

SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper has a double thrust, theological and psychological. The first has to do with the relations of science with religion, and of disparate religions with one another, as exemplars of the familiar phenomenon, “multiple descriptions of the same thing”—“the same thing” being, in all these cases, the real world. This is a problem which Descriptive Psychology deals with directly, efficiently, and without doing violence to any description of the real world, persons, or behavior. As I shall show, however, that way of handling those issues raises a second, very practical problem of our need for certainties, for absolutes, for dependable truths—one aspect of the basic human need for order and meaning. So I shall end with the Descriptive Psychology approach to meeting that critical need.

Over the past hundred years or so, few problems have exercised theologians more consistently than the two that I am bringing together here. The first is the relation of science and religion. The second is the relation among diverse and often disparate religions. I have chosen to discuss them

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together because they constitute two exemplars of the very common phenomenon called “multiple descriptions of the same thing”. We encounter other instances of this phenomenon whenever we hear two persons give different accounts of the same event, whenever we learn something that throws a new light on a situation, whenever we undergo a conversion, whether political, religious, romantic, or whatever. Having seen and described the world in one way, we now see and describe it in another. Closely related is what happens when a person who has been imbued with one culture is transported to another, as in the case of displaced persons, college freshmen, and others suffering from culture shock. And this is not by any means an exhaustive list of instances where different people, or the same person at different times, describe the same thing in very different ways.

I

Scientists purport to describe the real world. So do Christians, Jews, Moslems, Buddhists, atheists, and—no doubt—Australian aborigines, African pygmies, and everybody else between, below, and above. These descriptions are not only diverse; some of them are incompatible. Our first question, therefore, has to do with how we can justify the assertion that we are describing the same thing. The answer is obvious but not simple: that each of us claims to be, and is, describing the real world of people and automobiles, mountains and planets, physicists and laboratories, priests and sacred places, computers and kitchen stoves.

I shall be using “real world” (or more simply, “the world”) as a placeholder, like “what is happening in the next room” or “what goes on in a university” or “what this marriage relationship is”. Each of these identifies a state of affairs without articulating *what* that state of affairs is, that is, what it is that is happening in the next room, or what it is that obtains in this marriage. Those particulars must be specified separately and, in these cases, they must be discovered empirically. We go into the next room, or we ask questions of the husband and wife and observe their behavior, and so on. Thus in principle, a place-holder is followed by “namely—”, a specification of the relevant facts, which may be empirical findings. There are, however, two pre-empirical constraints on such investigations. First, we cannot investigate anything whatsoever, empirically or non-empirically, unless we have some concept of *what* we are investigating, and other concepts of how it might be—the concept of “next room”, for example, or of “marriage relationship”, and of there being an argument going on or of two people trusting each other. Second, what we do observe will also depend upon what our interests are and what we are competent to observe. In all probability, what a sociologist, for example, observes and describes as going on in the next room will be some-

what different from what an artist observes and describes, or a janitor or a policeman. For all of them, the place-holder will normally be the same, even though what they place in it is not identical.

The place-holder concept “real world” is shared by scientists, theologians, and all the rest of us who have a place in the world as Actors, Observer/Describers, and Critic/Appraisers—that is, as persons (Ossorio, 1976, 1978a, in press; Shideler, in press). Being universally shared, it provides us with a common ground for communicating with others, no matter how diverse. Whatever else divides us, we can be united (at least upon occasion) by the agreement that what we are talking about is the real world—just as, for example, we can be united by agreeing on some other occasion that what we are talking about is colors, not shapes or sizes or sounds or political parties.

For convenience, we can discuss the real world in three ways that are formally, although not practically, equivalent: (a) as the empirical world, what we see when we look around us; (b) as the behavioral world, the world-history of which our life-histories are a part; and (c) as the state of affairs that includes all other states of affairs, the totally inclusive, ultimate domain comprising all that has been, is, and can be.

To begin with the empirical world, what we observe is the real world, but each of us sees it differently, because each of us has not only different personal characteristics, but also different viewpoints, histories, and experiences. To illustrate, let us think of ourselves as sitting in a circle with an ordinary kitchen chair in the center. And let us suppose that each of us has a camera to record what he sees. No two of the resulting photographs will be alike, but we all know that we are photographing the same thing, and all of *us* know that it is a chair because “chair” is one of our shared concepts.

Each of us sees the chair from a different viewpoint, and therefore has a different view of it. And having had vast experience in observing three-dimensional objects from a variety of viewpoints, we find nothing strange in the fact that our views of it are different, as evidenced by the photographs taken from different positions. What *would* be strange, even to us, would be identical photographs taken from in front, behind, above, and below, with one camera equipped with black-and-white film, another with color film, others with lenses having different focal lengths, resolving power, and other optical characteristics. Equally, we ought to find it strange if we heard identical descriptions of the chair (or anything else) from persons with different personal characteristics such as interests or embodiments. An artist, a cabinet-maker, and a second-hand-furniture dealer will describe it differently. So will a blind person, one who is color-blind, and one who has normal sight.

