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Semantic Non-Doxastic Agnostic Religious Faith

Abstract:

The purpose of this article is to articulate the possibility of *semantic non-doxastic agnostic religious faith*. Robin Le Poidevin, who introduced the idea of semantic religious agnosticism, defines it as being agnostic about which parts of religion to treat in realist terms and which parts to treat in fictionalist terms (2019, 2016). I take Le Poidevin's view and argue that it is consistent with a non-doxastic attitude toward the object of faith such as acceptance. I then explore the similarities and differences between my account and a prominent version of non-doxastic faith found in the work of Daniel Howard-Snyder (2018, 2017a, 2017b, 2016, 2013). One advantage of my theory of faith is that it allows a person to be even more sceptical about religion than other versions of agnosticism while simultaneously avoiding some of the problems frequently associated with religious fictionalism.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is not to attempt a full-fledged defense of *semantic non-doxastic agnostic religious faith*, but rather to introduce the view, compare it to another account, and conclude by gesturing at some of its benefits. Agent S has semantic non-doxastic agnostic religious faith regarding p iff (1) S is agnostic about whether S ought to suspend judgment about whether to believe p is true; (2) S accepts that p; (3) S has a positive cognitive attitude toward p; (4) S is in doubt about whether p is true in realist or fictionalist terms; and (5) p is a theological statement. I will only be concerned with propositional faith.¹ In the rest of this article I'm going to describe this version of faith by explaining each of agnosticism, non-doxastic faith, and religious fictionalism. I accomplish this by explaining Robin Le Poidevin's semantic religious agnosticism (2019, 2016). Requirement (2) is a key difference between my view and Le Poidevin's position in that my account doesn't require doxasticism. I then use a prominent non-doxastic account of faith found in Daniel Howard-Snyder's Markan faith as foil to further illuminate my own view (2018, 2017a, 2017b, 2016, 2013). While much of our accounts are consistent with each other, one important area of difference regards how requirement (3) is interpreted. Exploring these differences will, I hope, shed more light on the nature of the account of faith that I am offering. I conclude by showing how this theory of faith allows a person to be even more sceptical about religion than other versions of agnosticism while simultaneously avoiding some of the problems frequently associated with religious fictionalism.

Finally, keep in mind that my focus is slightly different from many typical philosophy articles. I'm *not* focusing on offering detailed arguments about why we should adopt semantic agnostic non-doxastic religious faith. That is a valuable aim which I hope to take up in later work, but my goals here are much more modest and preliminary. I'm simply trying to offer a *coherent description* of semantic agnostic non-doxastic religious faith, contrast it to another non-doxastic account of faith,

¹ By way of contrast, for example, religious faith is sometimes described as placing one's trust in God.

and point out some of its benefits. Thus, this article should be understood as system-building, rather than an attempt to robustly defend a particular system.

2. What is Agnosticism?

The term agnosticism appears in the 19th century primarily amongst Christian writers (Wilczewska 2020, 1). Thomas Huxley coined the term in reference to suspending judgment on any question where one lacked sufficient evidence (Wilczewska 2020, 1; Huxley 1896). In religious matters the term typically referred to human's inability to know things about the nature or character of God (Wilczewska 2020, 1). This is distinct from the way in which agnosticism now usually refers to an attitude towards the existence of God. And it is this contemporary kind of agnosticism that is relevant to my purposes.²

Suppose *evidentialism* is true (Feldman and Conee 2004). This is, roughly, the idea that an agent's belief should be indexed to the quality of the relevant evidence she has for whatever belief is in question. In other words, an agent's confidence in a belief should rise and fall with the relevant evidence for that belief. It's fair to say that it is often evidentialist considerations that lead people to adopt agnosticism about the existence of God and/or other theological statements.

One way of motivating agnosticism is based on the idea that it is in principle impossible to discover whether God exists. Perhaps humans could never have the right type of evidence for something like the existence of God. Or maybe even if we could have the right type of evidence humans aren't the sort of creatures who could ever accurately interpret that evidence. If one or both of these lines of reasoning is correct, then we ought to permanently suspend judgment about whether God exists. This is not the type of agnosticism I'm concerned with here.

