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COULD GOD HAVE MORE THAN ONE NATURE?

Robert McKim

Abstract. I begin by examining John Hick's view of the status of the claims of the major world religions about what he calls "the Real," in particular his view of the status of the theistic claim that the Real is personal, and of the nontheistic claim that the Real is not personal. I distinguish Moderate Pluralism, the view that different conceptions of the Real are conceptions of the same thing, from Radical Pluralism, the view that different conceptions all accurately describe the Real. Although there is a bit of uncertainty about this, Hick seems to espouse a version of Moderate Pluralism, a version which I call Noumenal Pluralism. Moderate Pluralism is a coherent view, but Radical Pluralism is not coherent, and the standard defenses of it are not convincing. However, the view that the Real has more than one nature, a view which preserves much of Radical Pluralism, seems to be coherent.

1. *The Religious Reality.* Most members of most religious traditions believe there is a being, or entity, or state which is supremely important. Theists generally contend that there is a superior being who is benevolent, merciful, and just. Some speak of Yahweh, some of God the Father of Jesus Christ, and some of Allah. I use the term "God" to refer to the superior being whom theists believe to exist, although I do not assume that theists all believe in the same deity. Theists clearly disagree about the nature and activities of God, but they agree that God acts, responds to prayers, rewards, punishes, forgives, cares for people, perceives, knows, makes moral judgments, and is personal in these and other respects.¹ I refer to someone who holds these beliefs about God as a personalist.

Some nontheistic religions say there is a being, or entity, or state which is supremely important, but which is *not* personal. Advaita Vedantists, for instance, say there is an Absolute which is not personal. The Absolute is changeless, ineffable, and eternal, and it does not act, does not perceive, reward, forgive, and so on. The Buddhist conception of Nirvana is also a conception of something which is thought to be of supreme importance, but not to be personal. I refer to someone who believes there to be a supremely important impersonal force or state as an impersonalist.

So personalists and impersonalists agree that there is something which is supremely important. I refer to this "something" as the *Religious Reality* (RR), although I do not assume that personalists and impersonalists concern themselves with the same RR. The RR, to borrow from Professor Hick, is "a limitlessly greater and higher Reality beyond or within us, in relation to which or to whom is our

highest good.” (*Problems of Religious Pluralism* (PRP) (London: MacMillan, 1985), 39) The theistic traditions have non-theistic variants, and in a tradition such as Hinduism one finds personal deities and personal conceptions of the Absolute as well as the impersonal conception. So it is not so easy to draw the battlelines between the traditions on this issue. Yet there can be no doubt that there is disagreement about whether or not the RR is personal. It seems that if the impersonalists are right about the RR, the personalists are wrong, and *vice versa*.

2. *Hick's View*. In some of his writings John Hick appears to disagree. The world religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are “vast historical complexes . . . within [which] . . . the Real, the Ultimate, the Divine is known and responded to . . .” (“On Grading Religions” (GR) *Religious Studies*, 17, 1981, 467)²

[We must distinguish] the Real an sich (in his/her/itself) and the Real as humanly thought and experienced [We] are always aware of reality beyond ourselves in terms of the sets of concepts which structure our own cognitive consciousness. And the different religious traditions, with their different conceptual systems . . . constitute the ‘lenses’ through which different faith-communities variously perceive the divine Reality. The two basic concepts which are central to the different forms of religious experience are the concept of deity, or of the Real as personal, and the concept of the absolute, or of the Real as non-personal. These take particular concrete forms at different human interfaces with the divine, as the divine personae (Jahweh, Shiva, Vishnu, the Heavenly Father, the Qur’anic Revealer . . .) and the divine impersonae (Brahman, the Tao, Nirvana, Sunyata, the Dharmakaya . . .) (“On Conflicting Religious Truth-Claims” (CRT) *Religious Studies*, 19, 488)

Different conceptions of the RR are “different divine phenomena in terms of which the one divine noumenon is humanly experienced.” (PRP, 42) “If we . . . ask ourselves how it can be that the same ultimate divine Reality can be perceived in such different ways . . . the answer must involve both the infinity of the divine Reality, transcending all our conceptualizations, and the historical variety of the human cultures which form the lenses through which the Reality is variously perceived.” (CRT, 489)

Hick’s view seems to be that there is the RR as it is in itself, and there are both personal and impersonal conceptions of it. To put it crudely, he distinguishes three things, the relation between which he explores: the RR as it is in itself, the RR as conceived of by personalists, and the RR as conceived of by impersonalists. Hick holds that different traditions, including both personalist and impersonalist traditions, know, respond to, perceive, have conceptions of, (etc.) the same RR, even though they characterize it in different ways. I refer to this

view as "Moderate Pluralism." Moderate Pluralism is distinct from what I call "Radical Pluralism": this is the view that the various competing accounts of the RR *are all true*. According to Radical Pluralism what appear to be incompatible claims about the RR actually are compatible. So Radical Pluralism, in addition to saying that in different traditions the same RR is known (responded to, perceived, conceived of, etc.), says that the competing conceptions of the RR are all accurate.