The coordination of view with viewpoint, however, constitutes only part of the story. The other part is what we might call the recalcitrance

of the chair. No matter how hard any of us tries, he cannot successfully treat that object in the middle of the circle as a telephone, a screwdriver, or a pink elephant. Its being a chair constitutes a reality constraint on our possible behaviors in relation to it, including how we view it. We can successfully treat it as something to sit on, stand on, break up to burn in the fireplace, draw a picture of, prop under a doorknob to deter an intruder, or lay across a hallway to keep the dog in his part of the house, but definitely there are limits on what we can succeed in doing with it.

We can walk around a chair so as to coordinate viewpoint and view. But few of us, if any, have had comparable experience in the daily and hourly practice of observing the real world from a variety of different viewpoints. Instead, we have simply observed and described it from the angle of our own knowledge and values, attitudes and interests and embodiments, and our own place in the world as old or young, man or woman, psychologist or sculptor or farmer. Even so, the principle is the same in both cases: our viewpoint makes a difference in what our view is, and every view is an observation from a particular viewpoint—cultural, personal, position in space and history, and so on. Inevitably and immutably, we see the world from where we ourselves are, with our own eyes and our own minds. Through books, travel, study, and perceptive and receptive meetings with others who see the world from other viewpoints, we can see more than we would with unaided eyes or uneducated minds, but still we see the world from where we are.

If we sit in another's chair, still we see with our own eyes. But this does not mean that we need to be cut off from what others experience to an important degree. We can illustrate this with the example of the performer and the knowledgeable spectator. The performer, who may be a musician, a baseball player, a participant in a religious ceremony, or whatever, is able to engage in his activity because he has mastered certain concepts, conceptual structures, and skills. To be knowledgeable, the spectator—music critic, baseball fan, onlooker at the ritual—must have mastered those same concepts and conceptual structures, and must have developed an astute appreciation for the skills. Both performer and spectator are participants in the performance, but they are differently placed in relation to it. Consequently their experience of it differs, and it has a different significance for each of them. What they share is formal access to the performance, but they know it differently, from different viewpoints and with different interests.

To have formal access is to be able to provide "everything needed for an explicit, systematic delineation of a phenomenon in its various aspects" (Ossorio, 1983, p. 14). That is, having formal access is having the concepts that it would take not only to describe the thing, but also to have knowledge about it. Thus it encompasses both knowledge-about and knowledge-by-acquaintance, and contrasts with empirical access—which also cuts across

knowledge-about and knowledge-by-acquaintance. In general, for a given person, a phenomenon is constituted by the concepts he is able to bring to bear on it. To illustrate, some years ago I listened to a long argument between a couple of my friends on whether a certain fictional character was a saint. They ran aground (I realized much later) because one had never acquired the concept of the holy and therefore could not see the distinction the other was making between exceptional goodness and sanctity. The disputants could communicate and negotiate about the fictional character as a case of goodness; they could not communicate or negotiate about the same character as a case of sanctity. A person's repertoire of concepts determines what he has formal access to. His view of things may be solidly grounded if he has adequate concepts, and it may be close to illusion if he does not.

We acquire concepts in the same way that we acquire skills: by participating in social practices that involve the use of that concept or skill. This is in contrast to the way we acquire facts, which is primarily by observation and secondarily by thought. What facts we can assimilate, however, will depend upon what concepts we have acquired, and what concepts we have acquired will depend upon what social practices we have participated in. Moreover, our repertoire of concepts limits what social practices—and hence communities—we are able and eligible to participate in. For example, a person for whom the statement, "The world is the totality of facts, not of things" (Wittgenstein, 1963, prop. 1.1), makes no sense will not be eligible to belong among the followers of Wittgenstein. On the other hand, one for whom it makes a great deal of sense may have no interest in becoming a Wittgensteinian. The concepts we share—which is to say, the distinctions we make in common—are crucial to our becoming communities. In turn, those shared concepts codify what the individual and the community take to be the case and are prepared to act on—that is, what they take to be facts.

Facts about a religion or a science can be transmitted without grave difficulty; it is merely a matter of passing on information, like listing every item in a room in its relation to every other item, first in pairs, then in threes, then in fours, and so on. The concrete reality of a science or religion—the whole of which each of these facts is a part—is apprehended in a way comparable to simply walking into that room and seeing all those items together, that is, by hands-on participation in relevant social practices in a way that goes beyond what can be apprehended merely by careful and knowledgeable observation. Even the most assiduous study of the most comprehensive list would not substitute for actually walking into the room and looking around. Similarly, the simple, direct description, "It tastes like an orange—tart, sweet, fruity", will give formal access to that flavor to a person who has never tasted an orange, but it still will not convey what the same description does to a person who has tasted

oranges. At the end-point of describing the taste, instead of elaborating indefinitely, we make a move of another kind. We identify it: "It tastes like an orange."