A different contemporary understanding of agnosticism says that the question of God's existence is indeed in principle possible to answer. However, the current evidence for God's existence either (i) results in the tie; or (ii) is underdetermined.³ With respect to (i) perhaps the agnostic has evaluated the arguments for and against the existence of God and thinks that certain key premises in the various arguments are equally likely to be true (or false). Or regarding (ii) she might think that while we do indeed have some evidence for and against the existence of God, it's underdetermined such that she can understand why different positions are taken up regarding God's existence. Either way, this kind of agnostic is open to the possibility that in the future we develop better ways to interpret the evidence that we currently possess or even gain additional evidence.⁴ Throughout the rest of this article I am addressing this type of agnosticism. In sum, this agnostic says that the question of God's existence (and the truth of other theological statements) might be in principle answerable but currently she ought to suspend judgment about whether to

² Furthermore, agnosticism is now perhaps a general epistemological term without a necessary connection to the question of God's existence. For example, See Friedman 2013

³ If evidence is underdetermined, it could be argued this actually entails permissivism without respect to religious belief.

⁴ J.L. Schellenberg has repeatedly claimed that on an evolutionary timescale the human inquiry into religion is extremely young. See, for example, Schellenberg 2013.

believe that God exists. This results in what we might call a *doxastic agnostic* about the existence of God.

3. What is Non-Doxastic Faith?

In recent years there has been growing popularity in non-doxastic accounts of propositional faith (e.g. Alston 1996; Buchak 2012; Pojman 1986; Swinburne 2005). Not all of these accounts are necessarily motivated by agnosticism at the level of belief. However, all (or most) of these non-doxastic accounts are compatible with agnosticism about religious belief. Thus, the doxastic agnosticism described above is consistent with rationally endorsing a less strong non-doxastic attitude towards the existence of God (and other theological statements). This type of agnostic about belief thinks it's perfectly rational to endorse other non-doxastic attitudes such as acceptance and hence some version of religious faith remains open to her.

For the purposes of ease and simplicity, instead of surveying a number of possibilities or creating my own version, I'm going to rely on a prominent non-doxastic account found in the work of Daniel Howard-Snyder (2018, 2017a, 2017b, 2016, 2013). Using account as a foil will help shed light on the details of my view in the sections to follow. Howard-Snyder names his account *Markan propositional faith* since he takes it to represent the way in which faith is presented in the Gospel of Mark (from the New Testament in the Bible). Here is Howard-Snyder's most recent statement of it:

Markan Propositional Faith (MPF). For you to have faith that *p*, for some proposition *p*, is (a) for you to have a positive cognitive attitude towards *p*, (b) for you to have a positive conative orientation towards the truth of *p*, (c) for you to be disposed to live in light of that attitude and orientation, and (d) for you to be resilient in the face of challenges to living in that way (Howard-Snyder (2017a), 57; cf. Howard-Snyder (2013), 370) (2018, 3).⁵

For our purposes we can take 'p' to represent 'God exists' and/or other theological statements. Regarding (a), Howard-Snyder explains that a positive cognitive attitude towards *p* means, roughly, that "(i) it is incompatible with disbelief and, relatedly, (ii) it requires some sort of belief-like attitude" (Howard-Snyder 2018, 4). Additionally, it means that (iii) one has a positive attitude toward it (which cannot be had by disbelief); (iv) "taking the paradigms of belief and disbelief as clues, we can say that, unlike entertaining or wondering, both positive and negative cognitive attitudes have a *mind-to-world direction of fit*, in this sense: a positive cognitive attitude towards *p* is how it ought to be only if *p* is true, and a negative cognitive attitude towards *p* is how it ought to be only if *p* is false" (Howard-Snyder 2018, 4). Also, it means to (v) take a stand on behalf of *p*; (vi) "positive and negative cognitive attitudes are *evidence-sensitive* in this sense: no one can have a positive or negative attitudes *p* that does not reflect their estimation of the truth or falsehood of *p*" (Howard-Snyder 2018, 4-5). And finally, a positive cognitive attitude towards *p* entails that (vii) one uses it in both practical and theoretical reasoning (Howard-Snyder 2018, 5).

⁵ This isn't the most detailed account of Markan faith available from Howard-Snyder, but it is the most recent. And since it does contain some changes from previous iterations it makes good sense to stick with it.

With respect to (b), Howard-Snyder explains that for someone to have a positive conative orientation they must regard the truth of *p* to be good while also desiring it to be true (2018, 3). According to (c), one's action needs to be motivated by the truth of *p*. This is required because one could think the truth of *p* is good and desirable and yet not live in its light (Howard-Snyder 2018, 3). (d) says that an important feature of genuine faith is that one does not give up when the going gets tough. Howard-Snyder clarifies that this is meant to include evidential challenges (e.g. discovering counterevidence) and also non-evidential challenges (e.g. fatigue, depression, etc.) (Howard-Snyder 2018, 4).

