific theory, Newtonian mechanics, and with quantum and wave mechanics, which were incompatible with the classical theory of electro-magnetism. Here, it might be said that the difference was of a more fundamental kind;¹⁷ new paradigms were contrasted with old ones, but the process was fundamentally the same, although factors like a greater explanatory power and the ability to integrate not only new facts but also the facts and observations supporting the older theories were also important.

So far, this may seem a very rosy story. But there are two somewhat disturbing things that ought to be mentioned, and which have some relevance with regard to the testability of a religious perception of the world.

¹⁶ It is hard to see that this process follows any strict or formal rules, but it is also obvious that it is not entirely ad hoc or random.

¹⁷ This was, of course, the main point of Kuhn, Thomas (1962).

The first is that our total scientific knowledge is *not* a coherent and internally non-contradictory body of knowledge; it is rather a very complex system of "bits and pieces" which are only sometimes connected in a clear and undebatable way, and it is also a system suffering from some obvious and many as yet unknown lacunae and internal contradictions.

One of the greatest problems at present is the tension between the deterministic theory of general relativity and the probabilistic theory of quantum mechanics. Attempts, not entirely convincing, are at present being made to construct some sort of unified theory, where the so called "super string theory" seems to take the lead for the moment. No convincing and testable unified theory has yet been presented, however, and even when (and if) that does happen, there are lots of other pieces of scientific theory that still have to be integrated into the pattern.

The second thing is that since most people on this earth and in any single society are not on a level to be able to understand and fully integrate the most advanced scientific theories, let alone to know and integrate *all* scientific knowledge, a fundamental role will still have to be played on the individual level by personal experiences and judgement.

Even in the field of scientific knowledge, personal experiences, and not just in the sense of passive observation or the registration of the results of experiments, will sometimes play a decisive role in determining the position taken by an individual scientist on whether a certain new hypothesis is to be regarded as corroborated or falsified, and in the field of the perception of the universe as a whole (or of important or decisive parts of it) as governed by a benign or evil personal force or God, this is even more so.

For each person, individual interests and capacities combined with external factors will determine to which degree he or she accepts and internalizes the religious system(s) or worldview(s) current in the communities and contexts where he or she is brought up and lives. Various circumstances will cause these internalized assumptions, evaluations, norms and models of interpretation to be reconsidered, sometimes to be rejected or modified, sometimes to be still deeper entrenched. But together with other information, this constitutes the background against which every new experience must be tested and interpreted.

And here we must return once more to the question of meaning. Human beings seem to have a craving for meaning and purpose, and as indicated above, it seems to me that the perception of meaning is mediated by complex Gestalt qualities. There may thus be a tendency to perceive a meaning also in things and events, where there was originally none to be found or where the corresponding Gestalt qualities are present only as by-products of other, natural processes. To give but one example, there are, in the history of archaeology, many instances of pieces of stone mistaken for implements and of cracks and fissures mistaken for carved messages.

In the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, a great part is played precisely by the revelation of a divine message.¹⁸ Of old, this message was usually thought of as being revealed in the Holy Writs, in the Old and New Testaments and the Qur'an. But to derive, e.g., a system of Neo-Platonic theology from the narrative of the Gospels takes a great deal of vigorous and inventive interpretation.

¹⁸ Some notes on this issue may be found in Haglund, Dick (1984b).

It is sometimes also held that God's will is additionally or primarily revealed through history, e.g., through the history of the Jewish people or the life and death of Jesus, and here, too, it is obviously a question of interpretation, possibly of reading things *into* the events as much as reading things *out of* them.

Especially in the Christian tradition, there is furthermore a strong tradition of people being called (by God) to this or that duty, e.g., to the ministry or to work as a nurse or physician.¹⁹

Now, if somebody experiences a strong vocation in this sense, this may naturally be a decisive experience, leading to a profound change in his or her life. Similarly, if someone experiences God's will as revealed through this or that incident, how are we to prove that this subjective experience is wrong?

So long as there remains some cognitive content to a person's religious belief, there is room for both mistakes and testing. It is only when all claims to have something to say about the nature of man and the universe are rescinded in the way suggested by Wisdom's parable that religion turns into pure emotion.

As to the acceptance and integration of a personal religious experience, the decision rests with that person himself. If he carefully considers the experience in question in relation to the cognitive parts of his religious belief and to the rest of his knowledge of the world, doing his best to avoid being swayed by accidental whims and persistent biases, he has done as much as he can ever possibly do to test it. And, provided that he does not hurt other people by this decision, may he proceed in peace on the way he has thus chosen.

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¹⁹ In Swedish, there is a classical discussion of these problems in Wingren, G. (1942).

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