

13

John Hick's Pan(en)theistic Monism

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1 Introduction

John Hick endorses dualism as a response to the mind-body problem. He maintains that reality consists of two ontologically distinct types of entities – the mental and the physical – and that they interact with each other. Yet his religious pluralism entails monism because it claims that there is a single transcategorical ultimate reality that is variously experienced and construed in the world's religions. He also contends that he realized through his religious experience that he is part of, as monism says, a single indivisible whole. The aim of this paper is to reconcile this apparent tension between the dualistic and monistic elements in Hick's metaphysical system by proposing a unique form of pantheistic or panentheistic monism.

This paper has the following structure. In the following section, 'Hick's Dualism', I discuss Hick's dualism in response to the mind-body problem. In the section 'Hick's Monism', I discuss Hick's monism in response to the diversity of religion and his religious experience. In the next section, 'Reconciling Monism and Dualism', I discuss various possible attempts to reconcile the dualistic and monistic elements in Hick's metaphysical system. In the Conclusion, 'Hick's Pan(en)theism', I introduce a form of pantheism or panentheism that is entailed by the successful attempt.

2 Hick's dualism

The mind-body problem is a perennial puzzle concerning the relationship between the mental and the physical. How can you raise your hand by thinking that you raise your hand, given that raising a hand is



a physical event while thinking about raising a hand is a mental event? How can you experience a colourful sensation when a certain neural activity takes place in a specific region of your brain, given that experiencing a colourful sensation is a mental event while the neural activity is a physical event? The mind-body problem is especially forceful when it is formulated in terms of consciousness rather than mental events in general. This is because it seems impossible to provide a complete, fully satisfactory physical explanation of conscious experiences in particular. Conscious experiences – such as a specific feeling that you have when you experience, say, a throbbing toothache or a specific feeling that you have when you taste, say, jellyfish – do seem fundamentally different from physical events and, in particular, from neural activities in the brain.

Physicalists, including identity theorists, insist that, despite its initial appearance of non-physicality, what we call the mental *is* ultimately physical and that this world is therefore ontologically uniform. Dualists, on the other hand, affirm the non-physicality of what we call the mental and hold that this world ultimately consists of both the mental and the physical. Hick rejects physicalism and endorses dualism:

The alternative possibility, then, to consciousness/brain identity, and also to consciousness as a passive reflection of brain activity with no capacity to initiate thought or action, is that consciousness, plus the unconscious mind, exists as a non-physical reality in continual interaction with the brain.¹

Hick emphasizes, however, that his dualism is distinct from Cartesian dualism:

Is this a return to Cartesian dualism? Not Cartesian, for Descartes held that mind and matter interact in the brain's pineal gland – because all the other organs of the brain occur in duplicate in its two hemispheres, but there is only one pineal gland. He also held that animals have no minds, because for him the mind was the immortal soul and animals cannot be allowed immortality. So what I am proposing is a non-Cartesian dualism.²

Hick is right in saying that his view is not strictly Cartesian because he rejects Descartes's claims about the pineal gland and animal mind. Nevertheless, his view is Cartesian in a broader sense because it holds



Descartes's core thesis that the mind and the body are ontologically distinct entities that causally interact with each other. Hick continues:

This requires the reality of consciousness and brain, and also their interactions. But how can mind/brain interaction occur? How can the physical affect the mental, and vice versa? If we have abandoned mind/brain identity we are already committed to there being such interaction, at least in one direction. How does this happen? We can only say that it happens in accordance with natural law. Normally, by the 'laws of nature' we mean the laws of the material universe. But if it is the case that the total universe includes mind as well as matter, and if these interact, at least in the human brain, then the laws of nature must include the laws or regularities in accordance with which they interact.³

Hick's dualism faces the following objection, which is a classical objection to any form of interactionist dualism: it seems impossible for the mental and the physical to have causal interaction given the dualist assumption that they are ontologically distinct; such an interaction would be a violation of the causal closure of the physical.⁴

In the above passage Hick suggests that the interaction between the mental and the physical is regulated by the laws of nature, rather than, for instance, the control of a supernatural agent, which parallelists and occasionalists typically postulate. Hick is silent, however, about exactly how any natural law can allow two ontologically distinct types of entities to interact causally with each other. Physicalism does not face this problem because it holds that everything in this world, including consciousness, is ultimately physical. If everything is ultimately physical, there is no violation of the causal closure of the physical. I do not intend to evaluate Hick's dualism itself in this paper, but I will eventually come back to the problem of causal interaction between the mental and the physical.