While this is an admittedly terse summary it should be sufficient for now in order to get us on our way. Notice that we now have a plausible description of how an agent could be an evidentialist who is a doxastic agnostic about theological statements, and yet is still able to have non-doxastic religious faith.

4. What is Religious Fictionalism?

Before defining an anti-realist position known as religious fictionalism, I briefly explain its contrast view in realism. Realist statements in the discourse in question must meet the following conditions:

- (i) They are *truth-apt*: that is, capable of being true or false;
- (ii) They are *irreducible*: that is, they cannot be replaced by sentences which have a different subject-matter without loss of factual content;
- (iii) Their purpose is to be *objectively fact-stating*: they are intended as saying something about the world as it is, independently of our beliefs, attitudes or conventions about the subject matter of those statements (Le Poidevin 2019, 4).

The anti-realist, then, denies at least one of (i) through (iii). Fictionalism is an anti-realist position that has been taken up regarding many different topics, including about numbers, ethics, and possible worlds, etc. (Leng 2010; Mackie 1977; Nolan 2002, Rosen 1990; Yablo 2005). The basic idea of fictionalism is to treat the domain in question as a useful fiction even though it is thought to be false (in the realist sense).⁶ Being a committed fictionalist in one domain need not commit a person to fictionalism in other domains. The main purpose of this section is to briefly define religious fictionalism as found in the work of Robin Le Poidevin (2019, 2016).

Le Poidevin explains that for the fictionalist:

[T]he semantics for theological statements is supposed to be realist, but the truth-conditions simply do not obtain. What makes such account appropriately describable as fictionalist is its characterisation of the attitude that should be taken towards

⁶ To be clear, fictionalism is just one kind of anti-realism among many different kinds.

theological statements: rather than regarding them as true, we should treat them as if they were true, and let them guide us accordingly. The motivation for so doing is the instrumental benefits religion brings. And by ‘instrumental’ is not meant (here at least) ‘cynically calculated’. It is not that the fictionalist intends to put on a display of piety in order to win certain distinctly secular goods, such as a place for their children at a religious school. Rather, the hope is that engaging in religious activities would, for example, bring latent moral ideals into sharper focus” (2016, 180)

He continues:

On the fictionalist account, the logical properties of theological discourse will be those of fictions [... T]he world defined by the theological fiction will be incomplete: there are some propositions that are neither true nor false in it [...] Nevertheless, there is no reason to deny that it is fictionally complete; that is, it is not part of the fiction itself that some propositions lack truth-value. Similarly, God-talk is not closed under deduction: if it is true in the theological fiction that p and also true in the theological fiction that Not-p, it does not immediately follow that it is true in the fiction that (p and Not-p). Some inconsistency, therefore, may be tolerated, and does not generate, by the principle of Ex Falso Quodlibet, every proposition (Le Poidevin 2016, 181).

Le Poidevin spends a significant amount of time demonstrating how a religious fictionalist can genuinely engage in religious practice in faith communities consisting primarily of religious realists. I will discuss some of these issues in the objection section but remember my aim here is not to defend religious fictionalism as such. So we now have a brief account of religious fictionalism.

5. Semantic Religious Agnosticism

The main idea I want to borrow from Le Poidevin is what he refers to as ‘semantic religious agnosticism’.⁷ The semantic religious agnostic is in doubt about whether the appropriate semantics for theological statements is realist or fictionalist (Le Poidevin 2016, 190).⁸ Le Poidevin explains that “[i]t may be that a realist semantics is appropriate for part of God-talk, and a fictionalist semantics for the rest. But where should the line be drawn? She [i.e. the semantic agnostic] doesn’t know” (Le Poidevin 2016, 190). He also realizes that some might be inclined to protest that this is even more inappropriately sceptical (and perhaps confused) than the more standard version of agnosticism I described above.⁹ But Le Poidevin points out that the semantic agnostic actually has an advantage over the standard agnostic in being able to “*guarantee the truth of theological statements*” (Le Poidevin 2016, 190; emphasis mine). According to Le Poidevin here’s how the semantic agnostic can guarantee such a conclusion:

⁷ As far as I can tell, he is the first person to develop this sort of view (at least explicitly).

⁸ Of course, it’s possible that an individual is only a semantic agnostic with respect to certain theological statements but is a committed realist about others.

