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Experiencing-As: John Hick's Failure to Improve Upon a Fideistic Position

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Over the past fifty years, many philosophers have outlined a position regarding religious language and belief that can be referred to as "fideistic." In many respects, this position is based on the conceptual framework of Ludwig Wittgenstein, as expressed in his later writings. While this position is, in my opinion, extremely coherent and in keeping with experience, many theistic philosophers of religion have felt compelled to argue against it. As I will explain in a moment, a fideistic position holds many potentially negative implications for the religious person. John Hick, in his writings on religious faith,¹ attempts to entertain the benefits of a fideistic position while moving beyond some of its limitations. It is my contention that his is ultimately a failed attempt. I see Hick's position as divided into two arguments: an argument for a fideistic "experiencing-as" approach, and an argument for a more direct connection to objective "reality." Hick's arguments are self-defeating — his fideistic analysis of faith is so compelling that it serves as an immediate rebuttal of any further arguments — making the case for a fideistic position that much stronger. I assert that a fideistic position is essential to an understanding of religious faith, and that its negative implications for a traditional religious believer must be embraced rather than overcome.

Before undertaking an analysis of Hick's position, it is first necessary to outline briefly what is meant by the term "Wittgensteinian Fideism." While Wittgenstein has been quoted as saying, "I am not a religious man but I cannot help seeing every problem from a religious point of view."² It is important to note that "Wittgensteinian Fideism" does not refer to a specific philosophy of religion that has

been advocated by Wittgenstein. Instead, it points to a collection of writings on religious belief which have been produced by a variety of Wittgenstein-influenced philosophers. Consequently, the boundaries of this body of work are ambiguous, and the discussions are at times unrelated or self-contradictory. There is no fixed set of literature or dogmatic creed that must be the case when the term "Wittgensteinian Fideism" is uttered (as *might* be true if the term referred to a single author), although there is definitely a set of common assumptions and arguments. Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of debate over whether or not Wittgenstein was actually fideistic, and some philosophers have suggested that it is inappropriate to equate the personal name with the philosophical position. While a discussion of this debate might prove both interesting and informative, such a discussion would be tangential, at best, to my thesis. For the purposes of this paper, and for reasons I have just alluded to, I feel comfortable in referring to this conglomeration of ideas as "Wittgensteinian Fideism"; in doing so, I am not asserting that Wittgenstein would have fully agreed with such a philosophy of religion, but simply acknowledging the fact that a body of writing (whatever it might be named), that is inspired by a particular individual, has had an influence on philosophical discussions and on philosophers such as Hick — as this entity of Wittgensteinian Fideism. Some of the authors to whom I will refer in this paper may not be considered, or may not consider themselves, Wittgensteinian fideists. However, given my use of the term, I feel no hesitation with respect to their inclusion in my discussion.

The first step toward a fideistic appreciation for the groundlessness of religious belief is recognition of the ground-

lessness of our various ways of interpreting the world. Our experience of the world is extremely limited, and over the course of our lives we are continually in the process of creating and compiling a web of assumptions with which to interpret it. Various people in various contexts might construct this web differently. Each "web" is equally sufficient to account for worldly experience, although they might account for it in drastically different ways. By this, I mean that none can be shown to be more *correct* than another, as that there is no constant and unbiased measurement device to be employed that is devoid of assumptions — that is not a web itself. "Hypotheses are put forth, and challenged, within a system";³ this system provides boundaries and guidelines for analysis, and establishes exactly what would be tested for and what constitutes significant results. It is important to note that these various systems are founded upon assumptions that are not, and cannot, be justified. Instead of asserting, then, that a particular set of assumptions is *unreasonable*, Malcolm argues that "it is something that we do not try to support with grounds" and that it "belong[s] to 'the framework' of our thinking about material things."⁴

Religion stands as one example of this type of framework, or form of life.⁵ It is comprised of actions, rituals, beliefs, and ways of experiencing which are not reliant upon their connection to ultimate reality — they are their own grounds.⁶ Each form of life, including religion, has a logic of its own; it has "its own specific criteria of rationality/irrationality, intelligibility/unintelligibility, and reality/unreality."⁷

Consequently, one form of life cannot be justified in criticizing another, as such criticism will necessarily be based upon assumptions which may not be relevant to the form of life in question. One can only critique a form of life from within; a person can only critique and find contradictions or inconsistencies with a form of life if she lives in participation with its

daily context and shares its fundamental assumptions. One can say, "based on the criteria valued by my current form of life, I find this other to be untenable," for this is one of the reasons why a person would choose to remain in the current form of life. However, one cannot say, "My current form of life is more directly connected to 'reality' than this other" or, "My current form of life is based upon assumptions that are more 'accurate' than the assumptions of some other form."

