# The Virtues of Make-Believe: Religious Fictionalism

The debate between theists, atheists, and agnostics begins from the assumption that religious claims work more or less like ordinary claims. So, for example, theists think that God really exists, just like chairs really exist, while atheists think that God doesn’t exist, just like unicorns don’t exist. Agnostics, meanwhile, think that there just isn’t enough evidence to allow us to make a judgement about this one or way or the other. Not everyone is convinced that the existence or nonexistence of God (or gods) is the main point of religious practice, however. For example, there have likely always been significant numbers of people who identify as Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Hindus, etc. without actually believing in the *literal truth* of their religious texts. In the past 200 years or so, though, this sort of approach has become particularly popular among “mainstream” philosophers of religion and theologians (so, for example, ideas like this have been taught in many liberal seminaries and divinity schools since at least the 19th century). **Radical theology** is a particularly strong version of this view according to which religious practice does NOT presuppose the existence of “God” at all.

In this lecture, we’ll be looking at an explanation and defense of this view given by **Robin Le Poidevin.** Le Poidevin thinks that arguments such as the Problem of Evil provide good evidence that theism is false—there can’t *literally* be an all-good, all-powerful, all-knowing God of the sort many Jews, Christians, and Muslims have historically believed in. However, he argues that this does NOT mean that these religions ought to be given up entirely. Instead, he argues for a version of **religious fictionalism,** according to which we ought to interpret religious texts in the same way we interpret fictional novels and movies. Le Poidevin is, in general, very sympathetic to the ideas of radical theologians, but he thinks that these ideas have often been expressed in unclear and self-contradictory ways.

## So, What does “God Exists” Really Mean?

Radical theologians say things like “God loves everyone” or “God made the world.” However, they *also* say that “God doesn’t (really) exist.” How are we to make sense of this? In order to help clarify how one might do this, Le Poidevin introduces some concepts from the philosophy of science: **realism**, **instrumentalism,** and **positivism**. Each of these represents a different way of interpreting sentences like “Electrons have negative charges,” which refer to things (“electrons” and “negative charge”) that can’t actually be observed directly. Le Poidevin argues that there are religious analogues to each approach.

**(Scientific) Realism: Claims about electrons are true only if electrons (very small, negatively charged particles) actually exist.** Claims about unobservable entities like electrons are true or false in virtue of the way the world is, and not in virtue of anything to do with us. It might be tougher for us observe electrons than it is to observe elephants, but there’s no fundamental difference between saying “Elephants exist” and “electrons exist.” In the religious context, traditional theists and atheists are BOTH theological“realists.”They interpret claims about “God” as referring to some sort of all-powerful being. They just disagree on whether there really is such a thing.

Figure The birth of the Buddha. The Buddhist Sutras mention various gods and supernatural events. However, Buddhists have long been divided on the reality and function of these gods within Buddhism.

**(Scientific) Instrumentalism: It is *irrelevant* whether claims about electrons are true. Instead, such claims are justified by their usefulness.** Instrumentalists argue that scientists and philosophers shouldn’t be (too) concerned about whether a particular theory is true or false, since this may well be something we’ll never know. (After all, we’ll never be able to “see” electrons in the way we see elephants.) Instead, theoretical concepts such as *electron* are simply tools for making predictions. E.g., saying an electron has a charge of such and such is like noting the lines representing highways on a map are blue. The map’s structure is justified insofar as it gets us where we are going. Theories are tools, like hammers or maps. On an instrumentalist interpretation of religion, we should adopt religious claims about God/gods if they are *useful* to us in the course of our lives: Do they help us become better people? Do they comfort us during difficult times? Do they help build a sense of community with the people around us? This interpretation can be adopted even by atheists who think that God doesn’t *really* exist or agnostics who think (real) knowledge of this is impossible

