

Lessons in Faith and Knowledge

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to consider how well equipped philosophy is to meet the logical and epistemological demands of religious belief. That this belief is a response to questions both practical and urgent – the nature of one’s existence, the reality of salvation – frequently seems quite unimportant in a field dominated by rationalism and theistical realism. To properly understand both the response and the questions that give rise to it, I want to return to the foundations of religious thought. These foundations, I suggest, are not found in pure intuitions of divine reality, or in objective perceptions of divine handiwork. Religious thought begins with religious education. That is where we will find the conceptual tools to make sense of talk about God. More importantly, perhaps, that is where we will find a criterion of knowledge.

Education embodies the creative involvement of one mind in the development of another. The philosophical import of this is two-fold. First, it provides a model for conceiving Creation and the Agent of Creation. This resolves the conflict between classical and neo-classical ontologies, offers instead a chastened transcendence: otherness without isolation, involvement without equiprimordiality. Second, it instantiates providence in action, God at work in the believer’s life. Our criterion of knowledge, then, is a matter of impact: the ‘experientable difference’ providence makes to the believer’s life. Together, model and instance underpin a realignment of *praxis* and *theoria*. Religious *praxis* stands upon its claim to truth; without *praxis* embodied by the connection of developing minds, truth cannot be ascertained.

I would like to begin with a simple question: what is Philosophy of Religion about? The answer ought to be obvious. It is about religion. The clue is in the name. True, perhaps, but hardly helpful. As D. Z. Phillips observed, when discussing religion we cannot assume that everyone knows what we are talking about (1981, 1). Consider the language of Process Theology. That legendary Whiteheadian argot has proved all but impenetrable.¹ More generally, talk about God is notoriously difficult to pin down, either logically or epistemologically. There is no fixed rule for its proper construal or application. Phillips likened it to the Tower of Babel, but for one crucial difference. The builders of that edifice were agreed on their undertaking, “they were trying to do the same thing.” More than can be said for Philosophers of Religion: “the nature and purpose of their subject is itself a philosophical controversy” (1981, 1). Scholastic tradition charged philosophers with demonstrating the existence of God. Recently, their devotions have concerned the rationality of religious belief; while some, like Phillips, are dedicated to investigating the logic of the language affirmative of God.

All this, and much more, is what Philosophy of Religion is about. But are these logico-ontological ruminations really *about* religion? Are they concerned with religion as understood by religious believers? The answer, I suggest, is ‘no’. It is my contention that, when pursued in the rationalist-cum-realist mode currently dominating the field, Philosophy of Religion bears little relation to what religious believers say and do. Indeed, what religious believers say and do is commonly ignored in favour of what philosophers say and do. This may be an occupational hazard. “The theorising mind [William James observed] tends always to the oversimplification of its materials” (1985, 46).ⁱⁱ This leads us to confuse religion with research, mistaking it for a disinterested enquiry into truth or reality. Consequently, we assume religious thought can and should provide rational justification for belief in that reality. We may even suppose that religion ought to be linguistically self-contained: in Wittgensteinian parlance, one language-game among others. All of which leaves us somewhat ill equipped to meet the logical, epistemological, and psychological demands of those who not only think and talk about faith, but live by it.

In fact, those schematic abstractions may be, as James averred, at “the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested” (1985, 46). To avoid getting hopelessly tangled, then, we must concern ourselves with the practices and traditions which constitute religious life. So said another pragmatic thinker: “[w]hatever else the rational theologian may pretend to do, he will in fact be considering a question posed to him by religious belief; and he may as well be above board about it” (Farrer 1967, 1). Do so and we shall see that the religious question is both practical and urgent. It is not a matter of what God *is* per se (or *in se*) but of what God does. More immediately, it is a matter of what the believer can and should do in response. For the believer asks not “how truly God corresponds to my idea of him” but “What shall I do to be saved?” (Farrer 1967, 11).ⁱⁱⁱ

Religion is an activity, the co-operative structure of which is embodied in the language of religious *praxis*. There, pure and perfect Being is not centre-stage, love is. God is Love: primal connection and principle of (pro)creation. Out of love, God sends a Son who, in his own saving death, becomes the agent of our salvation.

A salutary warning to those scouring the world for signs of a First Cause. They assume that religious thought is a procedure for establishing basic religious concepts. In doing so, they strip faith of its co-operative status. Religious *praxis* is no longer a matter of participating in the saving acts of God. It is rather a cognitive or conceptual exercise: “an activity which appreciates certain facts or qualities among things and interprets them by the concepts it is led to form” (Farrer 1967, 2). The believer no longer seeks the divine will in order to co-operate with it. Instead, she “must perceive the God-suggestive aspects of things and on the basis of [her] perceptions accept or formulate the theology which they alone can justify” (Farrer 1967, 3). Consequently, she must stake her claim to “objective perceptions of [those] God-suggestive qualities.” Do so, however, and Ayer’s old challenge quickly appears: the impossibility of verification, the refusal to agree the ‘evidence’ is what she believes it to be.

Philosophers fare little better. The strength of this position lies in those objective perceptions. Unfortunately they assume that the realities perceived are the effects of an agency utterly unlike natural causes, so beg the question.^{iv} To begin with the idea that a pattern of natural effects has been identified which requires explanation presupposes the very cosmologicality we hoped to discover. For an effect is the effect it is in virtue of its cause: a pattern is only a pattern as enacted by a pattern-creating-agency. Pressing the point, we have no access to God apart from expressions of that agency. We cannot know God as He is in Himself: infinite Being lies far beyond our finite epistemological reach. Even in the ontological mode, God is defined in terms of His function: as the maximum in a scale of being the remainder of which describes finite existence.^v Hence, an effect that demands cosmological explanation presupposes cosmological activity and, therefore, the Agent who acts cosmologically.

The temptation to produce “the rabbit of theistical proof from the hat of impartial cosmology” is, Farrer advised, best avoided (1959, 6). We are too late to “experiment with an uninterpreted environment, to see whether it prompts the formation of a brand-new interpretative concept, the concept — dear me, yes! — the concept of God” (1967, 1).