⁹ This type of agnosticism entails the more standard agnosticism I describe above.

Either the realist truth-conditions obtain or they do not. If they do, I intend the statements to have realist truth-conditions; if they do not obtain, then I intend the statements to have fictionalist truth-conditions. Either way, they come out true, but in virtue of what they come out true I cannot say. So I can utter the creeds in good faith. And I can attach at least the same value to the statements as can the fictionalist, and can contemplate the possibility that their value goes beyond that, in putting us in touch with a transcendent reality (2016, 190).

It is this type of semantic agnosticism that I want to explore in more detail, particularly with respect to whether it coheres with non-doxasticism about faith. For I've explained that (standard) agnosticism is consistent with non-doxastic religious faith. But what about semantic agnosticism? Is semantic agnosticism consistent with non-doxastic faith? This is the question I address in the rest of the article.

6. Semantic Religious Agnosticism and Non-Doxasticism

It's not difficult to see how non-doxasticism can be made to fit with Le Poidevin's account. The semantic doxastic agnostic will say she isn't sure whether to *believe* theological statements as true in realist terms or fictionalist terms. On the other hand, the semantic non-doxastic agnostic will say she isn't sure whether to *accept* theological statements as true in realist terms or fictionalist terms. To accept *p* is simply to act as if *p* is true and be willing to use it in practical and theoretical reasoning.

In Le Poidevin's first statement of semantic religious agnosticism he doesn't mention the distinction between doxasticism and non-doxasticism about religious faith (2016). The most charitable reading is, I think, that his account falls within doxasticism.¹⁰ He uses statements like the fictionalist plays *make-believe*. In his more recent treatment of religious fictionalism, Le Poidevin does make explicit reference to the distinction between doxasticism and non-doxasticism and appears to imply that the religious fictionalism he has in mind is doxastic (2019, 34-37). This distinction is not central to his project so it's unfair to criticize him for not being as explicit on this point as he could have been. In any event, let's assume that this is what Le Poidevin intends regarding his description of religious fictionalism. I now want to suggest that semantic religious agnosticism is compatible with non-doxastic faith.

Now, this semantic non-doxastic agnosticism is a kind of second layer agnosticism. This is because this type of agnostic has already decided that it is irrational to *believe* theological statements are true (note: this is consistent with it being irrational to disbelieve them too). So, at the level of belief she is agnostic and suspends judgment about the truth value of theological statements.

At this point someone may ask why there is a need for non-doxastic agnosticism. The type of agnosticism I describe earlier is in purely realist-terms. To say she isn't sure about whether to

¹⁰ Strong versions of doxasticism say that faith entails belief. But I'm simply claiming here that Le Poidevin's account says that faith is belief (but I don't make any claims about whether he thinks it is necessary for it).

believe theological statements in realist terms or non-realist terms is consistent with doxastic agnosticism. Why introduce non-doxasticism at all? The reason for the second layer is that the standard agnostic who suspends judgment at the level of belief (in realist terms) may also be uncomfortable with belief even on a fictionalist interpretation of theological statements (i.e. uncomfortable with belief in non-realist terms). Perhaps she still thinks make-believe is too strong and so wants to ‘make-accept’ that religion is true in fictionalist terms. Or maybe she thinks that a non-doxastic attitude such as acceptance is more appropriate to take with respect to fiction in the first place. In either case she would have good reason to take the attitude of acceptance toward religious fictional discourse. Thus, she is someone who accepts instead of believes theological statements and she also isn’t sure whether the appropriate semantics for such statements is realist or fictionalist.

Finally, shifting to non-doxasticism need not imply that the person in question is religiously disengaged. A disengaged agnostic might simply suspend judgment about whether to believe or accept religious propositions altogether. This agnostic doesn’t pursue religious questions or desire to take part in religious practice and engage with a faith community. On the other hand, the type of agnostic I have in mind clearly accepts the religious discourse in question as true; she just isn’t sure whether to accept it in realist or fictionalist terms. She wants to meaningfully participate in religious practice and to be part of a religious community. Of course, I don’t take this discussion to be offering motivation for why an individual would adopt semantic non-doxastic agnostic faith. My point in this section is just that adding the non-doxastic component is perfectly consistent with Le Poidevin’s general description of semantic religious agnosticism.