John Hick incorporates many of these fideistic ideas into his discussion of "experiencing-as." The most basic premise of Hick's experiencing-as article, and the foundation for his arguments on the rationality of religious belief, is captured in the statement, "It is as reasonable for those who experience their lives as being lived in the presence of God, to believe in the reality of God, as for all of us to form beliefs about our environment on the basis of our experience of it."⁸ Hick argues that religious faith is not so much propositional as it is like sense perception. No experience is pure, unmediated experience of the *real* structure of the universe. All experience is experiencing *as* something, based upon a particular set of assumptions or past experiences — upon a particular form of life. Drawing on Wittgenstein's "seeing-as" phenomenon, Hick uses the example of seeing a tuft of grass *as* a rabbit or *as* a tuft of grass. This physical phenomenon is experienced differently based on the perspective of the person perceiving it. In this way, there is a sense in which "the religious person and the atheist both live in the same world and another sense in which they live consciously in different worlds."⁹ The atheist might see the world as self-sustaining or self-justifying, or as completely *undirected*, while the religious person sees the world as in continual interaction with God.

Religious beliefs are based upon this process of experiencing-as. As Hick points out, the response of the disciples to the figure of Jesus was not a theoretical one, but an experience "out of which

Christian language and theory grew"; that Jesus was their Lord was a fact of their experiencing him as such.¹⁰ As a result, Hick's justification for the rationality of religious belief differs drastically from the traditional argument; "the justification of theistic belief does not consist in any argument moving directly to the conclusion that God exists but rather in an argument for the rationality of so believing despite the fact that this cannot be proved or shown to be in any objective sense more probably than not."¹¹ In this way, religious belief is not based on an absolutistic reliance on evidences that supposedly uncover the structure of the universe, but on an unconscious experience of the world based upon a disposition toward a particular mode of experiencing-as. If a particular mode of experiencing-as is so pervasive in one's life, and generally consistent, Hick argues that it would amount to "cognitive suicide" to deny its legitimacy. "One who has a powerful and continuous sense of existing in the presence of God *ought*, therefore, to be convinced that God exists."¹² This is ultimately what is meant by the phrase "walking by faith."

This position¹³ holds some definite advantages for the traditional religious believer, foremost being the denial of an obligation to provide grounds for religious belief. In the history of theistic philosophy, it has consistently been the burden of the theist to provide legitimate grounds — to the atheist and to himself — for belief in God. Also, it has been the duty of the theist to defend his position against attacks from other forms of life. Given a fideistic framework, the theist is no longer expected to provide proofs for the existence of God, or justification for a valuation of religious faith. There need not be more arguments stressing, or arguing against, the rationality of religious belief. Various aspects of religious practice (including ritual, creed, or sacrament), although they must be consistent *within* a particular religious form of life, need not be justified to those external to that form. Furthermore, a fideistic philos-

ophy explains belief and practice formation in a way that is accessible to and in keeping with the experiences of the traditional religious believer. Finally, there appears to be something common-sensical about the proposition that, on some level, our lives operate based on assumptions that are ultimately groundless, and that there is no escaping the experiencing-as phenomenon. This last point, if no other, might encourage a traditional religious believer to at least entertain a fideistic position.

At this point, however, I will pause for a moment to examine some of the reasons why such an approach might be unsatisfactory to the traditionally religious individual. The fideistic position has the potential to be extremely relativistic, implying equal legitimacy for all forms of life, as there is no room for external criticism or the negotiation of perspectives with the hope of approximating "truth." Traditional religious belief is founded upon the conviction that there is a correct conception of the physical and spiritual world. It assumes the existence of an absolute truth and the possibility of discovering or approaching it. It assumes that one form of life is more directly connected to reality than another, and that this distinction is one that is both perceptible and arguable. It is this confidence in a particular form of life over another that lends religion its meaning and legitimacy — religion does not traditionally pretend to be *simply* a form of life, existing as an end in itself. A fideistic approach requires that the religious person either (1) accept that truth in the absolute sense cannot be approached by the human mind in its limited and contextual experience, or that they (2) abandon the notion of absolute truth altogether. This ultimatum is unmanageable for many religious believers, as it is not the intention or context which they see as significant, but the factual "truth" nature of their beliefs.

In his article "God and Human Attitudes," James Rachels hits upon this major critique of the fideistic position,

and also of the position expounded by John Hick through the concept of "experiencing-as." Rachels argues that a fideistic conception of religious belief is contrary to the Christian believer's conception of what she is asserting with religious statements. Rachels expands on this criticism in two directions. First, he argues that the believer would adamantly claim that she is making a factual assertion when stating a religious belief. For the believer, the assertion that "there will be a Last Judgement" is a statement of fact — if a non-believer disagrees with such an assertion, the believer will feel that she has been contradicted. Accordingly, when a believer leaves the faith, it is often the case that such a decision is based on the conviction that particular religious assertions are *false*. Second, Rachels argues that "a belief does not lose its ordinary factual import simply because it occupies a central place in one's way of life."¹⁴ While facts might serve as a guiding factor for a particular way of life, this does not negate their status as facts. For the religious believer, while a particular set of religious beliefs *does* comprise a form of life and referential standard for discourse, this belief *is* grounded in fact. If this fundamental assumption is removed, the religious form of life is deflated and loses its primary meaning.