The crucial mistake here is the assumption that religion is a disinterested inquiry into the nature of Creation and its putative primogenitor. This assumption is clearly false. A life of

faith is not an exercise in cognising or even recognising First Causality; it is an ‘experiment’ in drawing upon it. It is, moreover, an ‘experiment’ in which the believer has considerable vested interests. This was James’ lesson (1977a). The religious hypothesis offers a “live option” because the believer’s involvement with it is not neutral. Farrer concurred. Faith translates ‘First Causality’ as Sovereign Will. “This will it is that touches us; we aim to co-operate with it, and we hope to be saved by it” (Farrer 1959, viii). This is no mere choice, rational or otherwise; it is an ultimatum.

If God is known, He is known as the guiding hand of providence and author of Creation. Both faith and philosophy are committed to the notion that the action of God is universal, expressed at every level of Creation. Here, however, faith gains the upper hand. That Universal Will is only immediately experiencable in one place: the believer’s life. Religious *praxis* is predicated on interaction, personal communion. The believer lays claim to some confluence of finite and infinite. That is what ‘creation’ and ‘providence’ mean. Even *ex nihilo* creationism stands upon a prior claim to providential care. This putative experience supplies the reason for further theistical speculation. It provokes the search for the ‘guiding hand’ elsewhere, inspires that “craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is” (1977b, 42). The God of you and I must be the God of everything. Ignore immediate experience, however, and we cannot make sense of the claim to either cognise or recognise this Sovereign Will. The notion remains abstract; at best a merely logical move issuing in something like Voltaire’s deism, which has little or no claim on the believer’s life. Abandon the demand for providential care, that is, and “the link is cut between life and creationist belief.” Cut the link, and “the investigation of that belief appears superfluous” (Farrer 1959, viii). Natural explanation will suffice.

The key to construing the world as the work of providence, the expression of a Sovereign Will, is found in the concept of mind.

The world-order on one hand, and human mentality on the other suggest to us the hypothesis that wisdom made the world, and supplies us with the terms in which to formulate it (Farrer 1966a, 93-94).

Wisdom, *nota bene*, not mechanism. ‘Mind’ here cannot mean Cartesian consciousness, sheer noesis beloved of rationalism. Religious *praxis* is an expression of concrete relation. Not thought thinking itself, but mind socially embodied, physically extended.

If we are concerned about a Creative Cause, it is because, in creating all things, he is creating us; and it concerns us to enter into the making of our souls, and of one another’s. To enter into the action of God thus is what we mean by religion. (Farrer 1966a, 66)

Here is the pragmatic heart of faith. The social and physical reality of consciousness supplies both conceptual model and vital clue. The former is God as loving Other; the latter, loving Otherness as social outreach. On theistical premises, that is, the ‘guiding hand’ of providence is found, not by raking through physical nature, but in a personal reality much closer to home. Hence Farrer’s own simple question: “[h]ow did religion get into our heads?” The answer is surely obvious. “It was taught to us, was it not?” (1967, 3).

This vital move returns us to the philosophical psychology underpinning religious *praxis*. We learn about God from those who take an interest in our moral, intellectual, and spiritual development. Their interest is an integral feature of our education, not simply as motivation but in the very structure and import of these encounters. Teaching and learning, that is, are architectural elements of a social self. They mark the fundamental dependence of the self upon loving others, the self as a social reality.^{vi} Here are the conceptual tools for making sense of the language affirmative of God. The creative involvement of one mind in the development of another supplies terms for thinking both Creation and the Creative Agent responsible.

As a model for conceiving Prime Creative Agency, this resolves an age-old conflict: the sheer logical and ontological disjunct between transcendent reality of God and immanent act of Creation. This has long been the battleground of classical and neo-classical ontologies.

Classical or scholastic theologians fought to preserve the Being of God from the contaminating contingencies of Creation. They demanded ‘high transcendence’, what Edward

Henderson has dubbed “the existence of God above and before all worlds, the life of God-in-God” (1999, 101).^{vii} This represents God as Absolute Being, Being-just-being-itself. In short, for God to *be* God, He must be ontologically and epistemologically independent.

Whitehead responded by demanding the full-bodied return of God to Creation. Scholastic realism, he argued, is logically incoherent: independence issues in isolation and isolation is indistinguishable from non-existence. As Charles Conti put it, Being apart contravenes Quine’s predicate rule: “no entity without identity and no identity without describability; *no entia non grata*” (1995, xxii).^{viii} Apart from some predicable possibility, Being lacks particular instantiation: it is not this, that, or any other thing. Consequently, classical constructs remain cognitively empty: Absolute Being identifies no particular being so “propels God off the chart of ‘being’ altogether” (1995, 7).

Thus, Whitehead purged metaphysics of the “vacuous actuality which haunts realistic philosophy” (1978, 29). In place of Aristotelian being-talk, he built a *nexus* of concrete relations: ‘real being’ as a dynamic correlation of ‘beings’. The demand for absolute transcendence was rebuffed. *Real* Being *must* have its consequences. Equiprimordiality turned up the heat on a ‘Frigid First Cause’,^{ix} welding finite and infinite permanently together: God-in-the-world-and-the-world-in-God.

The conflict between classical and neo-classical theologies remains intractable. Their ontologies are, by definition, mutually exclusive; they pull in opposite logical directions. Being-just-being-itself is what it is apart from active relations, actual, possible, or conceivable. Such logical difficulties, however, are the province of philosophers and theologians. For the believer, both sides are potentially disastrous. Both process and perfection leave them psychologically disenfranchised. Abandoned to their fate, the faithful “take their chances in the rather *unsacramental* scheme of things” (Conti 1995, 152).