7. Semantic Non-Doxastic Agnostic Religious Faith

Much of my description of Howard-Snyder’s statement of Markan faith (2018) is in the context of him responding to recent criticisms by Finlay Malcolm (2018). Finlay’s general worry for non-doxastic accounts of faith is that they seem to include religious fictionalism. But we should reject religious fictionalists as having genuine faith. So, non-doxastic accounts of faith fail (Malcolm 2018). Howard-Snyder replies by showing that only a very specific kind of fictionalist can have Markan faith and we needn’t be very worried by this result since this sort of fictionalism is quite different from fictionalism about other things such as possible worlds, mathematics, ethics, etc. He also argues that Markan faith is consistent with many historical descriptions of faith (2018, 18-19).

The main purpose of this section isn’t to evaluate the debate between Malcolm and Howard-Snyder. Rather, in this section I’m going to examine the ways in which Howard-Snyder’s account is similar and dissimilar to semantic non-doxastic agnostic faith. I take it that Howard-Snyder is certainly correct that his account is incompatible with many versions of religious fictionalism, but I want to see what happens if we instead test it against semantic non-doxastic agnosticism. Recall: Agent S has semantic non-doxastic agnostic religious faith regarding p iff (1) S is agnostic about whether S ought to suspend judgment about whether to believe p is true; (2) S accepts that p; (3) S has a positive cognitive attitude toward p; (4) S is in doubt about whether p is true in realist or fictionalist terms; and (5) p is a theological statement.

Recall that Howard-Snyder listed four key components of Markan faith in (a) through (d) (see Section 3). Conditions (b) through (d) could be added to the description of my account offered thus far. In any event, I'll let my critics say otherwise. But remember that the first component of Markan faith is "(a) for you to have a positive cognitive attitude towards p" (Howard-Snyder 2018, 3). It's this criterion which requires more by way of explanation to show how it can be consistent with my account of faith. I'm thus going to explore whether Howard-Snyder's criterion (a) is consistent with condition (3) of my account.

Recall that condition (a) has seven different criteria. The first, (i) says that the attitude is incompatible with disbelief. Remember, though, that the agnostic does not disbelieve that God exists. Nor does she believe it. The fictionalist, strictly speaking, does indeed disbelieve that God exists (at least outside of the fictional discourse itself). Here is where some of the benefits of semantic non-doxastic agnosticism are obvious. The semantic non-doxastic agnostic doesn't disbelieve the proposition 'God exists'. She suspends judgment about it. But she does accept the proposition 'God exists'.¹¹ However, she is in doubt about whether to accept it as true in the realist sense (i.e. corresponding to the external world) or the non-realist sense (i.e. as a useful fiction). With respect to whether to accept 'God exists' in realist or fictional terms we can say her credence is 0.5. Now one might suggest that if she comes to think of 'God exists' as a useful fiction down the road then this will amount to disbelief and hence will be inconsistent with (i). This is right, but in such a case she would be a full-blown religious fictionalist and not a semantic non-doxastic religious agnostic. As it stands, then, (i) is compatible with semantic non-doxastic agnostic faith.

(ii) is the requirement of a belief-like attitude. While acceptance clearly is a belief-like attitude, and Howard Snyder might say that some attitudes attributed to non-doxastic versions of faith would qualify, he would likely reject my account of acceptance.¹² For Howard-Snyder, my definition of acceptance lacks the appropriate mind-to-world direction fit to be properly considered a belief-like attitude. And my account of acceptance lacks this requirement.¹³

Criterion (iii) is that one must have a positive cognitive attitude toward the proposition in question. This appears easily met as I have built it into my account in condition (3). However, upon closer inspection this isn't so. Recall that requirement (iv) says "taking the paradigms of belief and disbelief as clues, we can say that, unlike entertaining or wondering, both positive and negative cognitive attitudes have a *mind-to-world direction of fit*, in this sense: a positive cognitive attitude towards p is how it ought to be only if p is true, and a negative cognitive attitude towards p is how it ought to be only if p is false" (Howard-Snyder 2018, 4).¹⁴ On the surface this condition appears to be easily met by the semantic non-doxastic agnostic because she accepts theological statements

¹¹ Note that what is *not* at stake for the person in question is whether to accept theological statements at all. Rather she has decided that it's rational to accept them but unsure whether to accept them in realist or fictionalist terms.

¹² An anonymous referee points out that my definition of acceptance is inconsistent with William Alston's definition and Howard-Snyder seems to agree with Alston about acceptance.

¹³ While I think my account of acceptance is indeed a belief-like attitude, remember that this is not what's in question here.

