

What's Wrong with the Adequacy-argument? A Pragmatic Diagnosis

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Abstract When confronted with the question of which philosophical conception of religion to consider most adequate, many philosophers appeal to what I call *the adequacy-argument*: that we should prefer the one that looks most adequate from the perspective of religious believers. In this paper, I provide a critique of the adequacy-argument based on a pragmatic analysis of adequacy-judgments according to which reflective adequacy-judgments are forward-looking, and hence include considerations of the consequences of adopting different judgments as guides for conduct. It is this forward-looking character that is virtually absent within the current adequacy-debate. The major advantage of a pragmatic analysis of adequacy is itself forward-looking: it would enable philosophers of religion to play a more critical and constructive role vis-à-vis religious practices than presently.

Keywords Adequacy-argument · Adequacy · Judgements · Pragmatism · Dewey

Introduction

Most philosophers would agree that philosophy of religion is the systematic study of philosophical problems actualized by religious practices. However, there is less agreement on what these problems are, or how to articulate and deal with them philosophically. Instead, we encounter divergent philosophical conceptions of religion with different understandings of religious practices, and the philosophical problems they raise. The most notable disagreement in this respect is, no doubt, that between Wittgensteinian and what I will call ‘mainstream’ philosophers of religion. The prevailing lack of consensus on these matters raises several important questions: how can we determine whether a given philosophical conception of religion gets things right or not? What does it even mean to ‘get things right’ in this context?

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The dominant response to such questions is the claim that philosophers of religion should choose the philosophical conception of religion that looks most adequate from the perspective of religious believers (a response that takes somewhat different forms). I call this *the adequacy-argument*. The adequacy-argument is frequently used in e.g., introductory textbooks on philosophy of religion to justify the focus on mainstream philosophy of religion, and to demonstrate the inadequacy of Wittgensteinian and other alternative philosophical conceptions.¹

In this article, I present a pragmatic critique of the adequacy-argument. My purpose, however, is not to defend some alternative philosophical conception of religion (my focus on the adequacy-argument and mainstream philosophy of religion is motivated by its prominence in contemporary analytic philosophy). Instead, I suggest that if philosophers are going to play a more critical and constructive role with regard to religious practices than they do currently, we need a more reflective *adequacy-debate* (my name for the ongoing discussions about the adequacy of different philosophical conceptions of religion). To that end, I develop a pragmatic analysis, inspired by John Dewey, of (adequacy-) judgments, to show that the adequacy-argument rests on a flawed view of how judgments are formed and modified in response to the relevant conditions and consequences in view. A more fruitful adequacy-debate needs to include considerations of the extent to which different philosophical conceptions of religion offer fruitful suggestions about how to deal with what I call *problems of religion*—an expression I clarify later.

A note on terminology: I concentrate on philosophy of religion as it has developed in Northern Europe and North America, and within that setting, I believe that it is rather uncontroversial to speak of a *mainstream philosophy of religion* (perhaps best discernible in introductory courses on the topic), with a basically shared philosophical conception of religion, that is, a view of how to understand and assess the central Christian/theistic claim that God exists. From this perspective, ‘God exists’ is a metaphysical claim about a spiritual power with particular properties, and the main task for philosophy of religion is to clarify the nature of this spiritual power, and determine whether it is rational to believe that it exists. Some representative examples of mainstream philosophers of religion are Richard Swinburne, William Alston, and Keith Yandell—examples which should go to demonstrate that my talk of ‘mainstream’ is not intended to signal any lack of originality or depth.