The logic of perfection repudiates relation absolutely, so undermines the basic revelation of God as Loving Other. Active relations entail change, the realisation of unrealised consequences: more joy in heaven for every sinner saved.^x But there can be no scope for unrealised consequences in Absolute Being. *Ipsium Esse* wants nothing from me and I can do

nothing for or about it. This makes a nonsense of Christian belief. It reduces the sending of a Son to a Sunday school performance: puppet-show moralising with neither meaning nor relevance for the audience. There are no genuine witnesses, hence no salvation. Being-just-being-itself-in-plenitude rebuts the divine predicates most crucial to the *praxis* of faith: infinite love, abiding compassion. It lacks extensionality, social outreach.^{xi} Sever the link with social outreach, the confluence of finite and infinite, and the life of faith has no purpose.

Martin Buber understood the practical risks of so thoroughly disjunctive a construct all too clearly. The rarefied ‘presence’ of sheer Being, he suggested, distances the philosopher from the demands of lived relation:

On the threshold he lays aside his inauspicious everyday dress, wraps himself in pure linen and regales himself with the spectacle of primal being or necessary being; but his life has no part in it. (1966, 27)

The philosopher’s God is an empty concept, a God about whom we have nothing to do. Divine *Ipseity* offers neither motive nor opportunity for interaction, not with God and, what is perhaps worse, not with one another.

A poignant illustration of this appears in Buber’s biographical writings. The religious experience of youth, he says, was “of an otherness that did not fit into the context of life” (1973, 45). His encounters with the numinous offered something “unexpectedly mysterious and uncanny, finally lighting a way into the lightening-pierced darkness of the mystery itself.” Transcending the daily ordinary was “illumination and ecstasy and rapture without time or sequence.” Not, however, without consequence.

Following a “morning of ‘religious’ enthusiasm”, Buber was visited by “an unknown young man”. Despite being open and attentive, Buber confesses he was there “without being there in spirit.”^{xiii} As a result, he failed to guess the questions his visitor did not ask. He writes:

[N]ot long after, I learned from one of his friends — he himself was no longer alive — the essential content of these questions; I learned that he had come to me, not casually, but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. He had come to me; he had come to me in this hour. What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning. (1973, 45-46)

A tragic event and afterwards a responsibility keenly felt. “I have [he said] given up ... exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up.” Faith returned to the world of real relations, standing foursquare on its response the most urgent of demands.

The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fullness but each mortal hour’s fullness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demand a response. (1973, 46)

Such personal insights touch the heart of religious *praxis*. They remind us that the purpose of faith is to put us in personal communion with God and, through God, one another. Our task is to discover God’s will and align ourselves with it. And “God’s will [Farrer reminds us] is written across the face of the world” (1966a, 114).^{xiii} Our salvation, the believer claims, depends upon it. In the absence of so primal a connection, then, Ludwig Feuerbach could offer the believer only one conclusion. “A God who does not trouble himself about us, who does not hear our prayers, who does not see us and love us is no God”(1957, 213).

If scholastic thinkers failed to establish their claim to lived faith, process theologians fared no better. Despite the neo-classical charter of his “philosophy of organism” (1978, 7) Whitehead remained a metaphysician in the classical sense. Describing the “final realities” of Creation, he insisted that “the metaphysical characteristics of an actual entity...should be those which apply to all actual entities” (1978, 90). That included God: “God is an actual entity and so is the most trivial puff of existence in far off empty space” (1978, 18).

Furthermore, his principle of process had simply replaced the classical ontology of being with an ontology of action. For any existent, to be *is* to act; that is, to “contribute determination to the actual entities in the *nexus* of some actual world” (1978, 25). This necessarily locates real

being in a *nexus* of beings. For Whitehead, “*how an actual entity becomes constitutes what that actual entity is*” (1978, 23). And ‘*how an actual entity becomes*’ is a matter of mutual conditioning: the determination of an actuality by the entire *nexus* of actualities constituting its environment. This (Conti explains) meant “[n]o actualities without full and proper integration with other actualities, themselves in the process of becoming” (1995, xxii). In short, existence is found exclusively in active connections. A “bold retention of mutual immediacy” indeed (1995, 211, n9). It means, apart from Creation, there is no God. “[N]o two actualities can be torn apart: each is all in all.... [E]ach temporal occasion embodies God and is embodied in God” (Whitehead 1978, 348).

This is equiprimordiality in action, as it were. It certainly rebuts ontological isolation, but at what cost? The world is literally, in Grace Jantzen’s phrase, God’s body (1984). God is logically and ontologically equivalent to *natura naturans*. However, natural processes by themselves do not require theistic explanation. As for the alleged necessity of those explanations, there is no avoiding the positivist’s lesson. From Hume to Russell, philosophers have been quick to observe that atheistic naturalism is in no way logically incoherent. Farrer, too, recognised the ever-present gap between evidence and its interpretation. “With all the furniture of heaven and earth before his vision, [he conceded] the un-illuminated can still say ‘There is no God’” (1967, 126).

Equiprimordiality is, therefore, a psychological and theological liability. The God of faith is lost amid the flux and flow of natural process. Echoes of Spinoza: *Deus sive natura*. We should be careful how we choose, as James observed. Both faith *and* philosophy are in jeopardy here:

The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. (1977a, 734, n47)

Farrer agreed: assign theism the same logical status as naturalism and theism is reduced to “a piece of slang, an appreciative noise” (1972a, 172). Thus, Whitehead’s neo-classical

naturalism also fails to fulfil the first theistical requirement: the intimacy of a personal Other. That intimacy is not an invitation to psychological reduction any more than ‘otherness’ is the corollary of scholastic absolutism. It is, however, fully constitutive of the meaning of lived faith. “The only God who can mean anything to the human mind is the God about whom the human will has something to do” (1967, 70). And what the human will can do about a God exhaustively defined by natural processes is extremely limited.

[T]he God of nature can be worshipped in a dumb and distant sort of way; but how can he be prayed to? And how can he be trusted? If we pray to him, what can we ask him to do? And if we trust him, what can we trust him to perform? Is not he committed by his own consistency to the rules of the system he has created? How can we ask him to act out of order, that he may answer our prayers? How can we rely on him to save our children from disaster, if the disaster is coming to them? (1970, 146)

This God is an impersonal God, divine hands tied by the rhythms and regularities of natural process. Natural processes constitute the physical universe. Actual existents both comprise and are comprised of matrices of mutually conditioning forces, forces that must do what they do whomever it helps or harms. Life and the possibility of life depend on it. Change the forces and we change the nature of the existence they express. Worse still, change the forces on a whim and we destabilise the rhythm and regularity to which the emergence of living organism is a response. All living things depend upon relatively stable conditions for their continued existence.