¹⁴ In Section 8.4 I briefly mention the axiology of theism literature which I think has the resources to explain how someone on my account could be said to have a positive cognitive attitude toward the object of faith. Having said that, it wouldn't change the fact this is a significant point of difference between mine and Howard-Snyder's account. It likewise raises another problem for my view which I discuss in 8.4.

as true (in one sense or another). But this is too quick. By ‘world’ Howard-Snyder clearly means the ‘real world’ and not a ‘fictional world’. Consider that a child’s belief that Santa Claus exists does not satisfy the ‘is how it ought to be only if p is true’ condition because Santa Claus exists is true only in a fictional world. The child’s belief is only how things ought to be if it turns out that Santa Claus exists in the real world.¹⁵ The problem is that if religious fictionalism turns out to be true then this condition isn’t satisfied. This is the most obvious area where semantic non-doxastic agnosticism and Markan faith come apart. However, it’s important to remember that on my account *S is not committed to religious fictionalism*. It’s thus still possible that this condition is met if the agnostic decides down the road that realism is the way to go with religious discourse. However, with respect to the semantic non-doxastic agnostic the condition probably still isn’t satisfied. For on semantic non-doxastic agnosticism there is the possibility that the mind-to-world direction of fit intended by Howard-Snyder is not met. Of course, it is guaranteed to be met at least in terms of fictional worlds, but this isn’t what Howard-Snyder means nor what is typically meant by such phrases. The evidential bar for a non-doxastic attitude is simply lower than what’s required here. While this is the one place where my account of semantic non-doxastic agnostic faith is not consistent with Markan faith, it’s noteworthy that my account is consistent with all other aspects of Markan faith (as shown above and will be shown below). Whether we could drop or modify this condition and still have a properly Markan faith is a question for another day. I take it that Howard-Snyder would be sceptical about this possibility. But for my purposes I can drop this condition and still have a properly non-doxastic account of faith in general.

(v) is about taking a stand on behalf of the theological statements in question. Again, this is perfectly consistent with the semantic non-doxastic agnostic. She accepts the relevant theological statements as true (in one sense or another) and commits to using them in her practical and theoretical reasoning. This is consistent with her taking a stand on behalf of them.

Criterion (vi) regards the idea that cognitive attitudes must be appropriately sensitive to evidence. Now here one might suggest that the semantic non-doxastic agnostic cannot have a positive attitude toward p because she suspends judgment about whether to believe p. However, remember that Howard-Snyder’s account of faith is non-doxastic too, so it must be the case that one can have a positive non-doxastic attitude that is at the same time sensitive to the evidence. Indeed, while the semantic non-doxastic religious agnostic doesn’t think the evidence warrants belief that p she does think the evidence warrants acceptance that p. The attitude of acceptance is not insensitive to evidence. Part of the very reason for developing non-doxastic accounts of faith is that while there is sufficient evidence for an attitude like acceptance toward p, there isn’t for full-blooded belief that p. To reiterate, the semantic non-doxastic agnostic thinks that the evidence supports acceptance of the truth of p (i.e. she should act as if p is true, and use it in her practical and theoretical reasoning, etc.), she is just in doubt about the way in which p is true.

The final criterion regarding (a) is (vii) which is that one uses p in practical and theoretical reasoning. This is, by definition, part of what is implied when we say that an agent accepts p. When she accepts p she commits to acting as if p is true and thus to using it her practical and theoretical reasoning.

¹⁵ I’m grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point. Some of this objection is taking almost verbatim from them.

I make no claims about whether Howard-Snyder himself would be satisfied with semantic non-doxastic agnosticism, though I suspect not meeting (iv) would be problematic. However, we have discovered that apart from (iv), semantic non-doxastic agnostic faith is entirely consistent with Markan faith. I think it is a promising insight that my account is almost entirely consistent with at least one prominent account of non-doxastic faith. My hope is that this lends some initial plausibility to the idea that semantic non-doxastic agnosticism is a legitimate kind of religious faith, though as I've stated throughout my intention is not to defend this account here. A future area of exploration regards the ways in which my account does and does not fit with other non-doxastic accounts of faith.

8. Objections to Religious Fictionalism Don't Apply

Before concluding, I'm going to outline a number of objections to religious fictionalism and explain why they don't apply to semantic non-doxastic agnostic faith. They are: (i) the worry that the fictionalist engages in a disingenuous pretence when participating in religion; (ii) that fictionalists have faith for the wrong reasons; (iii) that the fictionalist cannot gain the moral benefits of religion and; (iv) there is no principled way for the fictionalists to choose one fiction over another. I show that even if these are legitimate challenges for the religious fictionalist, they aren't challenges for the semantic non-doxastic agnostic.