What sort of Pluralist—Moderate or Radical—is Hick? He says that "the same ultimate divine Reality can be perceived in such different ways from within the different religions." (CRT, 489) He writes of the *authenticity* of different faiths. "[The] Real is equally authentically thought and experienced as personal and as non-personal." (PRP, 98) Such remarks have the flavor of Radical Pluralism about them, but they may mean merely that members of the different traditions are genuinely in contact with the RR and that there is equally significant or meaningful reflection about the RR in the different traditions, all of which amounts to a statement of Moderate Pluralism. He makes other remarks which are suggestive of Moderate Pluralism, including his claim that "all human experience is experience-as." The idea is just that human experience involves a measure of interpretation: it involves the use of conceptual and interpretive schemes. (He mentions a number of *types* of interpretation which we impose on our experience, such as the type of interpretation that is involved in seeing physical objects as objects of a particular type, such as chairs, tables, knives, forks, and so on, (PRP, 20) and religious interpretations, such as the interpretation of an illness as divine punishment.) Interpretation is involved in experience of the RR: "if we ask why it is that Christians, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, report such different perceptions of the divine, the answer that suggests itself is that they are operating with different sets of religious concepts in terms of which they experience in characteristically different ways." (PRP, 26) The view that there are different "lenses" or perspectives, different categorial schemes, through which we perceive the RR, would account for disagreements about its nature, but does not take us beyond Moderate Pluralism. The fact that different groups have different perspectives would account for the central feature of Moderate Pluralism, namely that different groups say very different things about, and have very different conceptions of, the same RR.³ But some of Hick's remarks definitely seem to suggest that the RR is accurately, equally accurately, portrayed within the different traditions. For instance, he writes that "[the] *Eternal may be*—and has in fact been experienced as being—*personal* . . . without this genuinely personal character exhausting its infinity, so that *the same Reality may also be*—and has in fact been experienced as being—. . . [*impersonal*]" (*Death and Eternal Life* (Harper & Row, 1976), 32, my emphasis) He also says that among primitive peoples the "divine reality" was "crudely apprehended as a

plurality of quasi-animal forces"; such people had an "inchoate sense of the divine." ("The Outcome: Dialogue into Truth" in *Truth and Dialogue* ed. John Hick, (London: Sheldon Press, 1974) 149/50) "[Once] the golden age of religious creativity dawned . . . sometime after 1000 B.C. . . . a series of revelatory experiences [occurred] . . . throughout the world [and] . . . deepened and purified men's conceptions of the divine." (*Ibid.*, 150) So there are accurate and inaccurate representations of the "divine reality"; the suggestion appears to be that the dominant world religions, unlike the religions of "primitive people," have an accurate picture of the RR.

There can be no doubt that there are suggestions of Radical Pluralism in Hick's work. But it is striking that many of his relevant remarks are ambiguous: indeed there is almost a systematic ambiguity in the relevant passages. Consider, for instance, this passage:

"[The] Real can be experienced both in terms of the concept of deity and in terms of the concept of the absolute There is, I think, an illuminating analogy here with the use of the complementarity principle in relation to electromagnetic radiations. When light is experimented upon in a certain way it exhibits wave-like properties, and when experimented on in another way, particle-like properties. We have to say that in itself, independently of interaction with human observers, it is such as to be capable of being experienced under different experimental conditions in these different ways. Analogously . . . [through] dualistic-personalist lenses the real is seen and responded to as personal; through monistic lenses, as non-personal. And so we postulate the Real *an sich*, concerning which we have to say that it is capable of being authentically thought and experienced by human beings in these two significantly different ways;" (PRP, 98-9)

Such remarks could be read as a statement of Moderate Pluralism *or* as a statement of Radical Pluralism. The claims that the "Real" can be, or is capable of being, experienced in both ways, and is capable of being authentically experienced in both ways, are ambiguous in this respect. The light analogy may suggest Radical Pluralism, although certainly not unequivocally.

Recently Hick has said that he is a Moderate rather than a Radical Pluralist, although he says that this has not been clear in some of his writings. He says he is not a Radical Pluralist because he denies that the RR in itself is accurately described by *either* personalists or impersonalists.

[The] RR is neither experienced nor thought as it is in itself. The concepts which apply to its manifestations (the *personae* and *impersonae*) do not apply to the RR *an sich*. We cannot say that it is personal

or non-personal, good or bad The point of the complementarity analogy drawn from physics was meant to be that, as we can only characterise light as waves or particles, in its relation to an observer who acts upon it in a certain way, so we can only characterise the [RR] . . . as it is in relation to faith communities (and individuals) who 'act' upon it in personalistic worship or impersonalistic meditation.⁴

So Radical Pluralism has no chance of being true: it requires that the RR *an sich* should correctly be described as both personal and impersonal, but it can correctly be described in *neither* way. In fact we can say almost nothing about it, it seems. The claims that different groups make are true of their conception of the RR but not of the RR itself. For the most part, claims which are true about Allah, for example, are true of the Islamic conception of Allah, but not of the RR as it is in itself.⁵ On this view the RR as it is in itself is almost entirely unknowable. All we know of it is that it is capable of being experienced by different groups in various different ways. It has features such that in interaction with different groups it is seen by them in these ways. There is something in the RR corresponding to the characteristics that we impute to it, even if we do not know what it is. Let us call this view *Noumenal Pluralism*.⁶