‘Relative stability’ and ‘mutual conditioning’ should not, however, be mistaken for collaboration. Such anthropomorphic constructs only serve to mask the reality. The universe as we know it is neither a Mutual Society nor a Co-operative. It is a “free-for-all of elemental forces” (Farrer 1966a, 91). These collisions and exploitations are arbitrary: expressions of nothing but their own realisation. The disasters we perceive are an inevitable consequence of this cosmic brouhaha. Arbitrary collisions and exploitations are indistinguishable from the conditions for existence. On process premises, they are also inseparable from the character of God.

Under the circumstances, Farrer conceded, “theism adds nothing to naturalism” (1967, 70). Faith lived and understood as an active relation is strained to breaking point by equiprimordiality. With the metaphysical weight entirely on natural processes, the lines of communication Whitehead himself sought to reopen are cut.

There’s the rub: both classical and neo-classical theology issue in depersonalised abstractions. They fail to maintain the basic personal connection between the believer and her God. In so doing, they breach the psychological and logical conditions of lived faith. To heal the breach, we must abandon those abstractions and return to the pragmatic foundations of that faith.

Once again, faith is a matter of real relations, not merely physical but personal. The minimum condition for making sense of those relations is two personal agents. Religious *praxis*, that is, presupposes the ‘otherness’ of God. The problem facing the pragmatic theologian is how to preserve that ‘otherness’ without either retreating to the glacial slopes of high transcendence or plumbing the positivist depths of process naturalism. The believer’s response is to seek a conceptual model close to home, an analogy by which ‘otherness’ may be understood.

That analogy, as suggested, is found in religious education. More specifically, the student-teacher relationship supplies a conception of one agency fully involved in the realisation of another without resorting to either over-inflated transcendentalism or reductive naturalism. Teachers cannot be equivalent to students any more than they can be absolutely independent of them. Both moves result in the absence of actual teaching. And in the absence of actual teaching there is no reason to suppose an actual teacher.

To explain: teacher-student relations are complex and subtle. In essence, however, they articulate two agencies co-opted by a single project. In more traditional parlance, two wills in one. Crucially, the primary will cannot predetermine the nature or progress of the secondary. Teachers do not lay the rails on which our development runs any more than they set out to replicate themselves. To attempt as much would ensure failure. Education is not, as teachers will remind us, a matter of rote repetition. It is the formation of a free creative agency capable of undertaking its own enquiries and, ultimately, making of itself what it will. In the words of Mother Carey, the teacher’s role is to ‘make things make themselves’ (Kingsley 1864, 253).^{xiv}

Teachers, then, do not to develop their students per se; rather they involve the student in his own development, equipping him to pursue that process of self-construction to greatest effect. Good teachers guide faltering steps, support our understanding until we are ready to ‘stand on our own two feet’. Philosophically and theologically (as well as literally) that is how we all learned first to walk and then to run.

Good teachers invest in their students the values and ideals of a shared enquiry. Those values and ideals are encoded, firstly in the conceptual and inferential connections that constitute the elaboration of their subject; secondly, in the critical and analytic constructs which are brought to bear on those connections. Together, these are the tools the student must master if he is to engage in the enquiry on his own account. In appropriating these tools, the student is instantiated as participant in the process of self-construction. He embarks on a journey of intellectual and spiritual development.^{xv}

Put simply, we learn the language of faith as we learned our mother tongue: in dialogue. And thought, Farrer reminds us, is “the interiorisation of dialogue” (1967, 126). In learning to speak, we also learn to think; that is, we learn to “talk silently to the images of the absent, or we can pretend to be our own twin, and talk to ourselves” (1970, 74). Feuerbach called it “the inner life of man” (1957, 2). It is a dialectic of exchanged perspectives, transactions in which consciousness comes to self-consciousness.

Initiating this dialectic requires more than declarations of intent or official certification. The identity — and, indeed, authority — of the teacher is grounded, not in prior potentiality, but in activity. Crucially, it is not grounded in one activity (as Whiteheadians suppose) but two. One is obviously the act of teaching. Instructing students in the rules of the enquiry, supplying the tools with which they will carve out their identities as investigators in their own right. For this to be effective, however, a considerable amount of stage setting is required. Teaching presupposes the teacher’s own involvement in the enquiry. This must be both prior to and in parallel with the teaching; the teacher’s mandate depends on it. Onlookers, however knowledgeable, lack the direct experience and therefore the authority which is the privilege of the practitioner. If this is true of teaching in general, it is doubly so in the case of religious education. The knowledge and understanding which underpins that process is neither

objective nor neutral. Faith is not a set of facts to be learned by rule or rote. To be properly understood, faith must be lived.^{xvi}

Teachers, then, must transcend their teaching activities. Put simply, they must have a life outside the classroom and lecture theatre. This life outside might have nothing to do with their students; their students may know nothing about it. (They may not even imagine it exists: readers may recall that first, oddly perturbing, ‘real world’ encounter with their own teachers.) Nevertheless, in-class engagements presuppose what Farrer would call the teacher’s “prior actuality”: a life outside (1972b, 179). Only by living such a life, by participating in other activities and personal relations, do we acquire the understanding that makes teaching possible. Put simply, a teacher is a teacher because she understands, perhaps tacitly, that human personality is a creative involvement of one consciousness in the development of another. And that is something we learn through the involvement of others in our own development.