I will now turn to John Hick's attempt to move beyond some of these problems of a fideistic approach. While embracing the experiencing-as concept, Hick attempts to ground religious faith in some sort of extra-experiential reality. In both "Religious Faith as Experiencing-As" and "The Rationality of Religious Belief," Hick takes recourse to words like "ambiguity," "misperception," "delusion," "validity," "veridical," "illusory," and "credulity" in order to make such a connection. Hick attempts to argue that, while all experience is experiencing-as, some forms of experiencing-as approximate reality more fully than others. Returning to his seeing-as example, Hick points out that "it" is perceived either "*erroneously*, as a rabbit" or "*cor-*

rectly as a tuft of grass."¹⁵ This distinction leads to the problem of how to determine which experiences are "delusional" and which are "accurate." "Applying this concept of delusion to the realm of religious experience, we have to ask whether those who assume that their 'experience of living in God's presence' is caused ... by their being in God's presence" or whether they are, "on the contrary, under a delusion."¹⁶ Hick claims that he is not arguing for the validity of religious faith, but rather that it is rational for a person who experiences life as "living in the presence of God" to treat this experience as veridical.¹⁷ However, he does not hesitate to point out that one conception of experience is "accurate" while another is "inaccurate," and Hick remains extremely vague as to how such an evaluation can be made.

It is my contention that Hick outlines his fideistic position so well that he leaves himself in no position to postulate his second argument for ultimate objectivity. If Hick is genuinely arguing that *all* experience is experiencing-as, there can be no method for determining the objective truth-value of a particular worldview. While he can assert, I grant, that there may be some ultimate reality which particular forms of life approximate more than others, he cannot assert that there is any way for the participants to make such a judgement. He cannot, then, have such a sense of urgency with regard to determining the veridical character of belief. Hick's two arguments are built upon completely different sets of assumptions. The second argument does not follow from the first. In fact, the first nullifies any attempts like the second. Hick's arguments for the experiencing — as phenomenon are convincing — so convincing, in fact, that the second set of arguments seem both unfounded and unnecessary. They do not appear to stem from an experiencing-as framework of thought, but from a traditional religious desire for some deeper legitimacy for belief. Precisely *because* Hick's argument for experiencing-as is so well

developed and consistent with experience, it would seem impossible (and counter to his general thesis) for him to suggest that there is any way to make a distinction between illusion and veracity. He weaves the experiencing-as web so perfectly that he himself cannot escape it, even when he feels emotionally or pragmatically compelled to do so. Hick's desire for approaching "reality," ultimately, does no more than corrupt his original thesis of experiencing-as.

Also, Hick's desire for objectivity, coupled with his insistence on the groundlessness of belief, leads to some potentially dangerous conclusions regarding religious belief and practice. Hick points out that religious experiences can potentially provide rational experiential reasons for belief, but also that they are potentially ambiguous or misleading. Because of his interest in approaching ultimate reality, Hick is forced to suggest that the believer, who lacks or doubts of his own religious experience, might be well-advised to "follow in the footsteps of a great religious leader" whose belief is more "deeply or solidly grounded."¹⁸ Hick argues that credible religious leaders might be able to guide the believer in a way that he cannot guide himself. This process of deciding *who* is credible and *who* should be followed is potentially problematic. On what criteria should the believer base this decision? What measures exist to ensure that the believer will find a Martin Luther or a Jesus of Nazareth to be credible, as opposed to a Jim Jones? As religious experience might be one way to catch a glimpse of "reality" — to discern for a moment whether "it" is a rabbit or a tuft of grass, if you will — and as certain individuals seem to be more "deeply spiritual" in this way, Hick must argue that the believer should evaluate such individuals for legitimacy and then "follow in their footsteps."

I would argue that if a fideistic approach is to be seriously entertained, it must be entertained in full. A believer cannot accept the positive implications of the philosophy and deny the potentially

negative repercussions. This appears to be Hick's dilemma. He is drawn to arguments for the groundlessness of religious belief and for the legitimacy of religious faith, but he feels compelled to assert the accessibility of an objective reality. He cannot do both. It is precisely *because* of the "negative" implications of a fideistic philosophy that the "positive" are made possible. Hick appears to be adamant about the value of his experiencing-as concept as a necessary vehicle for understanding religious faith; given this commitment, his efforts to provide objectivity appear to be, at best, honest yet tortured attempts to reconcile his traditional beliefs with a more appealing theoretical framework.