The Adequacy-argument

Throughout his career, D. Z. Phillips sought to undermine mainstream philosophy of religion’s central assumptions about the nature of religious beliefs and how to evaluate them, and it is primarily in response to these criticisms that the adequacy-argument has been formulated. Inspired by Wittgenstein, Phillips rejects the idea that

¹ For example Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35ff., Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God* Revised edition (London: Fount, 2001), Roger Trigg, *Rationality and Religion: Does Faith Need Reason?* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 67f., Anthony O’Hear, *Experience, Explanation and Faith: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 17f., and William Abraham, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1985), 17.

religious beliefs and practices presuppose a commitment to the truth of certain metaphysical and historical claims, for instance, about God's existence or the resurrection. Certainly, Phillips would agree that in order to participate in an honest way in practices such as worship and prayer, you have to believe in God, but he rejects the philosophical account mainstream philosophy of religion gives of that belief, and urges us to attend closer to the way expressions about God function within religious practices.² We would then see, Phillips holds, that to understand 'God exists' in metaphysical terms has absurd consequences. He comments: 'On its own admission, the most evidentialism can say about God's existence is that it is highly probable. Few bother to ask what happened to belief in a God with whom there is no variability or shadow of turning.'³

I will not go into the different responses that mainstream philosophers of religion can offer to these criticisms; I am content to point out that Phillips and mainstream philosophers of religion both consider their own philosophical conception of religion more adequate than their opponents', and that they appeal—in several different ways—to the religious practices themselves to ground these claims. I use 'practice' in a broad sense here, to refer not only to manifest behavior such as prayer and worship, but also to the beliefs related to such behavior, as well as ways of speaking about and understanding different situations within human life.

One frequent appeal takes the form of what I call the adequacy-argument, and its explicit goal is to settle the adequacy-debate by taking recourse to the perspective of religious believers, that is, what believers themselves would consider an adequate philosophical account of religious beliefs and practices. Here, mainstream philosophers of religion claim to have a decisive advantage. Let us look at some representative examples.

According to Christopher Insole, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion fails to acknowledge the cognitive components of religious beliefs when it—against what most believers claim—takes the beliefs to merely express trust and faith. Sometimes, it is appropriate to distinguish between what we think we are doing and what we actually do, but nothing indicates that this is one of those cases. Insole concludes that an examination of religious practices reveals that 'there is no escaping the cognitive component of many religious beliefs and utterances'—at least as regards the large majority of believers.⁴ Alan Bailey, too, stresses the Wittgensteinian inability to do justice to religious practices. He argues that 'examination of the way "God" is employed suggests that the overwhelming majority of people who think of themselves as religious believers intend it to function as the name of a causally efficacious person who has no physical body'—which accords well with a mainstream philosophical conception.⁵

On Van A. Harvey's reading, Wittgenstein understood religious beliefs and utterances as glosses on experience, that is, ways of giving expression to

² D. Z. Phillips, *Religion without Explanation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976), 36.

³ D. Z. Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 2000), 6.

⁴ Christopher Insole, 'A Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion – Or a Philosophy of Wittgensteinian Religion?' *Heythrop Journal* XXXIX (1998), 152.

⁵ Alan Bailey, 'Wittgenstein and the Interpretation of Religious Discourse' in Robert L. Arrington & Mark Addis (eds.) *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 129.

significant experiences rather than claims we should take literally. However, Harvey responds: ‘I would argue that the assumption that beliefs are glosses on experience—that the belief in immortality is a gloss, for example—blocks the religious interpreter from taking seriously the believer’s own intention expressed in the belief.’⁶ Richard Swinburne reaches a similar critical conclusion: ‘as an account of the meaning of the sentences uttered by the vast majority of theists down the past two millennia, Phillips’ account is false’, and literary and sociological surveys could prove the superiority of a mainstream philosophical conception.⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, Mikael Stenmark, and William Hasker draw similar conclusions.⁸

There is a certain ambiguity here that deserves mention: should we understand the argument as based on the judgment of ‘ordinary believers’⁹ themselves, or on that of believers equipped with the necessary philosophical understanding of the different alternatives? This is no either/or-choice, and a combination of the two helps mainstream philosophers to avoid the charge that the judgment is made in the absence of relevant information (for instance, about relevant options) as well as the charge that the judgment is too far removed from ‘lived religion’. Nicholas Wolterstorff employs such a combined approach by drawing on the adequacy-judgments of (most) *informed believers*, ‘who use theistic language in a serious religious way and who grasp the philosophical issues at stake’, and to the way they cohere with the adequacy-judgments of most ‘ordinary’ believers.¹⁰