Noting the limitations of any analogical extension, the theological application should, nevertheless, be clear. We do not suggest that God learned his trade from other gods. The point is, rather, that the word ‘God’ functions as a job title. To be God is to be God to a world of persons. This does not deny the prior reality of that Agency we call God, does not (as some might fear) “cut God down to size and fit him on a world that measures up to him extremely poorly” (1972b, 191).^{xvii} It simply means that the function God performs for finite existents is not one He need perform for Himself. That function is, of course, an act of providential creation. We cannot suppose that God need play providence to Himself.

God transcends the world as the teacher transcends her teaching activities and her relationships with students. Can we claim that the teacher is a teacher in absolute independence of her teaching activities? Surely not. The designation ‘teacher’ is not a definition but a mode of activity: not a being, but a *way* of being. It cannot, therefore, be predicated upon acts held perpetually in abeyance. The idea that a mode of activity such as ‘being a teacher’ could be actualised apart from its enactment is nonsensical. Furthermore, if teaching is an activity then one’s identity (and authority) as a teacher is dependent upon one’s involvement in that activity. If those acts are not forthcoming, then there is no reason to assent

to the designation. Locate ‘teacher-hood’ in the essence or ‘real being’ of the agent and any manifestation of that essence is logically, ontologically, and epistemologically disconnected from the essence as it is in itself. Any ‘acts’ are, therefore, accidental, that is unintentional, so unable to support the inference back to the (alleged) agent.

For the believer, transcendence is chastened by its capacity to meet the pragmatic conditions of faith. It is qualified (in both senses) by its ability to instantiate itself actively. Philosophical theology is thereby bequeathed the means to reconcile classical and neo-classical metaphysics. In traditional philosophical parlance, faith privileges the *ordo cognoscendi* over the *ordo essendi*. That supplies the pragmatic theologian’s empirical mandate. Real knowledge is interactive: we know things by the impression they leave on our enquiries. Pressing the point, seeing may well be believing but impact is knowledge. We learn as much from the sciences, which (wisely) restrict themselves to studying the interplay of forces, systems, and processes.^{xviii} “No physical science without physical interference,” Farrer insisted; “no personal knowledge without personal intercourse; no thought about any reality about which we can do nothing but think” (1967, 22).^{xix}

The only God about whom we can know is God in the warp and weft of creation. So say the scientists and empirical philosophers. And if we are scientifically enlightened, we cannot ignore them. For the warp and weft of creation is all with which we have to do. It does not follow, however, that all with which we have to do is all there is to God. Our empirical mandate does not mean ‘what God is to me, is *all* God is.’ The point is epistemological not ontological, as Feuerbach made plain: “What God is *to me* is *to me* all he is” (1957, 16 my emphasis). The repetition is crucial. It means ‘God can only be (for me) what God is (to me)’.

On theistical premises, the point is also largely negative. It offers little positive knowledge about this Agency beyond what can be inferred from His acts. Acts of providential care imply an agent motivated by love and foresight. According to the believer, both out-soar her own to an infinite degree.^{xx} So much so, that to know them as they are in themselves is beyond the limits of coherent thought. As suggested above, this may trouble philosophers and theologians more than it does those who live their faith. *In se*, that Agency makes no claim on faith or the believer. Beyond what the divine will does about her, she is not called upon to do anything.

Thus, faith learned a lesson in humility that positivists (who positively lacked that virtue) only stumbled upon much later. God may transcend the world, but our knowledge never will. Faith saw, too, a philosophical point apparently too subtle for many philosophical minds: the act circumscribes, not the agent, but our knowledge of the agent.

Thus, religious *praxis* demands a predication-principle. Conceive God in the descriptive mode and the way is opened for otherness without isolation, involvement without equiprimordiality. Psychological reduction may not be ruled out, but the psychological gains to the believer are significant. This predication-principle, borrowed from the believer's experience, supplies the terms in which faith can be both lived and thought. Two wills in one: faith as concrete relation, as metaphysical experiment. Teacher and student: each must be themselves, pursue their own paths, if the relation is to be possible, the experiment intelligible. Hence, the point of application is the point of appropriation.

The inference connecting the believer's full-blooded epistemology to the pragmatic theologian's chastened ontology is strictly presuppositional. Disdaining the failure of rationalist guarantees, this turns (as Strawson revealed)^{xxi} on the *adequate* logical conditions for understanding faith as a relation. The presence of actual agents is expressed in their impacts upon one another; that is, their active relation to one another. But active relations cannot *entail* the presence of any particular existent, or even any existent at all. Causality does not equate to logical necessity. Thanks to Hume, the sceptical gap between experience and inference is well established. The possibility of doubt regarding the nature and provenance of any putative encounter must be admitted. Construe such an event as a genuine impact, however, and we presuppose the presence of some impacting agent. Relations require *relata*. That is the minimum logical requirement: only where it is met can actual agents be disclosed to one another.

Presuppositional logic is looser and more fertile than the necessitarian connections beloved of scholastic and process theologians. More fertile, because it does not deny the legitimacy of analogical projects which are vital to our talk about God. Nor, crucially, does it reject the psychological investment of the believer in the act of construal. Instead, it recognises the fundamental role interpretation plays in our education and development. This, ultimately,

provides faith with its criterion of knowledge. Looser, because the failure to meet those interactive conditions does not inevitably negate the existence claim. Failure to fully engage with you on any particular occasion does not confute my personhood. For alternative interpretations of our encounter are always possible. Crucially, however, should we agree on a negative interpretation, I may still ‘reclaim’ my actions, make my excuses and, more importantly, strive to make amends.

Philosophically speaking, presuppositional thinking allows us to distinguish between agent and act without resorting to radical separation or logical isolation. Agents are identified *by* their acts but not (exhaustively) *with* them. That is why I can take responsibility *for* my acts: reclaim and reissue them in the face of their failure to achieve intended consequences, or simply reinterpret them when consequences go awry. This may be vital to finite agents; for the infinite, it is essential. Distinguishing agent from act is an anti-reductive move designed (as Farrer put it) to allow the Creator to “see an inch ahead of the creature” (1967, 160).^{xxii}

Given that inch, sceptics may be tempted to take a logical mile. In the ordinary finite case, the distinction between agent and act is mitigated to some degree by the presence of the agent. Acts usually point to some more or less obvious feature of our physical environment. If I want to know who spilt the milk, I look for a physical presence washing his whiskers. In the infinite case, however, we do not – indeed, cannot – have (putative) agent apart from (interpreted) act. God does not ‘stand apart’ from His acts as a physical feature of the world. The chances of finding Him in the kitchen holding an empty milk bottle and looking guilty are, at best, slim. Hence the temptation to resort to necessary connections and, when that fails, easy reduction.