**Scientific Positivism: Claims about electrons are true if and only if they make correct predictions about the sorts of things we can actually *observe.*** Like realists (and unlike instrumentalists), positivists think claims about theoretical entities such as electrons are literally true or false. However, they think the truth/falsity of these claims has nothing whatsoever to do with the existence of small, negatively charged particles. Instead, claims about “electrons have negative charge” are just elliptical ways for us to make claims about the sorts of things we *can* directly observe (“You’ll be shocked if you stick a fork into an outlet”, “Magnets attract each other”, etc.). So, the claims are secretly about *us,* and not actually about the *world.* In this sense, positivism is closer to instrumentalism. On a positivist interpretation of religion, claims like “I believe in God” are actually claims about something else: “I believe people should be nice to one another,” “There is a large amount of suffering in the world,” “I regularly attend religious services,” etc.

*A problem for positivism--*any particular sentence containing theoretical terms like “electron” and “God” have an *infinite* number of observations with which it might be correlated. On the positivist view, for you to even *understand* what these words mean, you would have to know EVERY SINGLE ONE of these observations. Surely, understanding the statement isn’t that hard. For this reason, the view is no longer very popular among scientists or philosophers of science.

**Which interpretation best captures the “value” of religion?** Both Le Poidevin and radical theologians hold that, if interpreted realistically, claims about God are *false,* because God doesn’t (really) exist. So, the value of theistic religions can’t lie in the fact that they are literally “true.” Le Poidevin also rejects positivist interpretations, given the problems noted above. Positivist interpretations would also have the unwelcome side effect of entailing the vast of majority of theists/atheists are mistaken as to what their own deeply held religious beliefs are really about. In the end, Le Poidevin explores the possibility of an instrumentalist interpretation of religion, according to which we should see religious claims as “fictions” that might help us (or fail to help us) lead our lives in various ways.

## If Fiction is False, Why Care? Three Theories

If religion should be seen as a special sort of fiction, a new question arises: Why should we *care* about religion? This involves us in a tricky philosophical debate concerning the status of fictional discourse. As it turns out, the vast majority of people *do* care about fictional characters, and what (fictionally) happens to them. We are scared, happy, excited, and angered as we discover what happens to them, *even though we know they aren’t real.* But why is this? Philosophers have provided a few different accounts:

**Theory 1: We care because we really believe it (for a moment).** We really believe fiction when we are watching or reading it, so we experience it exactly what we would experience if we were living it. For example, when we watch a movie about an axe murderer, we really believe an axe murderer really is chasing us, and are filled with fear and anxiety. This does a great job of explaining why we have emotions. However, it doesn’t explain why anyone would actually *enjoy* horror films, or why we don’t run screaming from the movie theory.

**Theory 2: We care because it reminds of (real) people and events.**  Fiction teaches us very general truths about human emotion, moral development, science, etc. For example, reading Jane Austen’s *Emma* makes us realize that manipulating people, while fun, often doesn’t work well. This theory can explain why a great novel or movie can have a long-term effect on us, even after we are no longer “in its grip.” The major drawback is that it can’t explain why we care about the *individual characters*, nor why the emotions are so intense when we are watching the movie/reading the book. According to this theory, fiction should be like an academic article.

Figure Adam and Eve. Historically, most Jews, Christians, and Muslims have interpreted this story realistically. However, increasing numbers now interpret it instrumentally--as a "useful fiction."

**Theory 3: We (sort of) care because we can (sort of) become part of the fictional world.** Fiction allows us to play “make believe” and experience *ersatz* (“artificial” or “substitute) emotions that are structurally similar to (but not as strong as) those we would experience if these events actually happened in real life. For example, when we watch MacBeth or Darth Vader do bad things, we become (sort of) angry at them, and (sort of) want justice. This explains why the emotions we feel in fiction resemble the emotions we would experience were these things to happen to us, and how we can learn lessons from fiction applicable to real life.