William Wainwright and Peter Byrne represent a somewhat different type of adequacy-argument, appealing to what we, following the ideal observer-tradition in ethics, can call ideal believers, equipped with a comprehensive understanding of religion. For Wainwright, the purpose of theism is explanatory in the sense that it attempts to explain why there is something rather than nothing, why God permits evil, why moral values are objective, and so on.¹¹ Accounts such as Phillips’, which neglect this central task, are inadequate. According to Byrne, religion must offer hope, especially with regard to evil and injustice. To be adequate, any religious set of symbols needs to present a ‘through and through moral’ order, which it is possible to relate to in thought and practice, and upon

⁶ Van A Harvey, ‘Contemplative Philosophy and Doing Justice to Religion’ in D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr (eds.) *Religion and Wittgenstein’s Legacy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 187–196. The quote is from the following ‘Voices in Discussion’, 202.

⁷ Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 93.

⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘Reformed Epistemology’ in D. Z. Phillips and Timothy Tessin (eds.) *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 39–63; Mikael Stenmark, *Rationality in Science, Religion and Everyday Life: A Critical Examination of Four Models of Rationality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 321; William Hasker, ‘D. Z. Phillips’ problems with evil and with God’ *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 61 (2007), 151–160.

⁹ The term ‘ordinary believers’ is used in, for instance, David Cioocchi, ‘The Religious Adequacy of Free-Will Theism’ *Religious Studies* 38 (2002), 47. It is rarely clarified, but seems to refer to the kind of believers who have remained unaffected by the rather radical reinterpretations of religious belief suggested by, among others, Rudolf Bultmann and Gordon Kaufman. Similar views are expressed in, for instance, William P. Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 264ff.; William Hasker, ‘D. Z. Phillips’ problems with evil and with God’, 158.

¹⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, ‘Reformed Epistemology’, 61.

¹¹ William Wainwright, ‘Theism, Metaphysics, and D. Z. Phillips’ *Topoi* 14 (1995), 87.

which the current contingent order of things depends.¹² This is where Phillips, and others of a similar persuasion, go wrong.

I propose that we understand the adequacy-argument along the following lines. Philosophical conceptions of religion are accounts of religious practices—what they are like and what they are about—rather than part of those practices. The adequacy-argument holds that we should prefer the account that looks most adequate from the perspective of religious believers, and closer examination of that perspective reveals the superiority of a mainstream philosophical conception. How, more specifically, should we understand that claim? Let me take some cues from the relation known as *pragmatic implication*. A pragmatic implication takes the form: if a subject *S* accepts proposition *p* and entertains the proposition *q* (which is not logically entailed by *p*), we can say that *p* pragmatically implies *q* in those cases where it would be odd, and require a convincing explanation, if *S* were to accept *p* and at the same time reject *q*.¹³ Of course, the relevant relation for my purposes is not that between propositions, but rather between a set of practices and a philosophical judgment about these practices, but I still think the idea of a pragmatic implication is helpful. The large majority of philosophers that adopt the perspective of believers (*p*), agree that a mainstream philosophical conception of religion (*q*) seems to be the most adequate account of *p*, and hence, it is sufficient to show that those who think otherwise—e.g., Phillips and other critics—fail to give convincing ‘explanations’ for why we should reject *q*.¹⁴ This account captures the reasoning underlying the adequacy-argument rather well.

A Wittgensteinian Contribution

One crucial element of the adequacy-argument is thus, as we have seen, its rejection of objections (‘explanations’) such as that believers give confused accounts of religious practices. In later works,¹⁵ Phillips stressed a slightly different response that distinguishes two senses of ‘practice’; one sociological (practice_s), one grammatical (practice_g), to show that the problem is not so much that believers have confused views about the practices they participate in, but rather that the practices themselves are confused.¹⁶ The adequacy-argument typically draws on practices_s, Phillips holds, which refer to all the things going on in, for instance, a religious context, while the important philosophical task is to articulate practices_g, a contemplative task that aims to uncover essential features of

¹² Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 17f.

¹³ It was Paul Grice who first drew attention to pragmatic implications in the philosophy of language. The form I use it in here is adapted from Göran Hermerén, *Värdering och objektivitet* (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1972).