This, it seems, is a serious deficiency of our model. The will of God and the mutually conditioning forces constituting Creation perfectly align. Too perfectly: that alignment conceals the “causal joint” between them.^{xxiii} Without the actual agent ‘standing by’, any claim to know the Other may be vitiated. Equally, involvement in the development of another mind is a process so profoundly intimate that the actions of the teacher may not be readily distinguishable in the results. This is particularly true where the relationship is successful. The student’s actions are his own; they do not, and indeed should not, reveal the hand of his

teacher. This is essential if the student is to be himself and not merely a function of his teacher's will. Outside-in intervention overrules the student's will, undermining the integrity of his actions and the relation as a whole. In the warp and weft of this creation, the hand of the teacher, like the hand of God, must remain perfectly hidden.^{xxiv}

This looks like an insurmountable problem. A perfectly hidden hand seems logically equivalent to no hand at all. Knowledge of that hand is apparently grounded in experiences immediately accessible to the student alone. Such claims are, of course, vulnerable to reductive psychology. Changing metaphors (and models), "frail finitude projects the illusion of God as supreme 'fatherly' protector; it is the result of ego-centric providentialism." Hence Freudians, Conti observed, "see believers as arranging their own adoption" (1995, 22). Drawing the criterion of knowledge from *praxis* rather than *theoria*, however, resists psychological and naturalist reduction. This agent is known in and through acts of providential care. And acts of providential care may satisfy the empirical demands described above.

The presence of a teacher can be discerned in the activities of her students. Those who have known great teachers bear the stamp of their education. Punning the point, as the teacher informs, so she *in-forms* the developing mind of her student.^{xxv} She supplies the values and ideals from which the student begins to construct his identity. She lays down the terms and conditions for what Farrer would call his "charter of function or scope of effect" (1967, 111). The degree to which the student is equipped to fulfil that charter tells the tale. It is in the process of self-construction, in the role those values and ideals play in the development of the student, that we will find our criterion of knowledge. The creative relation wherein the student's identity is cultivated will make an experientiable difference.^{xxvi} Notably, this experience is not restricted to the student. It is recognisable by those with whom he forms relationships; it is found in the cut of his character. Saint Teresa supplies the philosophically astute application in her autobiography. Faced by allegations that her experiences were "the work of the enemy of mankind and the sport of ... [her] imagination", she writes:

I showed them the jewels which the divine hand had left with me:- they were my actual dispositions. All those who knew me saw that I was changed; my confessor bore witness to the fact; this improvement, palpable in all respects, far from being hidden, was brilliantly evident to all men (Quoted in James, 1985, 42).

Logically speaking, we deduce the relation from the development, the giving from the gift; and we deduce the presence, that is, the reality of the giver from the giving act. Put simply, a relationship that delivers the moral, intellectual, and spiritual intercourse it explicitly and implicitly promises counts as real. A promise kept is a promise that is true. Whether the promise is made by part of the physical furniture of the world or not is irrelevant. Indeed, crude physical evidence won't do. What tells me of your personal presence, convinces me of your reality *quâ* personal other, is no mere physical impact. It is the impact of your personality on mine: the moral, intellectual, and spiritual transactions in which we engage and the effect they have on future transactions. And "[t]he higher the intensity of personal act, [Farrer argued,] the more overpowering the constraint to recognise it as real" (1970, 40).^{xxvii} Personal acts stake a claim to the self which cannot be ignored without self-stultification. Personal agents cannot be denied without foreclosing on the psychodynamic development of the self. Hence, Feuerbach turned to the point where divine predicates and personal acts align most perfectly for a criterion of truth.

Love is objectively as well as subjectively the criterion of being, of truth, of reality. Where there is no love, there is also no truth. And only he who loves something is something: to be nothing and to love nothing are identical. The more one is, the more one loves and *vice versa* (1986, 54).

Saint Teresa, one imagines, would approve. If I am, then I am because someone gave me the tools with which to make of myself what I am. 'What I am' is evidence of providential care. And nowhere is that care more obviously encountered than in the relation that gives rise to our understanding of its divine foundation. Just here, truths of religion and of human personality coincide. If God is known at all, he is known as the wellspring of loving creation. That wellspring overflows in the actions of those who take a hand in our moral, intellectual, and spiritual education. Participation in another's development instantiates providence in action: supplies concrete evidence of God at work in the believer's life.

This takes the argument a stage further. It means that, applied theistically, our educative model functions both literally and figuratively. The logical links connecting instance to model are presuppositional; the epistemic criteria, pragmatic. This, too, stands upon the adequate (but *not* necessary) conditions for construing both involvement and the resulting development as acts of providential care: the Agent responsible. The validity of the inference is borne out by the consequences of participation. As pragmatic thinkers argue, the truth of the putative relation lies in the experientable difference of living it. “The gospel offers God to me as a good, not simply as a fact. In embracing the good I am convinced of the fact” (Farrer 1967, 10)

The believers’ truth is a metaphysical truth. It is, moreover, a matter of real urgency. So much so, that in staking their claim to it, they are prepared to stake their life upon it. In doing so, they plant their belief on empirical ground. The metaphysical experiment, which is the exploration of that belief, both honours and instantiates the creative construction of human personality. The evidence is pragmatic: the consequences of a life lived in faith. As students, we are — or should be — keenly aware that we are who and what we are by the grace and gift of others. As teachers, we cannot take *all* the credit for our students. Humility and, more importantly, honesty prevent us.