Noumenal Pluralism is a version of Moderate Pluralism since it implies that the different traditions have contact with the same RR, although they characterise it in different ways, but it denies the Radical Pluralist claim that these characterisations are true of the RR *an sich*. Noumenal Pluralism does not merely say that what a particular faith community says about the RR is influenced very considerably by the nature of that group's interaction with the RR. For characterising something "in relation to an observer who acts upon it in a certain way" need not be thought to be tantamount to not describing it "as it is in itself." We can characterise something as it is in itself, at least in part, by giving an account of its relation to other things, including observers. One *could* hold that when the RR is characterised "in relation to faith communities," we *can* learn something about the RR as it is in itself. The view that what a particular faith community says about the RR is influenced very considerably by the nature of that group's interaction with the RR is, therefore, consistent with *either* Moderate or Radical Pluralism: it will be a version of Radical Pluralism if the apparently incompatible characterisations are all said to be true of the RR as it is in itself, and it will be a version of Moderate Pluralism if this is denied.

My main concern in this paper is with the plausibility of Radical Pluralism, but a comment or two on the merits of Noumenal Pluralism is in order. One wonders what is Hick's argument for the Noumenal Pluralist claim that none of the faith communities give anything remotely like an accurate account of the RR, and that our concepts do not even apply to the RR *an sich*.⁶ As far as I

know, Hick has no argument to show that such concepts do not apply. Perhaps he should embrace the weaker view that we have no way of telling whether or not any of our concepts so apply, or the yet weaker view that we have no way of telling which concepts among those used by diverse faith communities should figure in a correct description of the RR *an sich*. Another question is this. If none of our concepts apply to the RR *an sich*, what is the justification for assuming that only a tradition which is salvifically effective—i.e., which helps with transformation of character—should be regarded as having a conception of the RR which is a product of genuine interaction between the RR and a faith community?⁷ Perhaps some conceptions which have a place in traditions which are salvifically effective are nothing but human creations: the sort of thing that those who argue that some religious beliefs are nothing but human projections comes to mind as a way of explaining how such conceptions might be created. Or perhaps some conceptions which have a place in traditions which are *not* salvifically effective *are* products of genuine interaction between the RR and faith communities. It is hard to see why one should go one way rather than another on these matters once one assumes the virtually complete unknowability of the RR *an sich*. Things would be otherwise if, say, we had reason to think the RR *an sich* is, or even might be, good or benevolent, or interested in transformation of human character: in that case we *might* have reason to think that a tradition which fosters the transformation of human character involves a conception of the RR which is a product of interaction between the RR and a faith community.

We should note too the very high price that members of the various faith communities must pay if they are to be Noumenal Pluralists. I will look at it from a personalist point of view, by way of illustration. Personalists believe that God acts, responds to prayers, rewards, punishes, forgives, cares for people, perceives, knows, makes moral judgments, and so forth. On the Noumenal Pluralist view there is no entity to whom such activities and states may truly be imputed. Certainly they cannot be truly imputed to the RR *an sich*, for they cannot be imputed to the RR *an sich* at all. But on the other hand to impute them to a particular conception or image of the RR is, it seems, to impute them to something which has no existence external to the minds of the members of the relevant faith community. The Noumenal Pluralist view is that these conceptions provide for genuine access to the RR in itself, and are the products of genuine interaction with the RR, but there is no suggestion that entities corresponding to these conceptions exists, side by side as it were, in addition to the RR in itself. The Noumenal Pluralist answer to the question "Is there a supernatural or transcendent being external to us which acts, responds to prayers, rewards, punishes, forgives, and cares for people?" appears to be "no."⁸ Radical Pluralism, therefore, is actually more attractive from, say, the theistic point of

view, because it attempts to defend the claim that the RR *an sich* is benevolent, acts, knows, and so forth. Whether or not it can coherently do so, of course, is another question.

3. *Moderate Pluralism*. It is easy to think of cases in ordinary experience in which there are different, even incompatible, conceptions of some thing or being as a result of the fact that different conceptual schemes, or even just different ways of looking at things, are operative. Access to different information may also play some role in the formation of different and incompatible conceptions of a thing or being. Suppose your neighbor Harry, admired by neighbors on account of his apparent friendliness and generosity, is really a vicious hoodlum who steals out at night to commit his crimes. Those who talk of the fine neighbor and those who talk of the hoodlum are talking about the same individual. There are incompatible conceptions of the same individual in virtue of the fact that different people have different information about him.

How different can conceptions of something be? A full answer to this question would require the spelling out of a theory of reference. Here I will just make a remark or two. Someone who has an entirely mistaken picture of Harry's nature can still be talking about Harry. But the picture must connect up in the right way with Harry. One account of what connecting up in the right way amounts to requires that the picture must have been caused in an appropriate way if it is to be a picture of Harry. If you and I have entirely different encounters with Harry—you, let us suppose, narrowly escape one of his assaults, while I know him as an apparently friendly neighbor—then no doubt we will form very different conceptions of Harry, and yet they can both be conceptions of *Harry* in virtue of the fact that they have been caused in a certain way, namely through interaction with Harry. Likewise in the case of the RR: a condition which Hick believes to obtain, namely that the different conceptions of the different traditions are all caused by the same entity, would ensure that the same RR is being variously construed. "[All] authentic religious awareness is a response to the circumambient presence and prevenient pressure of the divine Reality (PRP, 97/8) [There] has been a genuine impact of transcendent divine Reality upon human life." (PRP, 103; also 106) There are, of course, other theories of reference but I will not comment on them here: it is clear that there are plausible theories of reference which are compatible with Moderate Pluralism.