¹⁴ The parallel to a pragmatic implication becomes misleading if we think that religious practices *intend* to say something philosophical like when a person says ‘salt’ and a listener understands this as a request to pass the salt. We go wrong, I think, if we think of either religious practices or religious believers as consciously intending something which goes beyond these practices themselves.

¹⁵ For instance, D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire: Examining Assumptions in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 11.

practices, and which rules out ‘philosophy by Gallup poll’.¹⁷ Attention to practices_g enables us to reveal confusion in practices_s and to submit them to critique. Let us see how.

Phillips holds that religious practices_s become confused when we lose sight of the *essential* features of those practices—that is, those features that a practice could not discard without losing its *religious* character. When the contemplative philosopher reminds us of those features, certain religious outlooks (and along with them, philosophical conceptions) simply lose their hold on us. Sami Pihlström explains how this method can be used to attack mainstream philosophy of religion: its theodicies and arguments for the rationality of religious belief destroy the wonder at the existence of the world (in its present shape) that is the essential feature of religious practices_g.¹⁸ Hence, this philosophical conception of religion is inadequate.

Of course, this argument has its problems. How, for instance, would you argue against someone who claims that natural theology preserves rather than destroys a religious sense of wonder, or someone like Byrne, who identifies a rather different essential feature of religion? One suggestion, entertained by thinkers on both sides, is that what we see here is a clash between incompatible religious practices, or ways of being religious, and that Phillips’ analysis is only adequate with regard to a minority position.¹⁹ Phillips rejects the claim that his is a minority position once we look ‘outside the igloo’ of analytic philosophy, and he also insists that it is quite possible to show—again by reminders of the above kind—that certain ways of being religious are ‘shallow, trivial or uninteresting’, and even superstitious.²⁰

The important thing here is not to ask who is right, but rather to note that Phillips, despite his critique, in effect agrees with what I consider to be a central assumption of the adequacy-debate: that what to consider an adequate philosophical conception is a question we can answer by simply studying the religious practices themselves. I think this assumption leads us to isolate the question of adequacy from questions concerning the wider consequences of adopting different philosophical conceptions, something that, in turn, limits the critical and constructive role of philosophy of religion. To substantiate that claim, and point to a more fruitful alternative, I will draw on John Dewey’s analysis of judgments.

¹⁷ For instance, in the following passage from an exchange between Phillips and Stephen T. Davis, where Phillips says: ‘when reference is made [by Wittgensteinians] to what people mean, the reference is to the role the words play in their lives, not to the account they would give if asked. Notoriously, in giving that account our own words can lead us astray.’ D. Z. Phillips, ‘Voices in Discussion’ in D. Z. Phillips (ed.) *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*, 150. That this originally anonymous voice belongs to Phillips is confirmed in D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire*, 7.

¹⁸ Sami Pihlström, ‘Religion versus Pseudo-religion: An Elusive Boundary’ *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62 (2007), 3–32. It is worth noticing that Pihlström himself does not unreservedly defend the argument.

¹⁹ For instance Wolterstorff, ‘Reformed Epistemology’, Wainwright, ‘Theism, Metaphysics, and D. Z. Phillips’, Insole, ‘A Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion’.

²⁰ D. Z. Phillips, ‘William Hasker’s Avoidance of the Problems of Evil and God (Or: on Looking outside the Igloo)’ *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 62 (2007), 39; *Death and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1970).

A Pragmatic Critique of the Adequacy-argument

In many of his works, Dewey attacks the moral philosophy of his day for its reliance on a flawed analysis of judgments, an analysis which causes philosophers to neglect the rich resources for critical discussion available within our practices of making moral judgments. Both value-objectivists who claim that value-judgments are reports about the moral properties of things and situations, and emotivists who retort that value-judgments are merely reports about your feelings or attitudes, assume that the judgments in question have an *immediate* character similar to sensations and feelings. However, Dewey responds, the view that moral judgments suddenly 'are there', as given, overlooks a crucial distinction between the judgments we merely take to express liking, and the judgments we are prepared to adopt as guides for conduct *all things considered*.²¹ Speaking in terms of desires, Dewey writes:

That desires as they first present themselves are a product of a mechanism consisting of native organic tendencies and acquired habits is an undeniable fact. All growth in maturity consists in *not* immediately giving way to such tendencies but in remaking them in their first manifestation through consideration of the consequences they will occasion *if* they are acted upon.²²

Here, I will make a parallel distinction between *unreflective* and *reflective judgments*. Unreflective judgments have a character of immediacy similar to that of 'desires as they first present themselves': they surface as relatively direct responses to the situations we find ourselves in. Reflective judgments, on the other hand, arise gradually through a process of careful consideration of the *entire* situation: its possibilities and limitations, including the consequences of adopting the (unreflective) judgment as a guide for conduct. Hence, they are essentially *forward-looking*, in the sense that one central task here is to explore and assess the consequences of adopting the judgment as a guide for conduct. Unreflective judgments play an important role in this reflective process, but they are open to revision when confronted with the wider range of consequences considered in reflective judgments. Reflective value-judgments thus aim to be *guides for conduct all things considered*, guides that, experience teaches us, are significantly more reliable than unreflective value-judgments.

The pragmatic analysis of reflective judgments implies that there cannot be any rigid distinction between the process(es) of identifying *ends* to strive for, and the *means* by which to achieve them. This is because our choice of ends depends, to a significant degree, on consideration of the means available and required to reach them—or should, at least. Let me illustrate my point with an example. Imagine a religious citizen confronted with the claim (made by some fellow believers) that it is a religious duty to engage politically to permeate society—its laws, customs, and policies—with the teachings of her religious tradition. Let us assume that initially, she is inclined to agree. I call this an unreflective judgment.

²¹ John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation* in Jo Ann Boydstone (ed.) *John Dewey: The Later Works 1925–1953, Volume 13: 1938–1939* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 219.

²² John Dewey, *Theory of Valuation*, 217. Emphasis in the original.

When the believer starts to reflect, she will consider this judgment in light of the prospects of success and the consequences of adopting it as a guide for conduct. Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that she judges that there is some chance of success. Next, she looks closer at the likely consequences of both the end *and* the means, that is, the courses of action which she expects are necessary to achieve the tentatively adopted end. Among these consequences, she might list (i) increased conflicts with citizens belonging to other religious traditions, (ii) divisions and power-struggles within her own religious tradition between ‘moderates’ who resist this development and ‘radicals’ who welcome it, as well as (iii) fierce resistance from non-religious citizens, all of them likely consequences of ‘politicizing’ her religious tradition. On the basis of these considerations, she changes her mind, and starts arguing *against* those who wish to see more religion-based political action.

How can one construe the process of reasoning here? One way to misconstrue it, I think, is to picture the believer as saying: ‘Well, I agree that it I have a religious duty to take political action, but I refrain since I dislike the means it takes’. It is much more likely that she will hold that her opponents have an *inadequate* understanding of their religious duty with regard to politics, and if challenged, she would justify that claim by pointing to the consequences of adopting this judgment as a guide for action, hence appealing to forward-looking considerations to defend her judgment.

You may object that no *truly* religious person would reason this way. But does the appeal to forward-looking criteria actually signal a lack of religious commitment? Not necessarily, although her opponents will certainly claim that it does. The point here is that the believer does not decide what to consider an adequate understanding of her religious duty independently of forward-looking considerations of the consequences of adopting various alternatives (in practice, how could she?). We need not conclude that she considers, e.g., civil peace more important than God’s will—it is rather that considered judgments are woven in intricate manners, where her concrete judgments of what God’s will is in *this* social setting, as well as of the value of civil peace, take shape in processes involving consideration of the consequences of different alternatives. She may thus very well frame her standpoint in terms just as religious as those of her opponents, for instance by saying that God cannot want us to cause civil strife unless it is absolutely necessary, which, she holds, it is not, *in this particular situation*. It is just as likely (or even more likely) that her opponents will question her predictions as her theological standpoints, which, if I am right, also illustrates the contextual and forward-looking element of judgments.