Nota bene, this lets neither believer nor theologian off the hard questions. It certainly does not mean that theism can or should be left to its own devices: a language-game hidden from prying philosophical eyes. This is a corollary of our empirical mandate. “[T]o know God is to know, and not to do anything fundamentally different; it is to accord some real being a conscious recognition” (Farrer 1967, 21). ‘Conscious recognition’ is a product of interference, experientable difference. Real knowledge is, therefore, active; better yet, interactive. That is logically basic. Hence, all legitimate knowledge-claims must fulfil that condition. They must be an expression of this basic operation. It follows that, “[t]o know,’ or ‘to acknowledge as real,’ when used of finites and when used of God, cannot mean two utterly different things” (1967, 21). Farrer called this the “highest possible generalisation of empirical principle.” And “[t]heology [he said] must be at least as empirical as this, if it is to mediate any knowledge whatever” (1967, 22). Empirical knowledge, then, is open-access: available to anyone

prepared to grant the possibility of actual effects. More importantly, perhaps, *this* empirical knowledge *must* be accessible to everyone because it *concerns* everyone.

So much for language-games.^{xxviii} Philosophically speaking, this marks a realignment of *praxis* and *theoria*. A vital and necessary move, as W. H. V. Reade observed: “the two tasks, the doctrinal and the practical, are inseparable.” The coherent configuration of religious thought demands it. For “on Christian truth depends Christian practice, while conversely, without the practice, the truth cannot be discerned” (1951, 191). The conditions of truth are found in its practical application; applications express the commitments of truth seeking agents. Farrer put it like this: “Christ preaches salvation to those who have ears for the gospel, much as an agricultural improver offers better methods for cultivators able to understand and willing to try” (1966b). This plants the roots of *theoria* in questions first raised by religious *praxis*. In doing so, it allows us to restate the cosmological intuition without overstating its premises. No logically watertight demonstrations, but a simple question instead: can we be certain that the world does not require a divine will to complete it? More importantly, can we be sure that we do not? “They reckon ill who leave me out”, so says the voice of faith (Emerson 2010, 534).^{xxix} Right reckoning is a ‘leap in the dark’; but as James said, all the important matters of life are (1977a, 735). Refuse to leap and the evidence will not come. There is only one way to find out and that is to throw ourselves into that metaphysical experiment, to ask ourselves in all seriousness ‘can we be sure that Creation does not require our commitment to the cosmological ideal?’ Answer that and we have the beginning of an education in faith.

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NOTES

- ⁱ E.g. Whitehead's explanation of the difficult term 'prehension':
'A positive prehension is the definite inclusion of that item [an actual occasion] into positive contribution to the subject's own real internal constitution. This positive inclusion is called its 'feeling' of that item.... All actual entities in the actual world, relatively to a given actual entity as 'subject', are necessarily 'felt' by that subject, though in general vaguely.' (1978, 41). See also Whitehead 1948, 205:

'An occasion is a subject in respect to its special activity concerning an object; and anything is an object in respect to its provocation of some special activity within a subject. Such a mode of activity is termed a 'prehension'.' Cf. Conti's explanation of the term 'prehension' as 'Whitehead's expression for how one entity may take on the 'objectification' or goal of another' (1995, 257, n29.) Whitehead himself characterised them, somewhat unhelpfully, as 'vectors': "they feel what is *there* and transform it into what is *here*" (1978, 87.)
- ⁱⁱ See James 1977a for his most famous attack on absolutism.
- ⁱⁱⁱ See also Farrer 1966b, 177 for the practicality of religious truth. "It offers a programme of action, through which men are to transcend their miseries, and enter into the saving purposes of God." Farrer aligned that "programme of action" with the believer's question: it is "for the man who can ask, or be brought to ask, 'What shall I do to be saved?' It is the answer to his question."
- ^{iv} See also Russell 1967, 143-5 for the suggestion that the universe is not the sort of 'thing' that requires an explanation because it is not, in fact, a thing in the relevant sense. Notably Farrer agreed: the universe, he said, is an "unimaginable free-for-all of numerous bits of organism, system, process." Creation is not *a thing*, he added, it's "one damned thing after another" (1972b, 173-4).
- ^v See *FI*, 12 n.1.
- ^{vi} For more detailed observations on the social structure of consciousness, see Farrer 1967, 129; 1960, ch. XV; and 1970, 'Thinking the Trinity'. A remarkably similar treatment can be found in Polanyi 1974, ch. 7, 'Conviviality'. Cf. the postscript to Hampshire 1983, 2nd edition, where (Conti suggests) Hampshire finally "finished off the logic of intentionality, as Farrer did years earlier, with a flourish of 'common humanity'" (1995, 215, n9). See also 1995, 184-7; Austin 1961, 'A Plea for Excuses'; Strawson 1959, ch. 3 'Persons'. Buber described the becoming of self-hood in similar terms. See, for example, 1996, 16, 24-25, 32-34 etc. For Feuerbach on the self as 'species being' see 1957, ch. 1 'The Essential Nature of Man'. This is further discussed in Wartofsky 1982, 18 and 377. Cf. Karl Barth's critique of Feuerbach in his 'Introductory Essay' to Feuerbach 1957.