There are various versions of Moderate Pluralism. All versions distinguish the RR as it is in itself from the various conceptions of it. But they can disagree about many things, including the nature of the RR, how much we can say about it, and the precise nature of the relations which obtain between the RR and the various conceptions of it. Versions of Moderate Pluralism can vary, for example, with respect to the extent to which they think the RR to be incomprehensible. Some may hold that no human conception could describe it accurately and the

best we can do is strive to point in its direction: the RR is sufficiently mysterious, sufficiently far beyond our comprehension, that we can say little or nothing with confidence about it. Noumenal Pluralism is one such view. If this were so, it would not be surprising if descriptions mistakenly taken at their face value appeared to be incompatible. Others may hold that although the available conceptions do not accurately describe the RR, the RR is not *in principle* incomprehensible. Yet others may hold that some conception or conceptions—and here their *own* conception is likely to figure prominently—more accurately describe the RR than others. Versions of Moderate Pluralism can also vary with respect to their view of what *causes* there to be different conceptions of the RR. The competing conceptions of the RR may be thought to be caused or produced by the RR itself, or to be produced by the communities or groups whose conceptions they are, or to be produced by some other factor, or by some combination of factors. Versions of Moderate Pluralism can vary too with respect to their account of what, if anything, in the RR produces the different conceptions. And versions of Moderate Pluralism can differ about the extent to which they think it possible to reconcile the different conceptions: some Moderate Pluralists will look for a way to combine what they think to be best from the various conceptions, perhaps believing that in doing so they are peeling away inessentials, and attempt to construct one consistent conception, while others will eschew such an approach. No doubt there are further ways in which we might divide up versions of Moderate Pluralism. In any case it seems clear that Moderate Pluralism is a coherent view. I will not raise here the question of whether or not it is true.⁹

4. *Radical Pluralism: Some Unconvincing Moves.* Now let us consider Radical Pluralism, the view that the competing conceptions of the RR are all true, that what seem incompatible conceptions of the RR are actually compatible. Such a view, if widely espoused, probably would promote mutual respect among members of different traditions. For this reason it is very attractive. But is it plausible? Is it even coherent: is there a view here to espouse?

First, some clarification. I assume that the nature of the RR does not change. If the RR changes, it has different characteristics at different times, although whether or not that would help with a defense of Radical Pluralism is another matter. I obviously assume too that it is possible to think about, and to some extent describe, the RR. Personalists and impersonalists think the RR to be very different from all other things, but not *so* different from everything else that we can say nothing about it. If we were *entirely* unable to describe it, then all attempted descriptions of it would, presumably, be equally false. Worse, we might have no business talking about it as being unintelligible: we might have no way to determine the reference of discourse which purports to be about it. So those who say that there is an RR should be committed to our being able to think about it, however metaphorical or analogical may be the usage of our

concepts when we refer to it, and however inadequate and faltering may be our grasp of it. It seems plain that once concepts *are* used, then if they are to convey information they must be used in such a way that, for instance, if the RR is being claimed to be benevolent, then it is also being claimed that the RR is not malevolent, not indifferent, and so on.

In discussing Radical Pluralism I take both realism and a correspondence theory of truth for granted. By "realism" I mean the view that there is a reality external to us which has its own nature quite apart from our interaction with it. I assume the RR has a nature which is not a product of our interaction with it, and which exists independent of the perceptions or states of any being other than the RR. A denial of realism can take a number of forms. One might be a relativist about truth or a conceptual relativist, holding that what is true or what exists is relative to, for example, categorial frameworks or conceptual schemes, and that talk of the RR as it is in itself is meaningless or pointless. I will have nothing to say about relativism in any of its forms here.¹⁰

How might Radical Pluralism be defended? I consider a number of attempted defenses, moving from the unpromising to the more promising. If the aim is to defend Radical Pluralism there obviously is no point in merely contending that although the descriptions of the RR in the various traditions are not all true, what really matters about the RR from a human point of view, or from some other important point of view, is captured by all of the conceptions. Nor is Radical Pluralism supported by the observation that there are descriptions which are satisfied by the RR, under all or many of the distinct conceptions of it. Allah and Brahman, when Brahman is conceived of non-personally, and indeed the RR as it is conceived of in all the traditions, would probably satisfy the following description: "it is of supreme importance, holy, beyond space and time, a source of human fulfillment, and distinct from all physical things." But this does not show, or even suggest, that the apparently incompatible claims made about the RR are all true.