Now, I take the example to show that that in many cases, it is rather pointless to distinguish questions about what to consider an adequate understanding of your religious commitment from questions of what the consequences of adopting it as a guide for conduct are. The example also shows that Dewey’s point is not limited to moral judgments about what *should* be the case: means and ends are just as interrelated in normative questions concerning—for instance—what to consider an adequate understanding of the requirements of some religious commitment.

Let us return to the adequacy-debate. Not surprisingly, my objection to the adequacy-argument is that it—regardless of version—rests on judgments that, in a Deweyan sense, are *insufficiently reflective*. However, this claim requires careful clarification. The problem is not that the perspective of believers is confused or

unenlightened. The problem is that when that perspective becomes a philosophical adequacy-criterion, there is a significant risk that the task of philosophy is reduced to getting things right about the way these practices look presently. Before I elaborate this critique, I will briefly show that all the versions of the adequacy-argument that I have identified in this article operate with backward-looking, and hence insufficiently reflective, adequacy-criteria.

To start with adequacy-arguments that adopt the perspective of ordinary and/or informed believers, it should be pretty clear that the main criterion for adequacy is backward-looking in the sense that the goal is to develop a faithful representation of religious practices that believers themselves would (currently) approve of. Appealing to informed believers makes little difference here, because Wolterstorff, too, is concerned with the task of adequately representing something already existing, rather than raising critical questions about how philosophy can help improve those practices.

The same thing, I would hold, is equally true of appeals to ideal believers. In Byrne's *God and Realism*, to take one example, adequacy-judgments are made from a comprehensive (as opposed to distorted or partial) understanding of religious practices. From that position, a supreme religious end is identified, and it is against that end that the adequacy of competing philosophical conceptions of religion can be measured.²³ Here, too, a religious end is specified and adopted without much reflection on the wider range of consequences of the end as well as the means required to achieve it. So the same view predominates here: the important task is to get things right about religious practices as they look presently, and critical questions about the consequences of adopting the religious end receives relatively little attention.

Before I can move on, I want to respond to some possible objections. First, I am not implying that religious believers' judgments in a *religious* context are always backwards-looking (I think the example with the religious citizen should demonstrate that they are *not*), only that if transferred to a *philosophical* context and given authoritative standing *there*, the result is backwards-looking adequacy-criteria. Second, rejecting backwards-looking adequacy-criteria does *not* free philosophers of the task of attending closely to the current forms of religious practices—if it did, we would no longer be making *reflective judgments* where all relevant factors are taken into consideration. It is to say that we should not let such attention overshadow the critical task of asking how and where philosophical reflection can be of help in our attempts to *improve* those practices.

Third, and most importantly, I want to reject any suggestion that what we have here is a merely semantic dispute over the use the term 'adequate' between pragmatists, who define 'adequacy' in terms of the outcome of critical reflection, and mainstream philosophers, who use the term to refer to accounts which 'get things right before we start critical reflection'. In practice, the adequacy-argument does much more: it helps define which philosophical positions to consider 'live' and 'dead'. For mainstream philosophers of religion, the 'live' options tend to be limited to theism and atheism/agnosticism, as understood within a mainstream philosophical conception of religion. Other approaches are safely dismissed without further hearing. The adequacy-argument

²³ See Peter Byrne, *God and Realism*, 12ff.

thus influences philosophical practice much more than the ‘semantic point-objection’ pretends.

Towards a Reconstructed Adequacy-debate

Thus far, my article indicates that the adequacy-debate should (a) pay more attention to the question of what it is to make adequacy-judgments, and that this reflection ought to (b) lead us to abandon the present practice of settling the adequacy-debate with the help of backward-looking adequacy-criteria. As an alternative, I have suggested (c) that adequacy-judgments are forward-looking in that they include consideration of the consequences of adopting a judgment as a guide for conduct. What is the upshot of this claim for the way we do philosophy of religion?