We have seen in this section that Hick endorses an interactionist form of dualism in response to the mind-body problem. In the next section, however, I show that his religious pluralism as well as an implication of his religious experience entail monism, which appears to conflict with his mind-body dualism.

3 Hick's monism

Hick is well known for his defence of religious pluralism, according to which all the world's religions are valid responses to transcendental

reality. According to him, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and so on, are all equally sound approaches to ultimate reality.

Religious pluralism contrasts with religious exclusivism and religious inclusivism. Religious pluralism diametrically opposes religious exclusivism, which says that only one religion is the true approach to transcendental reality. So, for example, religious pluralism opposes a version of Christian exclusivism, according to which only Christianity offers the path to salvation. Religious pluralism is more sympathetic to religious inclusivism, according to which while a specific religion is superior to others, other religions also offer a path to ultimate reality. However, religious pluralism disagrees with religious inclusivism about the superiority of one religion over others. Thus, for example, religious pluralism rejects the version of Christian inclusivism that says that while other religions might offer a path to salvation, Christianity offers the most direct path.

Hick analogizes religious pluralism, exclusivism and inclusivism with cosmological models. For a long time scientists had accepted the geocentric model (the Ptolemaic model) of the universe. According to this model, the earth is the centre of the universe and the sun and other stars revolve around it. This view corresponds to religious exclusivism, which advocates the exclusive authority of a specific religion and religious inclusivism, which advocates the superiority of a specific religion. Cosmologists abandoned the geocentric model because the heliocentric model is more consistent with observations of the movements of the planets and stars. According to the heliocentric model, the Earth is not the centre of the universe; it is only one of many planets that orbit around the Sun. Similarly, Hick maintains that we should abandon religious exclusivism and religious inclusivism. With these analogies in mind, Hick calls the shift to religious pluralism the 'Copernican revolution in theology'.⁵ If we analogize the Sun as the ultimate, transcendental reality, then each planet corresponds to a world religion. Religious inclusivism corresponds to the idea that a certain planet receives the strongest heat from the Sun because it is closer to the Sun than other planets are. That is, it says that a certain religion is more valid than others are because it offers a more direct path to transcendental reality. Religious pluralism says that all religions are equally valid, so it corresponds to an imaginary situation in which all planets remain at an equal distance from the Sun and receive an equal amount of heat.

In defending religious pluralism, Hick needs to explain why distinct religions often make conflicting claims even though there is only a single transcendental reality. For example, some religions hold

monotheism, saying that there is only one god, while other religions hold polytheism, saying that there are multiple gods. Yet others postulate no god at all. In order to explain this fact Hick offers an epistemological foundation of religious pluralism. This foundation relies on two notions: 'the transcategorical Real' and the Kantian distinction between the noumenon and the phenomenon.

Hick formulates his religious pluralism in terms of 'the transcategorical Real', or 'the Real' for short, which is, as opposed to 'God', religiously neutral. The Real is also sometimes referred to as 'the Ultimate', 'Ultimate Reality' or 'the One'.⁶ While he acknowledges the diversity of the world's religions, Hick construes all of them as human responses to the Real, which is 'the postulated ground of the different forms of religious experience'.⁷ Hick distinguishes 'the Real in itself' and 'the Real as humanly experienced (or manifested within the intellectual and experiential purview of a certain tradition)'. He says that the Real in itself is transcategorical or ineffable. That is, our limited human language and thought cannot grasp its true nature. In order to underpin his distinction between the Real in itself and the Real as humanly experienced he appeals to a more general epistemological distinction introduced by Immanuel Kant.⁸ Kant distinguishes the noumenon and the phenomenon. A noumenon is a thing in itself, whereas a phenomenon is a thing as it appears in perception. According to Kant, the world *an sich*, unperceived by anyone, is distinct from the world as it is perceived by us.⁹ Hick applies this idea to defend his religious pluralism. The Real is neither a person nor a thing but people from divergent religious or culture traditions perceive it differently – sometimes as a person, sometimes as a non-personal entity. That is why there is religious diversity even though there is only a single transcendental reality, the Real. Hence, although Hick is a pluralist about religion, he is a monist about ultimate reality.