Nor should we be persuaded by the arguments of J. Kellenberger. ("The Slippery Slope of Religious Relativism" *Religious Studies* 20, 1984, 39-51) Kellenberger's case seems at first glance to be offered in support of something like Radical Pluralism, for this author suggests that "it may be that each major religion provides an equally good guide to the nature of God . . . (47) and that it is not the case "that if we accept . . . that God is uniquely revealed in Jesus we must deny that He is uniquely revealed in the prophets of Israel, in Krishna, and in the Buddha." (46) But Kellenberger thinks that it may *also* be that "the central beliefs of one religion [about God], and not those of others, are true." (*Ibid.*) This looks like a step in the direction of accepting Radical Pluralism, followed by a step in the direction of rejecting it. But what is going on here is just that the notion of "having a guide to the nature of God" has been reduced

to “working out . . . in fear and trembling . . . a day-to-day lived relationship with God or Reality.” Given that people in different traditions succeed in working out such a relationship—something which, Kellenberger makes clear, does not require them to have a *true* account of the Reality in question—then we get the result that each tradition has “an equally good guide to the nature of God.” But we get this result in such a form that it has been emptied of its normal content.

Consider next Hick’s soteriological test for the accuracy of the claims of a tradition. According to Hick “there must be a strong correlation between the authenticity of the forms of religious experience and their spiritual and moral fruits.” (PRP, 38) A person’s “spiritual state, or existential condition . . . [can range] from the negative response of a self-enclosed consciousness which is blind to the divine presence . . . to a positive openness to the Divine which gradually transforms us and which is called salvation or liberation or enlightenment. This transformation is essentially the same within the different religious contexts within which it occurs: I would define it formally as the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness.” (PRP, 29) When this transformation occurs, there is authentic religious experience. Salvation consists in this transformation, and since we can have a good idea of whether or not this process of transformation is occurring, we can also have a good idea of where and to what extent salvation is occurring. It is occurring “so far as observation can tell, to much the same extent . . . [in the] great world faiths.” (PRP, 36, also 47.)¹¹ So we may infer that the different perceptions of the RR which those faiths embody are “authentic” and “valid.” (PRP, 44) “[In] fact the truth-claim and the salvation-claim cohere closely together and should be treated as a single package.” (PRP, 46) But this is not very convincing. Suppose that personal transformation of the sort Hick has in mind occurs in all the major traditions. Why should this fact give us reason to think that the different accounts of the RR involved in the traditions are all true? Perhaps the truth of one or another version of *Moderate* Pluralism is all that is indicated by the widespread occurrence of personal transformation: perhaps getting in touch with the RR rather than accurately depicting it is sufficient for the transformation in question. Or nothing of this sort may be indicated at all. If Hick is wrong about salvation consisting in a transformation of the sort he describes, and if salvation consists in something else, such as forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God, as these are understood by Calvinists, or in liberation from rebirth, as this is understood by Hindus, there is still no reason to think salvation and truth should be “treated as a single package.” Let us call the view that the dominant traditions are equally salvifically effective—that is, are equally viable paths to salvation—Salvific Pluralism. One can be a Salvific Pluralist without being a Radical Pluralist, just as one can be a Radical Pluralist without being a Salvific Pluralist, although the latter view would be surprising. And needless to say, profound

personal transformations of the sort Hick has in mind sometimes occur in the absence of any religious commitments. A test for truth is not to be found in this area.¹²

Then there are appeals to the *infinity* of the RR in support of Radical Pluralism. For example, Chubb writes as follows:

to affirm a predicate of a finite being is necessarily to exclude some other predicate which is the contrary . . . of the predicate affirmed. The capacity to accommodate a predicate only through the exclusion of another predicate belonging to the same universe of discourse is the mark of finite existence. The finite lives by exclusion. The infinite, however, suffers no such limitation. Its acceptance of a predicate . . . does not involve a denial of any predicate except the contradictory of the predicate affirmed. Thus there is no contradiction in saying that God is both personal and impersonal. To say that God is the supreme person logically involves the denial of the proposition 'God is not the Supreme Person.' It does not involve the further denial of the proposition 'God is formless and impersonal.' ('Presuppositions of Religious Dialogue,' *Religious Studies* 8, 1972, 296-7)

This seems to be a statement of Radical Pluralism which, like some of Hick's comments, emphasizes the infinity of the RR. Some years ago Hick wrote that "[in] a finite entity, personality and impersonality are mutually incompatible. But why should they be incompatible in the Infinite?" (*Death and Eternal Life*, 32.)

Chubb, who indicates that he follows Sri Aurobindo at this point, contends that "the infinite is such that when we attribute some property to it, the contradictory of the predicate in question is being denied to apply to it, but the contraries of that predicate are not being denied to apply." Chubb claims that if one holds that God is personal then one may also hold without inconsistency that God is impersonal, although one may not hold that God is not a person. In thinking about Chubb's point here, it is important to note that he takes the property of being a person and the property of being personal to be the same property. (I comment on this in n. 1 below.) But—contrary to what Chubb says—when the Absolute is said to be impersonal, part of what seems to be meant is that the Absolute is not—in Chubb's terms—a person. It is true that there are usages of the term "impersonal" which do not have this implication: for instance, when a person, or more likely a person's style or behavior, are said to be impersonal, what is meant is that the person has a particular sort of character, and not that she is not a person. But this is quite beside the point. When the RR is said to be impersonal, this is *not* what is meant. Among the things that I take to be implied when the RR is said to be impersonal is that the RR does *not* act, respond

to prayers, reward, punish, forgive, care for people, perceive, know, make moral judgments, and so on. But this is just to *deny* that the RR is personal. Examples can be multiplied. Chubb thinks that the RR's being benevolent excludes it's not being benevolent, but not it's being, say, indifferent or selfish. But an indifferent being, or a selfish being, *is* one which is not benevolent. If something is indifferent, it is *not* benevolent. The distinction between contraries and contradictories is of no help here. (Incidentally, if it *were* meaningful to claim that in the case of an infinite being, the contradictory, but not the contraries, of a predicate affirmed of it, is being denied, we might wonder why the normal usage of our concepts breaks down just to *this* extent. Huston Smith seems to go all the way when he remarks in writing about Hinduism that "logic itself may melt in the full blast of the divine incandescence." *The Religions of Man*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1958, 66))