Formal access is available to the Outsider in the form of knowledge-about, as well as to the Insider who generally has both knowledge-about and knowledge-by-acquaintance. But the Outsider who has formal access to something does not thereby automatically move to the inside. People who have never had a mystical experience can and do talk about it, sometimes with great penetration, but this is possible only if they are competent in the use of the concept of transcendence. On the other hand, a person for whom the concept of transcendence has no meaning will have extremely limited access to anything important having to do with mysticism. Or to take another example, one cannot be an atheist without using the concept of a deity. How can anybody deny something if he has no idea what it is that he is denying? Having the Outsider's knowledge-about may sometimes be essential part of the process of acquiring the Insider's knowledge-by-acquaintance or for becoming an Insider, but it does not necessarily eventuate there.

As we can have knowledge-about without knowledge-by-acquaintance, so we can have knowledge-by-acquaintance without the kind of knowledge-about that a well-informed Outsider would have. Many, many people have had mystical experiences without ever having heard of the mystical tradition, and so they did not know that the experience was "mystical". Or they have engaged in advanced forms of meditation, without ever discovering that what they were doing was anything more than "just sitting" or "having a quiet time". Many, many scientific discoveries were made long before there was a philosophy of science that articulated what "science" is. It is when a problematical situation arises that formal access becomes indispensable—for example, when my pattern of religious belief and action conflicts with yours, or when we need to differentiate—let us say—scientific from unscientific concepts and procedures. Then, in order to negotiate our differences, we must share concepts that give us formal access to some facts, and it is only those facts that we can negotiate. Although we may also be able to negotiate the fact that one of us has access to facts that the other does not, we cannot negotiate the facts that we do not share.

With this systematic conceptual structure as a background, let us turn to the relation of science with religion and to the relations among religions.

II

What all the sciences and all the religions share is the concept of "the real world". Where they differ is in their "namely—" specification of

what the real world is. Most of us were imbued in our childhoods with the notion that the real world is what (we were told) physical scientists of the time said it was, which is—essentially and briefly—that the real world is constituted by sub-atomic particles in particular dynamic relationships occurring in space and time, and all larger objects and more complex relationships can be reduced to these “basic building blocks”. It follows, according to this understanding, that it is an historical accident that human beings exist and that language developed. Also it follows that the ultimate constituents of the world, their relationships, and the principles upon which they operate, do not depend in any way upon the nature or even the existence of human beings, and in the end, we ourselves are reducible to these basic building blocks and their relationships. Scientists of this persuasion constructed their world from the bottom up by combining the basic building blocks into larger and more inclusive structures, and in reverse, by reducing complex structures to the basic building blocks—thoughts into brain processes, love into electrophysiological transmissions, deliberate actions into muscular and skeletal movements.

Typically, religions specify their worlds from the top down, the top being the ultimate significance of all that is, what life is all about. Other disciplines also, of course, are concerned with all that is—science, history, and philosophy, to name only three examples. Only peripherally if at all, however, do those other disciplines deal with questions like “What is the meaning of life?”, “What makes life worth living?”, “Why are we here and where are we going?”. Answers—very different answers—to such questions are at the heart of religions, and religions can be differentiated according to the content that they specify for the content-free concept of ultimate significance. One religion may say that what ultimately gives significance to life is handing on what has been bequeathed to it by its ancestors; other religions may say that it is the hope of heaven (variously described). For still others, ultimate significance is found in helping others, or in achieving power or knowledge or love, or in submission to a divine will, or in ecstatic experiences. Even the answer, “Ultimately life is meaningless”, constitutes a religious stance, insofar as it takes seriously the question of ultimate significance by declaring that there is none.

Questions such as “What is the ultimate significance of all that is?” and “What is life all about?” belong within the domain of spirituality. Three concepts provide an articulation of that domain: totality, ultimacy, and boundary condition (Ossorio, 1977, 1978c), which I shall speak of here as “transcendental concepts”. In dealing with religions, a fourth concept is usually called for as well: that of significance. Religions, of course, have other aspects—historical, institutional, ethical, theological, liturgical, social, and so on—but paradigmatically all these are informed by spirituality, so here I shall treat that aspect of religion only. Let us

take these four transcendental concepts—ultimacy, totality, significance, and boundary condition—one by one.

First, ultimates are what cannot be further extended, analyzed, subdivided, or separated, and are logically related to totalities and boundary conditions (Ossorio, 1977, pp. 54, 60–66).