Hick's sympathy for monism is even more manifest in his description of his own religious experience. Hick has practiced a meditation method that he learned from the Buddhist monk Nyanaponika in Sri Lanka. As a result Hick had a religious experience, which he describes as follows:

I had been doing this [meditation], sitting at my desk after breakfast. When I opened my eyes everything was different in two ways. Instead of there being me here and the surrounding world there, apart from me – shelves of books in the room and trees and sky outside seen through the window – *I was part of a single indivisible whole*. And the totality of which I was part, not just what I could



AQ1 see, was such that there couldn't possibility be anything to be afraid of or to be anxious about. It was extraordinarily joyous, liberating and uplifting and such that I can only use hackneyed words like wonderful, marvellous, sublime, even though for me it only lasted a very short time, perhaps less than a minute – it is hard to say. I think myself that the awareness of the 'friendliness' of the universe was the most important aspect of it. (emphasis added)¹⁰

So Hick's religious experience has taught him two things. The first is that he, and presumably everything else, is part of a single indivisible whole. The second is that there is nothing to be afraid of. Since our interest is in Hick's ontological view, the first is more relevant to us here. Hick is not explicit in the foregoing passage, but the single indivisible whole that he realized through his religious experience corresponds to the transcategorical Real.¹¹

Let us recap Hick's three main claims:

1. The mental and the physical are two ontologically distinct entities that interact with each other (mind-body dualism).
2. There is a single transcategorical Real that is variously experienced depending on religious tradition (the notion of the Real according to religious pluralism).
3. Everything is part of a single *indivisible* whole (the monism revealed in Hick's religious experience).

This seems to show that there is a tension in Hick's metaphysical system. On the one hand, as (1) says, he thinks that the world consists of two ontologically distinct types of entities – the mental and the physical – but, on the other hand, as (2) and (3) imply, he thinks that the transcategorical Real is a single indivisible entity. In what follows, I propose a solution to this apparent tension between dualism and monism in Hick's system.

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4 Reconciling monism and dualism

When we attempt to determine the nature of reality we need to specify how many entities and what types of entities exist. Consider first the following two views:

Token monism: There is only one entity.

Token pluralism: There is more than one entity.



Very few philosophers endorse token monism.¹² It seems highly counterintuitive to think that there is only one entity when we see uncountably many entities around us, such as tables, chairs, clouds, electrons, and so on. AQ3 Physicalism and dualism agree with the majority that token pluralism is true. They affirm that there indeed are many entities in this world. Physicalism and dualism disagree with each other, however, as to how many *types* of entities there are in the actual world. Consider the following two views:

Type monism: There is only one type of entity.

Type pluralism: There is more than one type of entity.

Physicalism accepts type monism, saying that entities can (ultimately) be of only one type – the physical type. It claims that despite the apparent diversity of reality everything in this world, including even consciousness, is ultimately of the physical type. Dualism, on the other hand, accepts type pluralism, saying that entities can be of exactly two types – the physical type and the mental type. It claims that the apparent diversity of reality is veridical and that there are entities of the mental type as well as the physical type. As we have seen, Hick endorses dualism in response to the mind-body problem, which means that he endorses token pluralism and type pluralism. Yet it seems that Hick endorses token *monism* in response to the diversity of religion and through his religious experience. He says, again, that the transcategorical Real is a single ultimate reality and that we are all part of that *single indivisible* whole. At least initially, this appears to entail token monism, according to which there is only one entity. Token monism and token pluralism are, of course, inconsistent because while token monism says that there is only one entity token pluralism says that there is more than one entity.