I already mentioned the view that there are different "lenses" or perspectives, different categorial schemes, through which we perceive the RR. While this would explain disagreements about the nature of the RR, it does not render Radical Pluralism plausible. Only if the RR itself has aspects or parts which the various lenses render perceivable, can the competing descriptions of the RR all be true. Only if the RR has a nature such that it can correctly be characterised in the ways in which it is variously interpreted, can Radical Pluralism be correct. I now turn to that more promising possibility.

5. *A Step in the Direction of Radical Pluralism.* Defenders of Radical Pluralism sometimes observe that there are cases in which apparently incompatible descriptions of things are accurate. For example, there are ambiguous diagrams such as Jastrow's duck-rabbit. This is a drawing which lends itself to being seen either as a drawing of a duck or as a drawing of a rabbit. It is not merely that the drawing *can be seen as* that of a duck and as that of a rabbit. It has a drawing-of-a-duck aspect and a drawing-of-a-rabbit aspect. We need to distinguish cases where something merely is such that it can be seen in a number of ways from cases where something can be seen in a number of ways *and* has a complexity such that it can correctly be seen in those ways. The cases which are relevant to the defense of Radical Pluralism are the latter cases, those in which what is observed has aspects such that more than one interpretation of it is *true*. Radical Pluralism requires that the RR can *correctly* be interpreted in different ways.

Another familiar illustration goes like this. Seven blind men—seven blind men with no previous experience of elephants—are asked to describe an elephant. One feels only the tail and says "it feels like a rope," another only a leg and says "it feels like a tree-trunk," and so on. Defenders of Radical Pluralism sometimes point out that what each of the blind men says about the elephant is true, even though their descriptions are very different. The descriptions of the elephant are compatible: something can feel like a rope *and* feel like a tree-trunk

if it has different parts, at least one of which feels like a rope and at least one of which feels like a tree-trunk.

Could the RR have parts too? Only if the RR has aspects or parts which the various lenses render perceivable could the competing descriptions of it all be accurate. A personalist is likely to allow that human knowledge of God is very fragmentary, very incomplete. Should a personalist allow that there may be aspects of the RR which are not personal? How could this be? We might think of the RR as having "parts" in something like the way in which we think of a person's personality as having parts. In this context talk of "parts" and talk of "aspects" seem to amount to the same thing. Consider this case. A parent might be stern with a precocious child but warm and supportive with a vulnerable child. The parent is both stern and supportive. Which she is depends on which child she is dealing with. The same goes for disagreements *between different personalists* about the nature of God. Suppose some personalists think of God as stern and remote and other personalists think of God as supportive and loving. Can God be both? I see no reason why not. *Which* God appears to be may depend on facts about the group with whom God is interacting.¹³

Can the RR be both personal and impersonal? The commonsense view is that it must be one or the other. If the RR is personal, perhaps you can think of it as *not* being personal, and in doing so you may be aware of much that is true of it. You may be aware of aspects of it which tend to be neglected by those who focus on it as a personal being. There may even be something about the RR that makes the impersonal conception of it appropriate. But if it is personal, it can be aware, know, make moral judgments, and so forth; if you say it is not personal, you leave all of that out and you say something false about it. Should we take the commonsense view? I think we should, but we should also recognize that more needs to be said.

Here is a consideration which supports the commonsense view. There is a simple and obvious condition which must be met if our discourse is to be informative. Consider again the claim that the RR is a benevolent being, who wishes the best for all creatures. Benevolence in the RR would not be just like benevolence in a human being. But however analogical or metaphorical the usage of the term "benevolent" and its cognates in this context may be, there is a limit to the permissible vagueness. If the claim that the RR is benevolent is to convey any information, to have any content, it must imply that the RR is not, say, malevolent or indifferent; for in either case the RR would *not* be benevolent. If you are told that X is benevolent, but you are also told that X also is not benevolent, you are not told anything at all. And the same goes for other properties. The death of contradiction is much quicker than the death of a thousand qualifications.

But it is also possible that the RR has a double nature, that it has both a

personal nature or aspect and a nature or aspect which is not personal. If this is so, to describe either aspect is to describe the RR, although not of course in its entirety. More than one description of the RR can be correct, and a description which focuses on only one aspect of it is incomplete: it neglects to mention an entire aspect of the RR. A full description would involve the use of both sorts of descriptions.

What is it to have more than one nature? The central idea is that more than one description with an appearance of completeness, with an appearance of giving a full account of a being or thing, can be given. It might be objected that this talk of two natures is unhelpful or even misleading. After all, something is the way it is, and talk of "the way it is" is talk of its nature, however complex or multifaceted that nature may be. Talk of something having more than one nature, it might be suggested, should be replaced with talk of a complex nature with more than one aspect.¹⁴ But not much hangs on which locution we use. Talk of something having more than one nature nicely captures the fact that more than one description with an appearance of completeness can be given, as well as the fact that it has properties such that it may properly be included in one category of entities, and other properties such that it may properly be included in another category.