Second, the real world, as the state of affairs that includes all other states of affairs, is not only a totality, but the ultimate totality. However, the game of chess is also a totality, as is an indefinitely large set of numbers, or “everything that is in this room”, or one’s whole life. Our grasp of indefinitely large totalities is intuitive rather than empirical. We do not have to list every number in the indefinitely large set, or specify every item in a whole life, or know everything there is to know about the real world, to conceptualize those totalities. Because every science and every religion has its own set of concepts, each has access to a different set of phenomena and therefore has its own totality.

Third, the significance, or meaning, concept allows us to codify the place that any real-world element (object, process, event, or state of affairs [Ossorio, 1978b]) has in its context. It can best be explicated by generating a series: the significance of A is B, that of B is C, that of C is . . . N, N being its ultimate significance, i.e., the significance of the sequence as a whole and of each of its separate elements. The significance of drinking the consecrated wine is receiving the sacrament. The significance of receiving the sacrament is obedience to the dominical command. The significance of obedience is approaching closer to God or opening ourselves to His approach, and so on to its ultimate significance, which in a particular religion might be union with God. Each of the elements in the significance series has a place, a status, within a large context. And the sequence itself has a place in the world. We understand that sequence of elements as a whole, and the place of each element in the sequence, by their relation to the ultimately significant which is the significance of the totality.

What particular religions take to be ultimately significant determines their ways of life; in turn, their ways of life determine how their members, individually and as communities, weight their reasons in choosing among possible behaviors. Conversely, the weights they give those reasons reveal what in fact they take to be ultimately significant.

Fourth, the concept of boundary condition reflects the fact that there are reality constraints on our possible behaviors. We cannot successfully treat the chair as a telephone—initially because even the semblance of doing so is difficult, but ultimately because when we try to do so, we are unable to treat our behavior as having successfully treated the chair as a telephone. And if we try that, we are unable to treat *that* behavior as successful, and so on. What constitutes reality constraints may change from time to time, and from person to person: those for an infant will not

be the same as for an ordinary adult; those for a real-world king are not the same as for the king in chess. That there are constraints on our possible behaviors is indubitable. Being human, we are neither omnipotent nor omniscient. Some of those constraints can be specified without difficulty; others we cannot specify exactly. We do not, however, know what all those constraints are. More concretely, to say that human persons are finite is to say something about the nature of the reality constraints on their possible behaviors, but it gives only a partial specification of what those constraints are. Saying that human beings are finite does not say everything there is to be said about their limitations.

The fact that there is an end to the significance series reflects a boundary condition on the domain of religion. What characterizes a boundary condition is not merely that it involves some limitation, but also that the limitation reflects the character of the totality, the whole series, the entire domain. The latter point is essential because the limitation does not appear overtly except in a particular place in the domain, as a limit or limitation. For example, a boundary condition on the domain of knowledge is that “justification comes to an end”. Knowledge is not always grounded on further knowledge, ad infinitum, but ends with a move of another kind: “That’s the way things are”, or “We’re playing chess and this is the way it’s played”. Its not being so grounded in further knowledge does not make it something other than knowledge, but there is nothing peculiar about the specific knowledge at the end of the series. The fact that it does end is a characteristic of the whole domain of knowledge, reflecting something about that totality. What it reflects shows up as an end-point, which is why it makes sense to call it a boundary *condition*, thus differentiating it from a mere boundary. Likewise, a boundary condition on the domain of spirituality is that having significance comes to an end, and that end is, formally, “This is what life’s all about”. Without such an end to the justification and the significance series, we would be faced with an infinite regress that would make the domains unmanageable and incomprehensible.

Boundary conditions reflect the internal structure of a domain, which in turn reflects its ultimate objects and processes and their relationships. If two domains have different ultimate objects, ipso facto they will be different totalities, and we can expect that different boundary conditions will obtain. A striking example of this is provided by the classic religious conversion, where a person changes and therefore his world changes—or conversely, where his world changes and he becomes a new person. One of the more conspicuous differences among religions lies in what they expect or require as a sign that a person’s world has changed. It may be a rite of passage such as baptism or confirmation, a public declaration that one has been born again, a secret initiation, an affirmation of doctrinal conformity, or participation in a new set of social practices. Often we can

specify what reality constraints have been lifted or imposed by this new domain, as contrasted with that from which the convert came. A good many of us have moved, in adolescence, from a world dominated by a gentle, kindly God, or a harsh, dictatorial one, to another one governed by vast, impersonal forces, and found ourselves explosively endowed with what at the time appeared to be an illimitable freedom.

Returning to our concept of the real world as a place-holder, we can compare the domains of science and religion, and any particular sciences or religions, by how each of them fills in the namely-clause, with special reference to how it answers questions having to do with ultimates, totalities, boundary conditions, and significance.