I would argue that a fideistic approach is not only compatible with religious belief, but that it might actually *enhance* it. Note, however, that by the term "compatible" I do not necessarily mean non-contradictory. Also, this argument is only applicable to those initially inclined to a Wittgensteinian mode of thought, as it appears that Hick might be (at least to some extent). First, one must begin with the assumption that all experience is experiencing-as. One must agree with the proposition that humans act upon many assumptions which are ultimately groundless, and that their actions and beliefs are supported not by a connection with the "real" state of affairs but with a particular form of life. One must also agree that a critique from one form of life cannot be applied to another, and that, consequently, no form has a more justified claim on absolute accuracy.¹⁹ If these assumptions are accepted, one may fully enjoy the philosophical benefits of fideism as described above. However, one must also admit the possibility that her particular way of life does not include a direct connection to "absolute truth" in the notion of God. To aspire to this connection, or to criticize another form of life for distinctly having less of this connection, is to be self-contradictory. One, then, must be content to critique her particular form of life from within, or

to choose a new form. I must concede, however, that the believer attempting to hold this philosophy and to maintain any semblance of a traditionally religious position will find herself in quite a contradictory position.

This contradiction can and must be embraced. Only if, through living in this state of contradiction, the believer admits the tentative nature of her absolutist convictions, is neither position denied. In fact, this tension is the most genuine expression of the intellectual state of the believer (if she truly finds the experiencing-as concept to be necessary), and any attempt to negotiate out of it would be utterly false. Through embracing an almost Kierkegaardian notion of risk, the believer must continue to believe in the face of uncertainty. If the believer does not experience this conflict, she is either 1) living with the delusion that she has achieved or can potentially approximate

direct contact with the objective "facts" of God, or 2) simply living in a form of life without concern for its legitimacy. I believe that Basil Mitchell's argument for general religious faith can be carried into the present context; he argues that the believer "will only be regarded as sane and reasonable in his belief, if he experiences in himself the full force of the conflict."²⁰ If the believer finds it to be the case that a Wittgensteinian fideistic philosophy of religion is defensible and common-sensical, and if the believer wishes to maintain a more traditionally religious position as well, it is necessary that she acknowledge and embrace the conflict between these positions. If the believer is fully genuine with regard to each of these two convictions, I would argue that each can be maintained simultaneously, and that such maintenance could actually lead to an *enhanced* form of risk-based faith.

Notes

1. In this paper, when discussing Hick's position, I will be referring primarily to his views as expressed in the essays "Religious Faith as Experiencing-As" and "The Rationality of Religious Belief."
2. Norman, Malcolm. *Wittgenstein: A Religious Point of View?* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein in Norman Malcolm, "The Groundlessness of Belief," *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. Geivett, Douglas R. and Brendan Sweetman. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 94.
4. Malcolm: 1992, 93.
5. To use Wittgenstein's term.
6. When I use the term "religion," I am referring to conventional Christianity. The same arguments can be applied, in slightly augmented form, to other religions as well. I simply choose Christianity because it is the religious form of life with which I am the most familiar.
7. Nielsen, Kai. "Wittgensteinian Fideism," *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Cahn, Steven M. and David Shatz. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 239.
8. Hick, John. "The Rationality of Religious Belief," *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, ed. Geivett, Douglas R. and Brendan Sweetman. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 304.
9. Hick, John. "Religious Faith as Experiencing-As" *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Hick, John. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 408.
10. Hick: 1990, 415.
11. Hick: 1992, 305.
12. Hick: 1992, 309.
13. From this point on, if I have not been clearly doing so already, I will be regarding the "experiencing-as" component of Hick's philosophy as fideistic. As mentioned earlier, I am not asserting consistency between the many fideistic positions, nor a necessary agreement with the philosophy of Wittgenstein, but simply a category of thought. While I am hesitant to make such broad generalizations, oversimplifications, and categorizations (and regret that I must), I believe that such a technique is necessary given the scope of this discussion.
14. Rachels, James. "God and Human Attitudes," *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Cahn, Steven M. and David Shatz. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 171.
15. Hick: 1990, 409. My emphasis.
16. Hick: 1992, 305.
17. Hick: 1990, 417.
18. Hick: 1992, 313.

19. If one disagrees with these assumptions, there is no need to continue. I am not arguing for the propositions themselves — others have done and continue to do so quite adequately — but for the position that a person who feels compelled to embrace these propositions may continue to maintain a religious way of life without reducing it to a vacuous set of mechanical actions.

20. Basil Mitchell, a response to Antony Flew in 20. Basil Mitchell, a response to Antony Flew in "Theology and Falsification." *Classical and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Hick, John. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 373.

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