That *n*₁ and *n*₂ are two natures of the same thing may be something that has to be discovered. Prior to that discovery, it may seem that if one way of describing it is correct, the other must be incorrect. Some of the properties we impute to it under one description may not normally be thought to be possessed by something which can correctly be characterised under the other description. For instance, some of the properties imputed to the RR in the course of describing its impersonal nature may be such that when one considers an entity with those properties, one would not normally think it to be a personal being. The impersonal nature is such that if you were to describe that nature alone, it would *appear* that you were describing a being that is not personal. But having a nature or aspect which is not personal does not involve not being personal. It is just that the impersonal conception accurately (if incompletely) depicts the RR without any reference to the personal. It does not say, or imply, that the RR is not personal.

It is plausible to say that something has more than one nature only if the properties imputed to it under the different descriptions are compatible. To impute mutually exclusive properties to something is to say nothing about it. It is not as though, for instance, the RR both acts in history and does not do so. If it does so, it does so, and that is all there is to it. Rather, if it acts in history this is a fact about it which you might not notice if you focussed on its impersonal nature. The facts do not change on account of the way in which you look at them, but how you look at the facts makes a difference to which of them you see. So there are limits to what can plausibly be said to be two natures of the

same thing, and these limits include the fact that under two descriptions of a thing, incompatible properties cannot truly be ascribed to it. Two descriptions can be true of something only if one does not involve a denial of any part of the other. A more vague limit is this: the natures in question should be candidates for coexisting. It should be sensible to impute the natures in question to the same thing. This notion, and the larger account of the limits to what can plausibly be said to be two natures of the same thing, is complex and a full account of it would be major task. It is enough to point out here that there are limits of this sort. It is easy to give examples which are within, and others which are without, the limits, even if it is hard to state those limits.

I propose also to sidestep the question of precisely what conditions a description must meet if it is to have an appearance of completeness. It is a description of something about which someone might reasonably say: "that is all that is to it, and that is all there is to know about it." (Consider a simple object such as a knife. One can describe the knife using the terms of everyday observation or using the terms of contemporary physics. Or consider human beings. There are a number of ways to describe us accurately; for example, there are descriptions using the terms of the physicist, others using the terms of the biologist, others using the terms of the psychologist, or the theologian, and yet others using the layperson's concepts. Someone who came across the descriptions in either case might be very surprised to discover that they are descriptions of the same thing. So how many natures does the knife have and how many natures do we have? Whatever the answer to this question may be, it seems that having a double nature has nothing to do with having an infinite nature.) While it is difficult to specify the precise requirements a description must meet if it is to have an appearance of completeness, it is easy to give examples of descriptions which would not meet such requirements. ("It has a red handle" is all that is offered as a description of the knife.) And there are descriptions for whose fulfillment of this requirement a good case can be made. (A complete account of the microstructure of the knife, or of our bodies, is given.) So although a full account of what it is for a description to appear to be complete is lacking, the central idea here, I suggest, is fairly clear.

How are we to conceive of the natures in the case of the RR? The RR *qua* personal entity is something of which we can get some grasp. What about the impersonal nature? Hindus who have an impersonal conception of the RR conceive of it as pure consciousness, pure awareness, pure bliss, and so forth (e.g., Huston Smith *op. cit.*, 74). Perhaps we should think of the relation between the two natures as follows. The difference between them might be analogous to the difference between, on the one hand, a mind as encountered from the outside, and on the other hand, a mind as participated in from the inside. In the latter case, rather than interacting with something which is distinct from oneself, one

would be participating in something that is larger than oneself. On this analysis the RR, under both the personal and the impersonal descriptions, is thought of as mental. Perhaps there are correct descriptions which do *not* characterise the RR as mental. We are beings with a mental life of whom very elaborate descriptions can be given *qua* physical things. The physical is the stuff in terms of which a description of us which does not make reference to the mental can be given. It is possible that the RR too may correctly be described in a way that makes reference to some other sort of stuff but makes no reference to the mental. If the double nature theory is correct, then we and the RR share a personal nature: that is, we are all beings of the same kind. The impersonal nature of the RR either is unique to it, or it is shared with some other being or beings: this is a matter about which, I suspect, we cannot speak with much confidence.

Some personalists, or some impersonalists, may not be satisfied with the double nature proposal. A personalist will perhaps say that *at the deepest level*, at the level where you are dealing with what is most important about the RR, the RR is personal. There may be dissatisfaction with the idea that there are characterisations of the RR which leave out entirely the fact that the RR is a personal being and yet which are just as good as those of the personalist. But what is it to be the more important nature of something with a double nature? More important from what point of view? The personalist and the impersonalist may have different views about what is more important. The personalist may think nothing more wonderful than the discovery that interaction with the RR is possible. The impersonalist may think the personal to be lower, inferior, limited in some way; she may think the personal conception presumptuously anthropomorphic. There may be no reason to think of one rather than the other nature as more important, all things considered. Which appears more important may be a matter of what one's priorities are. What sort of description of *us* you think to be important will depend on whether it is neurology, biology, psychology, theology, or something else you are doing. Perhaps certain cultures would be more likely to focus on one rather than another nature of the RR.