What we have seen so far is the following: On the one hand, in response to the mind-body problem, Hick endorses both token pluralism and type pluralism. On the other hand, however, through religious pluralism and religious experience, he seems to endorse token monism. How can we resolve this apparent conflict between pluralism and monism in Hick's position? In what follows I discuss three possible solutions to this problem. I argue that the failures of the first two solutions lead us to the successful third solution, which entails a unique pantheistic or panentheistic form of monism.



Solution 1

As we have seen, Hick seems to endorse the following set of three views:

In response to the mind-body problem:

Token pluralism: There is more than one entity.

Type pluralism: There is more than one type of entity.

In response to religious diversity and religious experience:

Token monism: There is only one entity.

Again, this is problematic because token monism is mutually inconsistent with token pluralism. The first way of resolving this inconsistency is to replace token monism with what I call the 'unity thesis', and hold the following set of theses instead:

In response to the mind-body problem:

Token pluralism: There is more than one entity

Type pluralism: There is more than one type of entity.

In response to religious diversity and religious experience:

The unity thesis: There is a single unity of all entities.

According to this set, there are many entities, some of which are mental and some of which are physical. However, together they constitute a single unity. In this way Hick can defend mind-body dualism while maintaining that we are all part of the single whole. The whole contains multiple entities of the physical type and the mental type. We can illustrate this view with an analogy. Arguably, a person is a unity of mental and physical entities, the sum of various mental states and bodily parts. Similarly, the whole can be construed as a unity of mental and physical entities. In this way we can keep the unity of the whole while admitting the plurality of tokens and types.

The appeal to the unity thesis is, however, not compelling for several reasons. First, it does not capture Hick's claim that we are all part of the single *indivisible* whole. The unity of mental and physical entities cannot be construed as an indivisible whole because mental entities and physical entities are ontologically distinct. Second, it is unclear how mental and physical entities can be unified. The unity is not a mere collection of entities. There has to be a mechanism to bond mental entities and physical entities. It is



difficult to expect such a mechanism because there is no ontological continuity between the mental and the physical. Physicalists can maintain that a person is a unity consisting of mental states and physical parts. That is because they hold that ultimately everything, including what we regard as mental, is physical. If everything is physical, then there is no ontological gap within the unity to be filled. However, if Hick holds dualism, which consists of token pluralism and type pluralism, there seems to be no way to bind mental entities and physical entities into a single unity.

Solution 2

The second solution to the apparent inconsistency in Hick's metaphysical system appeals to the following distinction:

Token *fundamental* monism: There is only one *fundamental* entity.

Token *fundamental* pluralism: There is more than one *fundamental* entity.

Unlike token monism and token pluralism, token fundamental monism and token fundamental pluralism count, not the number of entities in the world, but the number of *fundamental* entities in the world. Token fundamental monism says that there is *ultimately* one fundamental entity, and token fundamental pluralism says that there is *ultimately* more than one fundamental entity. Token fundamental monism normally says that the whole is the single fundamental entity. Jonathan Schaffer calls this view 'priority monism'.¹³ There are many entities in this world, such as tables, chairs, clouds, and electrons, but they are all part of the fundamental whole, which is ontologically prior.

Token monism is initially counterintuitive because a whole is not normally regarded as being ontologically prior to its parts. For example, grains of sand (parts) are usually regarded as ontologically prior to a heap (the whole). Similarly, tiles in a mosaic (parts) are regarded as being ontologically prior to the mosaic (the whole). Schaffer points out, however, that there are other cases in which a whole is regarded as being ontologically prior to its parts.¹⁴ For instance, we think that a circle is ontologically prior to semicircles of the circle or that a body is ontologically prior to organs of the body. This is because, according to Schaffer, our common sense distinguishes between *mere heaps* and *genuine unities*. A heap of grains of sand and a mosaic are mere heaps, but a circle and a body are, according to Schaffer, genuine unities. Similarly, we can regard the whole reality as being ontologically prior to its constituents.

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Hick's ideas that the transcategorical Real is a single *ultimate* reality and that we are all parts of a single indivisible whole seem compatible with token fundamental monism. We can construe Hick's claim that everything, including himself, is part of a single *indivisible* whole in the sense that the whole is ontologically prior to its parts. Thus, Hick can hold token fundamental monism, instead of token monism, to preserve his monism while accepting token pluralism and type pluralism to preserve his mind-body dualism:

In response to the mind-body problem:

Token pluralism: There is more than one entity.