8.1 Disingenuous Pretence

I borrow the first objection from Finlay Malcolm. He writes that:

[F]ictionalists are engaged in a pretence. With her affirmation of claims from a discourse, the fictionalist is merely pretending in her attitudes towards such claims. A fictionalist with faith, then, would simply be pretending to have faith, and as such, would not have faith. If she did have faith, then she wouldn't need to pretend to have faith (2018, 224)

Presumably, part of the problem isn't just that pretending isn't genuine faith but also that it's somehow insincere or disingenuous. Does this challenge also apply to the semantic non-doxastic agnosticism? It's difficult to see how it could apply. For the semantic non-doxastic agnostic is not merely pretending. She accepts the relevant theological statements and participates in religious community and practice. She is simply unsure about whether what she accepts as true is true in realist or fictionalist terms. So while she is open to a fictionalist semantics for theological statements, she isn't committed to them. Besides, Le Poidevin has extensively argued that there are many ways a full-blooded fictionalist can participate in religious life, but I won't rehearse those details here (2016, 181-187). Also, note that Malcolm's objection can only hold water *on the assumption* that realism is true. Yet since this is what is at issue it begs the question against the fictionalist to say they engage in a (bad) pretense. Thus, not only do I not think that this objection applies to semantic non-doxastic agnosticism, it also fails when directed at its initial target in fictionalism. Finally, it is an open question whether the semantic non-doxastic agnosticism I've described is actually less susceptible to charges of disingenuousness than Le Poidevin's account.

This is because the non-doxastic agnostic isn't in doubt about whether to believe either realist or fictionalist interpretations of religion. If some of the implicit worry here is about insincere belief, then it evaporates on my account. At the very least, more remains to be said regarding why the worry applies equally to acceptance.

8.2 Faith for the Wrong Reasons

The next objection has to do with the fictionalist being insensitive to evidential considerations (Malcolm 2018, 225). If the fictionalist really is insensitive to evidence and believes purely for prudential reasons, then perhaps these are the wrong sort of reasons to accept various theological statements. There are interesting questions here about the role that prudential reasons should play in one's religious life, but I won't dive into such questions here. Rather, even if it's true that the religious fictionalist isn't appropriately sensitive to evidence, the same can't be said for the semantic non-doxastic agnostic. Her reasons for accepting theological statements instead of believing them are epistemic. She has some evidence, but not enough to believe them. This is why she is a semantic non-doxastic agnostic instead of just semantic doxastic agnostic as described by Le Podievin. Likewise, she has practical reasons (e.g. good consequences) for adopting a pro-attitude towards the object of faith. Yet her reasons for being in doubt as to whether the theological statements she accepts are true in the realist sense or fictionalist sense are *epistemic* reasons. She is in doubt about whether the evidence suggests she should accept theological statements in realist or fictionalist terms. Her credence here is 0.5. Finally, it's unclear whether those with religious faith as belief never factor in prudential considerations (e.g. gaining a good afterlife), in deciding what to believe.

8.3 Moral Benefits are Elusive

Andrew Eshleman says that the “fictionalist and realist agree that a central function of religious practice is to bring about a transformation of one's character. But can we expect that a non-realist form of religion will be just as effective as its realist counterpart in bringing about this result?” (Eshleman 2005, 195). The question here is about whether religious fictionalism can be functionally equivalent to religious realism. If religious commitment requires significant self-sacrifice in order to foster moral development, then the religious fictionalist may be less willing to make such sacrifices, especially over an extended period of time. If this is right, then the religious fictionalist cannot reap one of the main benefits from religious practice in moral development. Indeed, this benefit serves as much of the motivation for the fictionalist to participate in religion in the first place.¹⁶

Suppose that Eshleman insisted that the same objection applies to my account even though it is not fictionalist. Notice that the objection seems to rest on empirical claims about the sort of psychological states required to make sacrifices. Without the requisite empirical data this objection cannot be established. But let's set this aside and suppose that it is a successful objection to religious fictionalism. Does it also apply to semantic non-doxastic agnosticism? The answer is clearly 'no'. The semantic non-doxastic agnostic does not endorse religious fictionalism and as such she is genuinely open to the possibility that religion puts her into contact with transcendent

¹⁶ Eshleman has had a more recent exchange about the merits of this kind of argument, but evaluating it is not relevant to my purposes. See Cordry 2010 and Eshleman 2020.

reality. The objector here might further reply that the appropriate moral motivation cannot be had without *committing* to realism. But again, this type of claim rests on empirical assumptions which have to be tested.