Karl Popper once remarked: ‘Genuine philosophical problems are always rooted in urgent problems outside philosophy, and they die if these roots decay.’²⁴ I agree. Philosophy of religion, on this view, is a series of responses to problems which involve religious practices. Examples abound: the difficulties people may experience as they strive to harmonize faith and reason; when religion and modern science seem to conflict; the cases where believers from different religious traditions experience a need to rethink their view of ‘outsiders’ when brought in closer contact with believers and non-believers of various sorts; where some believers defend oppressive practices in the name of some religious tradition, and so on. I will call them *problems of religion*, and philosophy of religion is, arguably, one set of responses, among others, to these problems.

The problems of religion lack simple solutions, but there are definitely better and worse ways of handling them. I think philosophical reflection might render the problematic situations somewhat less confusing and troublesome by offering constructive proposals that, if adopted, would improve our ability to deal with them, both intellectually and practically. But if this is so, it seems unfortunate to exclude already from the outset that such constructive proposals might challenge the framework of what is *presently* judged adequate.

Let us take John Hick’s advocacy of ‘the pluralistic hypothesis’—the hypothesis that the great world religions all relate to different manifestations of one and the same unknowable ‘Real an sich’—as an example. Critics such as Paul Griffiths and William Alston argue against Hick on the (by now familiar) grounds that from the perspective of devout believers (more specifically, the Christian tradition), this account is inadequate.²⁵ Interestingly, Hick does not deny that. To use my terminology, we can say that he argues that the pluralistic hypothesis *would* be adequate from the perspective of a reconstructed set of

²⁴ Quoted in Eberhard Herrmann, *Scientific Theory and Religious Belief: An Essay on the Rationality of Views of Life*. (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), 15.

²⁵ Paul Griffiths, ‘The Uniqueness of Religious Doctrines’ in Gavin D’Costa (ed.) *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), 157–173; William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 265.

Christian practices where, thanks to the reconstruction, we have become better at handling one particular problem of religion. He also aims to show that the required reconstructions can draw on elements already present within the Christian tradition, such as the emphasis on virtues like charity and tolerance and, not least, on the ineffability of God.²⁶ Hick's use of forward-looking adequacy-criteria thus enables him to make constructive proposals that may influence the future development of religious practices in ways that would hardly have been possible, had he stayed within the confines of the adequacy-argument.

Now, constructive proposals such as Hick's would be pointless if philosophy of religion could have no influence on religious traditions. I simply assume that it can, at least as long as it addresses problems many religious believers acknowledge *as* problems. They would also have no point if religious practices were completely static, as many religious authorities claim they are. However, such normative self-understandings seem rather far removed from the truth. First, feminist philosophers have drawn on many sources to show that religious practices have changed significantly over time, and that in these changes, aspirations to power, and intolerance towards marginalized groups have often played more significant roles than sincere theological reflection, facts that, feminists claim, philosophers have neglected for too long in their quest for 'representative' or 'ordinary' believers.²⁷ Second, research within sociology and cognitive science shows that in modern societies, where people's lives are increasingly fragmented (i.e., they move between and negotiate the demands of many loosely related spheres), traditional modes of religious transmission and policing become less effective, and citizens tend to be more suspicious of religious authorities, and this goes even for those who characterize themselves *as* religious believers.²⁸

Given these circumstances, a more accurate description may be this: religious traditions (in the Western world) are systems of thought and practice which are constantly being re-negotiated in response to criticism and developments both within and outside the traditions, and in these processes, there is no single centre of gravity, or final arbiter. From a Habermasian perspective, which stresses the equality of participants and holds that the best arguments should decide the

²⁶ For instance John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989), chapter 14.

²⁷ A philosopher of religion that has drawn attention to this process within the development of the Christian mystical tradition is Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). A number of feminist philosophers of religion stress the point that philosophers of religion often neglect to ask critical questions about *whom* to consider representative, and why. As Harriet Harris puts it: 'Feminist philosophers ... want to know 'whose beliefs' are occupying the philosophers' attention, and who is supplying the criteria of justification. ... Who is controlling the discipline and setting its norms?' Harriet A. Harris, 'A Theological Approach' in Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack (eds.), *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), 74.