To bring these all together: Given that what is ultimately significant for the domain of the physical and natural sciences is empirically grounded knowledge, its totality comprises all that is, in the sense that there is nothing one could point to that would not fall within its scope. In principle, there is nothing that physical or natural scientists cannot study empirically, although in practice, they do not yet have the conceptual resources, the methodologies, or the technical equipment for some of such studies to be of much, if any, value. Within that domain, particular sciences constitute subdomains with their own limitations. The physical chemist as such is not concerned with comparative anatomy or how to distinguish poetry from prose, nor the botanist as such with quantum mechanics or the artistic value of Calder's mobiles. Although these scientists are free to examine any phenomenon whatever, they are limited in what it is possible and appropriate for them to say about it. Further, since anything that one could point to is subject to different descriptions, there is no privileged description that tells us what it *really is*, independent of human conceptual frameworks.

The religious totality also comprises all that is in the same sense, i.e., that there is nothing one could point to that could not fall within its scope. But theologians likewise are limited in what it is possible and appropriate for them to say, and their descriptions are no more privileged than the scientists'.

Where physical and natural science is not concerned with truths that are not empirical, religion is not concerned with truths that are unrelated to ultimate significance. Certainly some individual scientists have done their work to the glory of God, and some scholars in the field of religion have made important empirical discoveries, as in archaeology. But the best of these would count it a betrayal of their scientific integrity, and a blasphemy against what they took to be ultimately significant, if they misrepresented empirical evidence to sustain a religious dogma, or adulterated a religious doctrine to bring it into conformity with scientific precepts. Just as certainly, other individual scientists have shown nothing but con-

tempt for anything religious, and some religionists have distorted empirical findings unmercifully in defence of a religious dogma. But the fact that persons can relate themselves to these two domains in such very different ways does not imply confusion between the domains themselves, any more than the fact that a single person can be both a chef and a chess-player implies that the domains of cooking and chess coincide, or that the distinction between them is unclear.

The content of scientific knowledge is continually changing. In the high and far-off time when I took chemistry in high school, we were taught that the basic building blocks were atoms. Now, chemists are going beyond subatomic particles to heaven knows what. But the nature of scientific knowledge as empirical does not change. Likewise, what we take to be ultimately significant can change: I remember a noted theologian telling about the little boy who insisted fiercely that he didn't want to go to heaven if he couldn't have his new little red wagon there, and his laughter at himself in later years when he was reminded of that. But the nature of religious knowledge, as having to do with what is ultimately significant, does not change.

In this paper, I have limited myself to an analysis of the worlds of science and religion, and to the concepts of totality, ultimacy, boundary condition, and significance. This is not, however, the only way to articulate the similarities and differences of those or comparable domains. There are at least three other possible approaches: first, through the parametric analysis of behavior (Ossorio, 1973, in press; Shideler, in press); second, through the parametric analysis of cultures and communities (Ossorio, 1983; Putman, 1981; Shideler, in press); and third, through the paradigm-case study of persons and personal characteristics (Ossorio, 1966, 1976, 1977; Shideler, in press). And yet another might be added: the approach through language (Ossorio, 1966, 1967, 1978a). It may be of interest that none of these descriptive approaches—via the real world, behavior, community, personal characteristics, and language—was developed for describing religions, and this application has come relatively late in the history of Descriptive Psychology. Therefore what we have here is a set of systematically-related concepts that is not peculiar to this subject-matter or applicable only here. Experience indicates, however, that even so this conceptual system is capable of doing full justice to the power, splendor, and uniqueness of the religious domain as such and of specific religions as well, without reductionism, paradox, remainder, or ad hoc formulations.

III

Given that we can describe the real world in the neutral terms provided by the content-free transcendental concepts developed within Descriptive

Psychology, it is imperative to remember that anything that can be described in one way can also be described in other ways. And one of the most striking facts about descriptions of the real world is how varied they are. All scientific descriptions have some features in common, but every scientist describes the world differently, depending on whether he is a physicist, a chemist, a biologist, a social or behavioral scientist, or a philosopher of science. Further, within those domains, individual scientists will give their own distinctive twists to the general view. Religious bodies differ from each other in their official portrayals of the world, and the single members of each body will depict the world generally in a common way but with individual variations. Diversity, not unity, is characteristic of our descriptions of the real world. Which of them, then, is the true, the privileged one? And how can we determine which is true, or more modestly, which comes closest to the truth? To answer these questions of content and methodology, we must again go back to fundamentals.

First, to acknowledge that we describe the world in different ways according to our own personal or communal characteristics and circumstances does not automatically condemn us to anthropomorphism or egocentrism, that is, to casting ourselves in the starring roles in the universal drama, or indeed of our personal dramas. We can just as well cast ourselves, or even humanity, in a supporting role. It is not unusual for a person to value another person, or a cause or a country or a deity, more than himself, or to accept another's knowledge as superior to his own. As individuals, we know what we know, but we know only what *we* know. Our communities describe and define in authoritative ways, but those ways cannot be totally authoritative for all persons in all times and places because each community has a particular viewpoint and can describe the world only from that particular place. These constraints, however, do not compel us to absolutize our own view, and do not prevent us from gaining formal access to other views in the form of knowledge about them.