8.4 Could an Atheist have Semantic Non-Doxastic Agnostic Religious Faith?

Another objection is the worry that an atheist could meet the conditions for Semantic Non-Doxastic Religious Faith.¹⁷ Recall that agent S has semantic non-doxastic agnostic religious faith regarding p iff (1) S is agnostic about whether S ought to suspend judgment about whether to believe p is true; (2) S accepts that p; (3) S has a positive cognitive attitude toward p; (4) S is in doubt about whether p is true in realist or fictionalist terms; and (5) p is a theological statement. (1), (2), and (5) do not appear to rule out atheism. One might also claim that (3) doesn't rule out atheism either. For the kind of positive cognitive attitude in question here is not one that requires a mind-to-world fit. Indeed, the axiology of theism literature discusses the purported value of God's existence with some suggesting that it is perfectly reasonable for an atheist to think God's existence would be add value to the world.¹⁸ This is at least one way in which an atheist could be thought to have a positive cognitive attitude towards the existence of God. So (3) doesn't eliminate atheism either. (4), it seems, has to do the work of eliminating atheism from my definition of faith. The description I provide above is that someone who is in doubt about God's existence has a credence 0.5 in God's existence. So, the question is whether a credence 0.5 that God exists is true in realist or fictionalist terms is compatible with believing that God does not exist (in realist terms). If they are compatible, then it appears that atheism is consistent with semantic non-doxastic agnostic religious faith. The worry, of course, is that atheism is *prima facie* incompatible with any form of genuine religious faith.

Whether a person could be in both states (i.e. credence 0.5 that God exists while simultaneously doubting that God exists) is a question about psychology I cannot answer here. However, even if it is possible, it is *irrational*. A credence 0.5 that God exists is incompatible with flat out disbelieving that God exists. The fact that it might be possible to hold a view X in conjunction with some other view Y, but that doing so necessarily requires the agent holding the views to be epistemic irrationally cannot in itself be an objection to view X. In other words, all this objection would show is that a form of *epistemically irrational atheism* is consistent with my version of faith. But this doesn't show very much at all. Furthermore, note that if the agent in question was already a committed fictionalist about theological statements and denied that God existed (in realist) terms, then one might worry that this is a pressing objection. But if that were the case then condition (4) of my account would not obtain in the first place. So the objection could not even be raised against my account. Finally, even if all of this fails (though I don't think it does), and my account is consistent with atheism this need not turn out to be as devastating as an objector might suppose. Why? Well, it could show that while intuitively any genuine account of religious faith must rule out atheism, it turns out that upon further investigation this isn't the case. If Semantic Non-Doxastic Religious Faith is indeed a genuine form of religious faith, then it turns out to show that faith and atheism are compatible. This could turn out to be a feature of the view, not a bug.

¹⁷ I'm grateful to an anonymous referee for bringing this objection to my attention.

¹⁸ For two introductions to this literature see Kraay 2018 and Lougheed 2019.

8.5 Which Faith?

A final worry for the religious fictionalist regards how they are to choose which religious fiction to engage (Le Poidevin 2016, 183-184). Le Poidevin observes that realist reasons may not carry over to the fictionalist. Yet such worries do not apply to the semantic non-doxastic agnostic. At the very least, this isn't more of a problem for the semantic non-doxastic agnostic than for the committed non-doxastic religious realist or doxastic religious realist. How do people choose which religion to follow at all? And are such choices ever (wholly) rational? Whatever problems arise when trying to answer these questions seem to apply equally across the board.

8. Conclusion

I have presented a novel version of faith called semantic non-doxastic agnosticism. This type of faith occurs when an agent *accepts* the truth of relevant theological statements but is ultimately in doubt about whether they are true in realist or fictionalist terms. This type of agnosticism allows for an additional layer of scepticism than either doxastic or non-doxastic realist accounts of faith permit. Depending on one's epistemic orientation this fact is itself an upshot of the view. Yet a further benefit is that semantic non-doxastic agnosticism seems to avoid many of the problems associated with religious fictionalism such as that the fictionalist engages in a (bad) pretense or has faith for the wrong sort of reasons. I hope this theory of faith becomes a viable alternative to the other non-doxastic accounts of faith, though surely much more remains to be said about it.¹⁹

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