²⁸ See, for instance, Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992) and Ronald Inglehart & Christian Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change and Democracy: The Human Development Sequence* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Harvey Whitehouse points out the importance of ritual and repeated exposition to religious messages for effective transmission of religion, and that rather brutal means of oppression are necessary to avoid freethinkers and diversity. See Harvey Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Walnut Creek, Lanham etc.: Altamira Press, 2004).

outcome, these processes are far from satisfactory, but I take at least this much to be obvious: forward-looking considerations *are* regularly assigned weight by a significant number of participants in these ongoing negotiations. Hence, constructive proposals which appeal to such considerations *might* influence the future development of religious practices, and philosophy of religion *might* be *one* source of such proposals, at least if we abandon the currently dominant analysis of ‘adequacy’.

This should not invite us to assume that religious practices are easily reconstructed in any direction we wish (then we are not making *all things considered*-judgments), nor that philosophers are the ones who should decide the future development of religious practices (that there is a single centre of gravity that can or should settle questions like these is in itself a dubious assumption that tends to preserve the status quo). However, it is to say that merely resorting to the adequacy-argument and its backwards-looking adequacy-criteria as setting the limits for philosophical reflection tends to make philosophy of religion a conservative defender of the status quo rather than a source of critical and innovative thinking. Despite the radical nature of Phillips’ critique, there is actually not much that indicates that he is significantly better off in this respect.

How should we go about, then, to articulate adequate philosophical conceptions if the adequacy-argument is rejected? First, and trivially, we have to make sure that we are well-informed about the current standing of religious practices in modern societies. This involves, but goes far beyond, the current views of religious authorities and ‘representative’ believers; in particular, I would like to stress the importance of sociological and psychological research. Most important is that we avoid taking the normative characterizations offered by religious authorities as descriptive reports with universal application. Second, we should look closer at the problems of religion, and the different proposals about how to articulate and deal with them put forward within different philosophical conceptions of religion. Third, we should assess the various proposals with an eye to (a) how well they contribute to our ability to handle the problems of religion better than before, but also (b) how these proposals may be connected to elements of religious traditions in such a way that they can realistically come to influence, over time, the way that at least a substantial number of believers think and act (of course, these considerations should play an important role not only in the context of justification). While (a) urges us to constantly rethink and criticize the current standing of religious practices, (b) cautions us that such criticism needs to resonate with elements within the religious tradition(s) (which, I have repeatedly insisted, involves more than simply looking at their normative self-presentations).

The link to the problems of religion makes the philosophical task inherently value-laden: we cannot in a neutral fashion identify problems, and proposed ‘solutions’ to problems have consequences that also need to be evaluated and taken into account (cf. Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis above). In that sense, the adequacy-understanding I claim we should abandon may look more neutral and less value-laden. However, it is important to remember that the problems of religion are not *subjective* or *optional*: they are experienced *as* problems by very many believers and non-believers alike, so there is really nothing arbitrary about using them as a

starting-point for reflection. Also, feminist critique should have taught us that to unquestioningly adopt some mainstream position without discussion of how this position became mainstream, and through which means it is upheld, is not so neutral after all, if we acknowledge the normative and forward-looking character of adequacy-judgments.²⁹

Conclusion

My pragmatic diagnosis of the adequacy-argument is that it sets too narrow limits for critical philosophical reflection by neglecting the forward-looking character of adequacy-judgments, but also that it is far from clear that critics—such as Phillips—fare much better in this respect. My pragmatic proposal is that we link philosophical practice closer to the problems of religion that originally triggered philosophical reflection and ask if and how different philosophical conceptions of religion can contribute to developments that improve our ability to deal with these problems. In this process, we are also forced to reflect on and clarify evaluative commitments relevant for our standpoints, something that should make philosophical practice more transparent and self-reflective. The main argument, though, for adopting forward-looking adequacy-criteria is that this would broaden the range of philosophical options to take seriously, and enable philosophers of religion to play a more critical and constructive role with regard to religious practices than they do currently.

²⁹ I deliberately use the vague term 'influence' here to uphold the distinction between religious practices and philosophy of religion as one mode of reflection on these practices. Philosophical conceptions of religion are not themselves part of religious practices, but they have repercussions for them and it they are thus not religiously neutral—not even if we identify some type of believers as 'representative' or 'ordinary'.