Type pluralism: There is more than one type of entity.

In response to religious diversity and religious experience:

Token fundamental monism: There is only one fundamental entity.

This set has an apparent advantage over the previous one insofar as it eliminates the conflict between token monism and token pluralism. Hick can maintain consistently that while there are many (non-fundamental) entities there is only one fundamental entity, namely, the whole. This solution, however, is still unsuccessful because token fundamental monism and type pluralism are mutually inconsistent. If there is only one fundamental entity, then there has to be only one type, namely the type of which the fundamental entity is the only instance. If, however, there is only one type of entity, then type pluralism is false. (Notice that when we talk about type here we mean *ultimate* type. So, for example, physicalism claims that the ultimate type of everything is physical despite the appearance of two existing types – the mental type and the physical type.) This observation leads us to the third solution, which I believe is successful.

Solution 3

As we have seen, if token fundamental monism is true, then there can be only one type. This means that if Hick defends token fundamental monism he has to endorse type monism, instead of type pluralism. That is, he has to accept the following set of three views:

In response to the mind-body problem:

Token pluralism: There is more than one entity.

Type monism: There is only one type of entity.



In response to religious diversity and religious experience:

Token fundamental monism: There is only one fundamental entity.

This set *is* consistent. There is more than one entity but everything is of one type. And there is ultimately one fundamental entity, the whole, which is ontologically prior to everything else. The whole is of that one type as well.

The above set, however, does not seem to capture Hick's view fully because it appears to fail to accommodate his mind-body dualism. Hick claims that there are two distinct types of entities, the physical type and the mental type, but type monism says that there is only one type. How can we resolve this problem?

I submit that Hick can accept the above set without giving up his dualistic stance. In order to do that, he can reuse the Kantian distinction between the noumenon and the phenomenon, to which he appeals when he defends religious pluralism. Recall that Hick uses this distinction to defend the idea that although there is a *single* Real, there are *multiple* religions with differing interpretations of the Real. This allows him to be a monist about the Real while being a pluralist about religion. We can adopt similar reasoning to preserve both the monistic and the dualistic – that is, pluralistic – elements of Hick's metaphysical system.

It *appears* to us that reality consists of two types of entities, the mental type and the physical type. The mental type, which is revealed in our conscious experience, appears ontologically distinct from the physical type, which is captured by physical sciences. However, this does not immediately entail that there actually are two ontologically distinct types of entities. By appealing to the Kantian distinction, we can say that the apparent duality is a reflection of our two contrasting ways of perceiving the same reality. Just as the Real perceived by Christianity differs from the Real perceived by Buddhism, reality perceived through conscious experience differs from reality construed by physical sciences. In this way we can maintain the spirit of mind-body dualism without endorsing it as a fundamental metaphysical principle. We can hold type pluralism, type monism and token fundamental monism by saying that though there are many entities, which appear to us to be of either the mental type or the physical type, there is only one fundamental whole of one type. The apparent duality of reality arises from our limitations in perceiving or construing the whole in itself. That is, the duality of reality is epistemic rather than ontological. In this way Hick can defend his monistic view about the whole without giving up his dualistic stance towards the mind-body problem. Neither conscious



experience nor physical sciences can exhaust reality in itself; each of them represents a limited way of perceiving it.

This view also preserves Hick's rejection of physicalism. The view says that physicalism, at least as typically formulated, is false because it is not the case that the whole is entirely physical. Physical sciences cannot capture the whole in itself any more than our conscious experience can. It is appropriate to call this view 'non-physicalist monism'. Non-physicalist monism agrees with dualism that physicalism is false. However, it disagrees with dualism that there are two ontologically distinct types of entity in the world. Non-physicalist monism also agrees with physicalism that there is one type of entity in the world. However, it disagrees with physicalism that the type in question is physical. According to non-physicalist monism, although the world consists ultimately of one type of entity, that type is neither physical nor mental in itself.