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- vii Henderson borrows the expression from Farrer's *Auseinandersetzung* with process metaphysics and the 'Death-of-God' theologian Thomas Altizer (1972a and 1972b).
- viii See also Farrer 1959, 66 and 176-7; and Hampshire 1983, 18-19.
- ix "God made his appearance in religion under the frigid title of the First Cause, and was appropriately worshipped in whitewashed churches" (Whitehead 1948, 146).
- x See Farrer 1972b, 178 and, of course, Luke 15:7.
- xi The atheism of rationalist theology, therefore, lies in "the denial not of God, as subject, but of those predicates usually associated with divinity: sympathy, goodness, justice, and so on" (Wartofsky 1982, 88). On the vital congruence of finite and infinite, see Feuerbach 1957, 30, 40, and 44; Conti 1995, 152 and Farrer 1970, 44.
- xii Cf. Laing 1972 104-5 on 'disconfirmation'. Describing a therapy session with a young woman, Laing writes: "After about ten minutes during which she had not moved or spoken, my mind began to drift away on preoccupations of my own. In the midst of these, I heard her say in a very small voice, 'Oh please don't go so far away from me.'" Eschewing the clinicians' pose of objectivity, Laing's response was at once more human and more healthy. "The only thing...I could say to my patient was, 'I am sorry.'"
- xiii See also Farrer 1964b, 7: "Human unhappiness is a human problem, and the kindness of God inspires human hands to undertake it."
- xiv See also 1972a, 176 for the "act of condescension by which God serves his creatures in making themselves". As Conti points out, this aphorism, is "crucial to Farrer's doctrine of the divine and human complementarity" (Farrer 1972, 224-5, n5). See also Farrer 1964a, 51, 82, 124.
- xv For the parallel in scientific education, see Polanyi 1964, ch. 2 'Authority and Conscience', especially 42-7.
- xvi If this is correct, it follows that a religious education offering nothing but facts from a neutral perspective – thereby placing the student in a position to make a free choice – is impossible. Firstly, it is evident that the perspective itself is not neutral but driven by the interests of the educators and, perhaps, of the society in which they act. Such interests inevitably reflect the political and personal choices of those involved. The choice of perspective expresses a value, whether that be intellectual satisfaction or those attached to secularism. All actions have some purpose. Purposes are not neutrally determined, they are chosen precisely because they are important to us. Furthermore, the choice of facts to place before the student, however comprehensive it may be, will involve some process of selection. Relevant facts must be identified and relevance, again, reflects the values of those who define what 'relevant' means under particular circumstances.
More importantly, perhaps, this alleged neutrality cannot provide a genuine education or insight into religion because it fails to convey the basic premises which govern and configure religious values and ideals. These premises are tacitly known by the believer; they cannot be explicitly formulated because they are embodied in practice. This follows from our empirical mandate, see p. 93 above. Real knowledge is a product of interaction; its objects are things about which we have something to do. The underlying premises which configure cultural practices ground and therefore precede all the doing that is to be done. They are not, therefore, accessible to the practitioner in the ordinary course of their practice. Any attempt to express this tacit knowledge explicitly requires that we step outside the discourse and so abandon our position as practitioners, thereby losing sight of the knowledge we sought to express. It is, in short, a matter of *praxis* not *theoria*.
As a result, the student will not be in a position to make a genuine choice regarding religion because he or she will be missing quite a lot of important information regarding the social, political, and personal context of their educators choices and about the premises which govern and configure religious belief. Of course, religion is not the only subject in which this applies. For a consideration of this question in relation to the teaching and practice of science, see Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, ch. 2; and *Personal Knowledge*, ch. 7.
- xvii Cf. Henderson 1996 and 1999. Henderson argues that agency analogies licence a full-blown transcendental inference to that "being who is the absolutely perfect personal agent, utterly transcending the world, condescending out of love to let it be *ex nihilo*, loving it and redeeming it but also enjoying in himself a full, perfect and concretely fulfilled life, whose perfection is independent of this or any world" (1999, 102).
- xviii "Physics is not concerned with the way things look, but the way they act; and the method of physical discovery is physical interference, so it issues in control" (Farrer 1967, 17).

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- xix See also Feuerbach 1986, 68. Cf. Whitehead 1978, 40 for the claim to be “extending and rigidly applying Hume’s principle, that ideas of reflection are derived from actual facts”.
- xx See Kierkegaard 1958, especially, 49-53.
- xxi On presuppositional logic, see Strawson 1959, ch. 3 especially 105-6 and 112; and Strawson 1952, ch. 6.
- xxii See also Farrer 1967, 114 for the claim that agent/act distinctions serve to “abstract the focality of an agency from the fact and mode of its activity”. This, of course, was the point of Austin’s essay ‘A Plea for Excuses’ (1961).
- xxiii See Farrer 1967, 65 for the idea that we cannot discern the “causal joint” between Creator and Creation: “We enter into ... [God’s] action simply by acting, whether the action be a movement of thought or an employment of the hand.” Consequently (Farrer argues) the “causal joint...between infinite and finite action can play no part in our concern with God and his will. We can do nothing about it, nor does it bear on anything we can do.” It lies, in short, outside the terms of the empirical mandate.
- xxiv See 1966b, 95 & 99; 1964a, 72; and 1966a, 80.
- xxv For readers who dislike puns, the expression ‘interconstitutivity’ was suggested by Andrew Chitty. By the strongest possible implication, any ‘education’ which fails to deliver on this promise fails in its most important aim. The teaching of dogma, of mute acceptance, of the rejection of critical engagement has, I suggest, no place in religious discourse.
- xxvi See Farrer 1959, 70. See also Conti 1995, 214, n8.
- xxvii Rebutting the schematising of personal relations, Farrer goes on: “the higher the intensity of personal act, the more complete the absurdity of listing it under any general heading. Those who think that to understand a thing is to exhibit it as the case of a rule, must be hard put to it by Shakespeare, Socrates, or St Paul, not to name Christ” (1970, 40). See Feuerbach 1957, 47-48 for the claim that it is ‘feeling-consciousness’, real sensuous relation, or more simply, love that overcomes rationalist legislation. “No man is sufficient for the law which moral perfection sets before us; but for that reason, neither is the law sufficient for man, for the heart. The law condemns; the heart has compassion even on the sinner. The law affirms me only as an abstract being, – love, as a real being. Love gives [*nota bene*] me the consciousness that I am a man; the law only the consciousness that I am a sinner, that I am worthless. The law holds man in bondage; love makes him free.”
- xxviii So much, too, for that other key Wittgensteinian notion: philosophy as a descriptive activity which “leaves everything as it is” (1985, 1: 123-4). See also Phillips 1981, 1.
- xxix Quoted in 1966a, 11. See James 1977b, 735-740 on the completeness of the Universe. This is, of course, notwithstanding Peter Atkins’ claim that the universe is just an accident, in debate with Mary Midgley on the BBC Radio 4 programme, *Today*, (2011).

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