From one viewpoint, this situation can be described as relativism of the deepest dye. From another—which I share—it can be described as enjoining upon us a decent humility, stemming from the recognition that we are human beings, not gods. As Charles Williams (1952) writes (I have changed the tenses),

No mind is so good that it does not need another mind to counter and equal it, and to save it from conceit and blindness and bigotry and folly. Only in such a balance can humility be found, humility which is a lucid speed to welcome lucidity whenever and wherever it presents itself. (p. 187)

Second, we seem generally to be convinced that it is imperative for us to know The Truth, absolute, irrefutable, and inviolable, but we have seldom been reminded that truth is a property of statements. An object,

process, event, or state of affairs cannot be true or false; it simply is what it is. Statements about those elements can be true or false, but are not always verifiable. That the book is on the table can be verified; that the world was created in seven twenty-four-hour days cannot be, nor can “The world is the totality of facts, not of things”. Truth is a property of statements in the sense that it is a status that we assign to statements. But a statement is the statement it is independently of whether it is true or false, and more generally, things are what they are independently of their status, and can be judged accordingly. Thus a portrait can be judged as a work of art without regard to whether it is also a good likeness of its subject. Who knows—or cares—today whether da Vinci’s portrait of Mona Lisa was an accurate representation of the lady? It is the move from portrayal to reality-judgement that is perilous, from “Human beings can be described in terms of what their bodies are made of” to “They really are merely what they can be decomposed into”, or from the other direction, “Human beings are participants in world history” to “They really are mere items in a universal process”.

The reality-judgement, “they really are”, is a status-assignment, a final-order appraisal of what the persons making that judgement take to be real and therefore are prepared to act on. It is also, though less obviously, a value-judgement reflecting what those judges take to be important. Either way, they are saying not just, “This portrait is a good likeness of the subject”, or “This is an accurate description of the real world”, but also, “This is the only definitive portrait” or “the only true description of the world”. So doing, those judges strip themselves of a decent humility and array themselves as gods, and join battle. It is not the claim to be right that sets them on a collision course, but the claim to be exclusively right. Compare this with what Charles Morgan (1961) writes of Thomas Hardy:

Hardy’s saying that he had no philosophy is not to be understood to mean that he had no point of view. He stood on a hill-top and from it surveyed experience, and it was his own hill-top; he was not inconsistent in the sense of being without individuality; he was not for ever blown hither and thither by the opinions of others, joining leagues and clubs and fashionable groups and peering out at life through their blinkers. He preserved his integrity, guarded his individuality, looked out from his own hill-top. But he did not look only north, or only south, or only east or west. He did not fix upon a favourite view and say: “This is Truth. There is no other.” He surveyed the whole landscape of experience with what eyes he had, and said to us: “Look: what do you see with your different eyes?” And we looked, and, though we did not see what he had seen, we saw what we had not seen before and might never have seen but for his visionary flash. (p. 13)

Here, viewpoint and view are paired so as to uphold the authority of Hardy’s view from his hill-top while denying that it is—or should be—authoritative over persons standing on other hill-tops.

A good many statements, descriptive or otherwise, are not merely statements. What we are doing when we make them is giving a promise that this is how we are prepared to treat whatever it is we are talking about. A paradigm case for such promises is “Here I stand”—another place-holder, tacitly followed by “namely—”. In the first instance, “Here I stand” represents our acknowledgement that other persons may take other stands. In the second, the namely clause presents what we are holding ourselves to, and what we expect—legitimately—others to hold us to. My standing where I do many involve my insisting, “And here is where you ought to stand, too”, or it may simply designate my place without my imposing on others the expectation or requirement that they should stand there as well.

Promises cannot be wrong in the way that observations can be wrong, because what is at stake in a promise is something over which we have control, our behavior, and beyond that, our identity, because “Here I stand” can be paraphrased into “This is me”, or “I cannot do otherwise and still be me”. We may be wrong in standing where we do; to say that we are or are not is to take another stand on the matter. Our identity may be commendable or abominable; again, it is a matter of taking a stand on *that*. But this is a commitment we *can* make, and nobody else can make it for us. Someone else can tell us, “I’ve committed you to being there on time”, but if we are not there on time, it is the person who originally made the promise who is responsible, not for our tardiness or absence, but for having promised something which he was not in a position to control, i.e., our willingness, our behavior, our circumstances, and so on. He was the guarantor; therefore any claim must be against him.

Saying “Here I stand” is a way of taking an irrefutable and in some sense invulnerable position equivalent to saying “This is me”. We can anchor ourselves there, and we can know where others are anchored by their “Here *I* stand”. Obviously, over the years we—and they—can change, but we do not make such promises over matters that we expect to change readily or often. And standing firmly, even in a well-defined place, does not deprive us of formal or even empathic knowledge about persons standing equally firmly in different places. We are not cut off from them rationally, imaginatively, or compassionately. Moreover, as a reminder, whether our stand is one of conformity or creativity or rebellion, always we are in community with other persons, because taking a stand occurs only in the context of participating in social forms of behavior.