La Poidevin argues that we theory 3 does the best job of capturing why we care about fiction, and can be applied to religion as well. So, when we interpret theistic religions as fictions, we “pretend” that we live in a world created by an all-powerful, all-loving God who will ensure that the world is perfectly just. For some people, this might help them find the motivation to treat other people well, to find hope in difficult times, and so on.

## Why Be a Religious Fictionalist?

Le Poidevin writes: "What is needed, for instrumentalism to be a viable theological position, is a defense of religious practice which allows an atheist...to engage in worship and fear.” He argues that treating religion as a fiction really can do this, at least to some degree. In essence, making believe that there is a powerful God who (1) created the world for a purpose and (2) will reward good and punish evil, etc., allows us to experience certain emotions they wouldn’t otherwise: awe at creation, sympathy for our fellow creatures, etc. The idea is that engaging in religious practices (such as prayer or reading religious texts) helps us experience the world in new ways, and is thus a good thing. However, he recognizes that traditional theists and atheists may have several objections:

**Objection 1:** Religious fictionalism is far too weak and watered down to capture what *matters* to people about religion, or to explain how central religious beliefs are to many peoples’ sense of self-identity. Fictionalists needn’t be “committed” to any particular religion (they might be “Christians” one day and “Buddhists” the next), and they don’t really believe in things such as the afterlife, the “goodness” of the world, or anything else.

*Response:* If God really existed, this would be a good response—surely believing in the real thing would be best. However, Le Poidevin thinks that we have good reason to think that God doesn’t exist, and that there are real harms in continuing to believe in God. Le Poidevin’s example: People who really believe in an all-powerful God worthy of worship and obedience sacrifice their moral responsibility to make their own decisions about what it is right. It would be better for people to acknowledge (at least to themselves) that they are responsible for their decisions about what is moral/immoral, and how they act on these.

**Objection 2:** The people who wrote religious texts didn’t intend them to be read as fictions, and the majority of religious people don’t understand them this way (either now or in the past). It’s not “honest” to interpret the Torah, Bible, Koran, etc. as fictions.

*Response:* There were lots of people who wrote religious texts, and it’s plausible that some were realists and some were not. In any case, everyone (even realists) acknowledges that there are lots of parables, metaphors, and analogies in religion AND that there has long been debate about which “parts” of religion ought to be read in a realist vs. instrumentalist way. The only “new” thing about the religious fictionalist is that they want to extend this to the whole of religion (and, in particular, to claims about the existence and nature of God).

**Objection 3:** Arguments such as the Problem of Evil show that there are deep problems with the very *idea* of God, and more specifically, show that believing in God requires us to ignore or minimize the extent to which our world contains massive amounts of evil. So, it’s not clear that merely pretending there is a God is any more responsible than actually believing in God.

*Response:* Unlike the traditional theist, the fictionalist isn’t committed to believing the world is *actually* perfectly just, or that it contains no unnecessary suffering. Instead, she simply wants to take some time during religious services to act *as if* the world is like this, because it helps her put her own problems in perspective, motivates her to help others, and so on.

## Review Questions

In answering the following questions, be sure to engage with Le Poidevin’s ideas and arguments where appropriate. As always, pretend you are trying to explain the ideas to someone who hasn’t read the article or handout.

1. Explain why both theists and atheists count as “theological realists.” Now, give an example of someone who would NOT count as a theological realist.
2. Compare and contrast the “realist” and “instrumentalist” might interpret a particular religious story with which you are familiar. Then, give an \*argument\* in favor of your preferred interpretation.
3. Name one piece of fiction (movie, book, TV show, video game, etc.) that you feel has made a significant difference to your own life, and explain your reasons for this choice. Does your experience fit with Le Poidevin’s idea that fiction involves playing “make believe” and experiencing ersatz emotions? Why or why not (make sure to give details)?
4. All things considered, do you think the argument given in favor of religious fictionalism should convince a committed atheist or theist? Why or why not?