One notable advantage of non-physicalist monism over dualism is that it does not face the problem of mind-body interaction. As noted earlier, Hick fails to explain the causal interaction between the mental and the physical. Hick claims that the interaction must be regulated by the laws of nature but he is unable to explain exactly how the interaction can occur when the mental and the physical are ontologically distinct. Non-physicalist monism does not face this problem precisely because it does not admit the ontological distinction between the mental and the physical.

5 Conclusion: Hick's pan(en)theism

We have reached non-physicalist monism, which consists of the following four views:

Token pluralism: There is more than one entity

Type monism: There is only one type of entity.

Token fundamental monism: There is only one fundamental entity.

The epistemic plurality of reality: The mental and the physical are reflections of two distinct ways of perceiving reality.

As I have argued, non-physicalist monism captures Hick's monistic ontology, which he has developed in response to religious diversity and which he has realized through his religious experience. It also captures his dualistic and anti-physicalist stance with respect to the mind-body problem.



According to non-physicalist monism, though there is more than one entity, ultimately there is only one fundamental entity, the whole. In this sense, we can say that everything is ultimately part of an indivisible fundamental whole. Since there is only one ultimate entity, there is only one ultimate type as well. Non-physicalist monism is sympathetic to the dualistic intuition that our conscious experience and physical sciences appear to reveal that reality consists of two distinct types of entities. It denies, however, that there indeed are two ontologically distinct types; it says that the appearance of two distinct types reflects only our two contrasting ways of perceiving or describing the same reality in itself.

I believe that non-physicalist monism is an attractive view. As a form of monism, it avoids the most contentious claim that dualism makes: The mental and the physical can interact with each other even though they are ontologically distinct. As a form of non-physicalism, it avoids the most contentious claim that physicalism makes: Even consciousness is ultimately physical.

Interestingly enough, non-physicalist monism seems to entail a non-classical form of theism. Recall Hick's claim about his religious experience. He says that the experience taught him that he (and everything else) is 'part of a single indivisible whole' and made him aware of 'the "friendliness" of the universe'.¹⁵ If we incorporate these thoughts and the notion of the Real into non-physicalist monism we obtain either pantheism or panentheism. Pantheism identifies the universe with God (or the Real or the whole in our context), while panentheism regards it as a constituent of God (or of the Real or of the whole). Thus whether non-physicalist monism entails pantheism or panentheism depends on whether we regard the universe as the Real (the whole) itself or as only a proper part of the Real (the whole). It would be interesting to determine which view Hick's metaphysical system entails and which view is more cogent, but I leave that task for another occasion.¹⁶

Notes

1. J. Hick (2006) *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 111.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. The causal closure of the physical is the thesis that no physical event has a cause outside the physical domain – this is sometimes regarded as one of the most fundamental metaphysical principles.
5. J. Hick (1973), *God and the Universe of Faiths*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan), p. 120.

6. J. Hick (2004, originally 1989), *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 236.
7. Ibid.
8. I. Kant (1958, originally 1781), *Critique of Pure Reason*, (trans.) N. K. Smith (London: Macmillan).
9. It should be noted that to defend his religious pluralism, Hick does not necessarily need to endorse the entirety of Kant's epistemology. In fact, Hick himself remarks that he can defend the same view by referring instead to, for example, the claim by Thomas Aquinas that '[t]hings known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower' (Ibid. p. 241).
10. J. Hick (2010) *Between Faith and Doubt: Dialogues on Religion and Reason* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 29.
11. Through personal communication, Hick has confirmed that he regards his religious experience to be compatible with his metaphysical views.
12. See T. Horgan and M. Potrč (2000) 'Bobjectivism and Indirect Correspondence', *Facta Philosophica*, 2, 249–70.
13. J. Schaffer (2007) 'Monism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/monism/>.
14. Ibid.
15. Hick, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
16. I presented this paper at three events in 2011: a symposium in honour of John Hick at the University of Birmingham, the 'Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century' conference in Krakow, and a conference of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. I would like to thank all in the audience. I would also like to thank Philip Goff and John Hick for helpful comments. This paper was written as part of my research project with Andrei Buckareff, 'Exploring Alternative Concepts of God', funded by the John Templeton Foundation. I am grateful to the Foundation for its generous support.