This one anchor, however, is not enough. With that alone, we could slip too easily into solipsism or fanaticism. While it is important to have a personal anchor that depends upon us and not on others, it is no less important to have an objective one that does depend on others. When I say, “This is a book”, I am making a promise. Implicitly I am saying, “I

can successfully treat this as a book—open it, read what is printed on the pages, and so on. *And you can, too*, because there are ways of finding out whether this is a book, and you or anybody else can check out my observation in those ways.” If you do not share with me the concept “book”, of course, you will not be able to check me out, but there are ways—practice and experience—by which you can become competent in the use of that concept, and then you will be able to confirm—or disconfirm—that this is indeed a book.

In giving empirical and historical truth-statements, we may be wrong or our information may change. For example, granting that the book is now on the table, yesterday it was not there and tomorrow it may or may not be. In the domain of history, new information discloses that Columbus was not the first European to travel to the American continents. Even so, the empirical and historical constraints on our possible behaviors have an anchoring function, in part because although we can choose how we shall treat the book or any other real-world element, we have no choice as to what our options are. It has its own recalcitrance. We can read it, tear it up to start a fire, use it as a doorstop, throw it at the dog who has been chewing it up, but not use it to quench our thirst or convey us to the other side of town.

Personal and objective truth-statements are not as unrelated as they may appear to be, because the declaration “Here I stand” is not only a promise, but objectively a statement of what I take to be real and therefore am grounding my actions on. Thus it is as much of an anchor as any other objective statement.

To bring this all together, let us take the case of a scientist and a mystic (it could equally well be a Buddhist and a Moslem, or a Christian and a Hindu, or an atheist and a Jew) who stand in very different places, and who have specified very different content for the concept “real world”. Within this range, we have equally vehement affirmations that life as a totality is ultimately meaningful and that it is meaningless; that it is ordered and random, benevolent, malevolent, and indifferent to human concerns, and so on through a wide range of incompatibles, uncomfortably reminiscent of “This is a book” versus “This is not a book but a marble sculpture.” Which of us are out of our minds? All, or none, or “everyone except thee and me—and I have my doubts about thee”?

First, there is no way to confirm or disconfirm conclusions of the kind that life is meaningful or meaningless, or ordered or random, because these are not statements of fact, nor are they derived from an assemblage of facts. They are not historical particulars that we are able to discover or disprove empirically, such as that we are sitting in a circle around a chair. Nor are they facts of the noncausal, nontemporal variety such as that circles are round. Instead, such statements as “The world is mean-

ingless”—or meaningful—are ultimate-significance judgements. They are not summary formulations of facts, but affirmations of what we are prepared to take to be facts, and what we are prepared to assign to the status of error, misrepresentation, dream, or delusion. Indeed we can engage in attempts to prove that life is meaningful or meaningless, and so on, and claim success, but we cannot successfully carry off that attempt any more than we can successfully carry off the claim that we have treated the chair as a telephone.

As we have already seen, status assignments, like descriptions, can be transmuted into ontologies. One person says, “That which is supremely significant is God”—or goodness or pleasure or power or whatever. Another person says, “The central fact of human nature is the desire for sexual gratification”—or instinct or curiosity or the urge toward self-fulfilment or whatever. Sometimes these status assignments are expressed as assumptions. The move from description or status assignment to metaphysics is not illegitimate in itself. It becomes so when we do not know what we are doing, or do not identify what the other person is doing, that is, when descriptions are confused with theories, or status assignments with revealed truths. Thus it is not tolerance that we need most in dealing with religions other than our own, but straightforward intellectual clarity in conceptualizing, describing, and appraising.

Clarity may be more difficult to achieve than we like to think, because only rarely can we translate our concepts into those of a science or another religion without loss or distortion. For example, recently I came across a book by a psychiatrist who was proposing as a healthy approach to personal relationships the slogan, “I’m not O.K. You’re not O.K. And that’s O.K.” (Kopp, 1981, p. 97)—as neat a paraphrase of the Christian doctrine of original sin as I have ever come across. From the context, I am certain that the author had no idea of the equivalence, but there it is. To state the identity in this way, however, requires that I put his concept into my terms, which results in some degree of distortion. Far more deformation results from the popular attempts to show that all religions are really presenting the same view of the world—for example, that the Aztec Quetzalcoatl is a Christ-figure, or that the only difference between the Buddhist Nirvana and the Christian heaven lies in the names given to them, and so on down the line. To take an illustration from another field, this is like declaring that only nomenclature separates Freud’s psychological theories from Skinner’s.

If our scientist and mystic give each other flat statements of fact, their conversation will bog down immediately and probably irretrievably, because they do not share enough concepts or agree enough on what are facts to make their interchange productive. Nor are they likely to share the same values. What is highly significant to one may well be inconse-

quential to the other. That is, they do not share a community within which they can hold each other responsible, nor have they a claim upon each other because of that shared community. This is where “Here I stand” is not only appropriate but necessary for communication, since it does not necessarily presuppose or generate the kind of community that is presupposed and generated by “I’m right and you’re wrong”. On the ground of “Here I stand, and there you stand”, persons can describe, explain, and engage in any other of the social practices that will “get someone to see.” If, from this, a community eventuates, it will be of a very different kind from the community of those who take their “Here I stand” as obligatory upon everyone. To over-simplify, this will be a community of persons who are not holding each other to any promises except those that are basic to any productive interchange: integrity, clarity, and good will.

Ultimately we do not choose where we shall stand, any more than we choose our ways of living. In ordinary situations, our circumstances give us reasons for choosing to behave in this way or that, and when we are asked, “Why are you doing so-and-so?”, we point to those circumstances and reasons (cf. the Judgement Diagram [Ossorio, 1977, 1978c, in press]). If, however, we are pressed further, to the point where we have exhausted our recourse to circumstances and reasons, we move to how much weight those reasons carry with us. If questions are raised about those weights—which reflect our personal characteristics—we can give rationalizations and justifications, and when we have exhausted our recourse to these, we answer, “This is me and here I stand”.

People have made serious and sometimes prolonged efforts to live in ways that were neither authentically human nor fulfilling, such as determinism, solipsism, and fanaticism, but always, sooner or later they have failed. And people have compelled others to live inauthentic and unfulfilling lives—in slavery, to take only one example—but these attempts result in degradation if not death. Yet there remains a wonderful variety of ways of life that *are* compatible with human nature, as shown by the great religions of the world such as (in alphabetical order) Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism, as well as the religion which takes science as its authority, and many religions that are not as widely spread or well known as these.

Adherents of any of these can say to the others, “Your way is less authentic, less fulfilling, than mine”, and given their reasons—reasons which are likely to be grounded in disagreement on what constitutes authenticity and fulfilment for human beings. Two quotations will admirably illustrate such disparities: “What the Liberal Church strives for is happiness—an undeceived happiness” (Opton, 1982, p. 29), as contrasted with “There are certain eternal achievements that make even happiness look like trash” (Sayers, 1949, p. 40). Persons of any persuasion can claim

that others grossly misapprehend or misrepresent the facts of human nature, and here again we have a boundary condition situation, as in the case of treating the chair as a telephone, and of “That’s what life is all about”. Such differences are in principle negotiable, remembering that successful negotiation does not necessarily end in agreement. It may end instead in what an Outsider might describe as an amiable tolerance, but an Insider would more likely call compassion and honor for others who are also on a spiritual journey, albeit a different one.

IV

To conclude with a statement of where I stand on the matters at issue in this paper: it is on the ground that the human search for absolute, universal, unchangeable, and unchallengeable Truth (with a capital T) is doomed to failure because we are finite and fallible beings. We are not gods, and therefore we do not have direct access to a divine viewpoint. Thus even if we did possess such truths, we would not recognize them as such or we would not know what to do with them. We can, however, have both objective and personal certainties, and these will serve the same behavioral and ideological functions, but without tempting us into the cardinal sin of pride, or ensnaring us in fanaticism or solipsism.

Finally, as a grace note—in both senses of “grace”—for any who may still be unhappy with anything that smacks even faintly of subjectivism and relativism, herewith a quotation from an “unspoken sermon” written more than a century ago, in which the writer, George MacDonald, defends the importance of relativism and explicates its significance. What he says of knowing God is equally applicable to knowing the world.

Not only . . . has each man his individual relation to God, but each man has his peculiar relation to God. He is to God a peculiar being, made after his own fashion, and that of no one else; for when he is perfected he shall receive the new name which no one else can understand. Hence he can worship God as no man else can worship him—can understand God as no one else can understand him. This or that man may understand God more, may understand God better than he, but no other man can understand God *as* he understands him. God give me grace to be humble before thee, my brother, that I . . . look up to thyself for what revelation of God thou and no one else canst give. . . . From this it follows that there is a chamber in God himself, into which none can enter but the one, the individual, the peculiar man—out of which chamber that man has to bring revelation and strength for his brethren. This is that for which he was made—to reveal the secret things of the Father. (MacDonald, 1867, pp. 110–112)

As a Descriptive Theologian, I should like to propose that another of the things for which we are made is to reveal to others what we see of the world from where we stand, while looking to them for the view of the

world that they and no one else can give. When we do this in our approach to the relations between science and religion, and among religions, we can have diversity without division, intellectual rigor without reductionism, and certainty without arrogance. And that is no small achievement.

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