If, say, personalists are not satisfied with the double nature proposal, is that a serious problem? It is a reason for being suspicious of it, but not a reason to reject it. Some personalists might say: "if it turned out that what I thought I was worshipping was as the double nature proposal represents it, I would have to conclude that the being whom I *thought* I was worshipping does not exist at all." What authority should the personalist have here? Of course, a proposal such as this might be a reasonable one even if the personalist, or anyone else, finds it repugnant. Yet the personalist is entitled in certain circumstances to say that, to put it crudely, if what there is to be found in the area where she thought God to be, is very different from what she had thought, then the being whom she thought herself to be worshipping does not exist at all. Suppose, for instance,

that someone were to worship the RR, thinking of it as that which satisfies the description "it is of supreme importance, holy, beyond space and time, a source of human fulfillment, and distinct from all physical things" and also thinking that what satisfies this description is something personal, and suppose that it were to turn out that what satisfies the description is *impersonal*. There is no reason why she must say: "ah, so it was something impersonal that I was worshipping all along." The linguistic community, in other words, has some say about what is essential to what is discussed. But not complete say. The double nature proposal leaves much of the nature which the personalist had thought the RR to have intact. Because of this the authority of the personalist is diminished. For instance, the double nature hypothesis permits the personalist to say that the RR is essentially personal, acts in history, perceives, makes moral judgments, and so forth. But the double nature proposal also says that the RR has aspects which the personalist had thought it not to have. Perhaps some personalists would regard the double nature proposal as good news. Corresponding comments can be made about the impersonalist.

Three final thoughts. First, a word on religious experience. An advocate of the double nature proposal might suggest that many religious experiences which are taken by those who have them to be experiences of the RR are such that they can be construed either in a personal or in an impersonal way. Consider a frequently reported religious experience: a sense of being guided in what one is doing. Suppose that I believe that God is guiding me to pursue a career as a teacher. How would the experiences that I take to involve God guiding me in this way differ from the experiences I would have if, say, in deep reflection or meditation I were to enter into a state in which I somehow or other participate in an impersonal RR, and in which I see that I ought to pursue such a career? Can some experiences be interpreted in either way? But it is important to note that whatever the answer to these questions may be, the double nature proposal does not rest on the plausibility of this suggestion about religious experience.

Second, while the double nature proposal provides a way to save much of what both personalists and impersonalists assert, and while it concurs with the Radical Pluralist view that certain apparently incompatible claims about the RR actually are compatible, it does not provide a way of defending Radical Pluralism. So the double nature proposal is a step in the direction of Radical Pluralism rather than a defense of it. There are two respects in which it falls short of being a defense of Radical Pluralism: it provides no support for the idea that the RR can be, say, both a person and not a person. It also has been presented here merely as a possibility, as a coherent proposal. Whether or not it is true is another question. How might we set about determining whether or not the double nature proposal is true? The merits of standard arguments for theism, as well as of any arguments there are for the existence of the RR as conceived of impersonally,

might be considered. A consideration of these arguments would include attention to the extent to which religious experiences of different sorts provide support for the different conceptions.

Third, religions do not differ solely with respect to their conceptions of the RR, and insofar as they differ about the RR, their disagreements do not have solely to do with whether or not the RR is personal. An appeal to the possibility of a double nature may help to resolve *some* of these other disagreements, such as disagreements between different personalists about the RR, as I suggested above, and the same may hold for some disagreements between impersonalists about the RR. But how many of the very large number of disagreements between traditions admit of such a resolution? In how many cases can there be more than one legitimate way of looking at things? For example, what about disagreements about the afterlife: is there a single resurrection or are there a series of incarnations? What about disagreements between Christians and Muslims about the status of Jesus, or between Hindus and Muslims about the status of the Qur'an? It is not easy to see how the double nature proposal could help in such cases. There seem to be disagreements in which it can turn out that both sides (or all sides if there are more than two) are giving an accurate, if incomplete, description of something. The substance of both sides can be preserved. Then there are other cases where this is not so. It would be hard to say which type of disagreement is more prevalent. But the fact that many disagreements seem not to admit of the sort of resolution which is helpful in the case of the RR means that the double nature proposal has a somewhat limited application. It is not that everyone can be more or less right about everything. In many areas we will have to settle for less, perhaps for saying that at most one view is correct, or for saying that the lowest common denominator is correct, or for a compromise position where each side gives up a lot but can hold on to some part of what it initially adhered to.¹⁵

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NOTES

1. Theists disagree about whether or not God is a person. Christians generally believe that God is a person, whereas Muslims generally believe that this is not so. (For an introduction to some relevant issues see Gary Legenhausen "Is God a Person?" *Religious Studies* 22 (1986) 307-323.) But all theists agree that God is personal in the respects specified above. When I say that God is personal I mean just that God is like a person in such respects as these: God acts, responds to prayers, rewards, punishes, forgives, cares for people, perceives, knows, makes moral judgments, and so forth, and I want to avoid the controversial question of whether or not God actually is a person. In what follows I assume, as it seems reasonable to assume, that it is coherent to attribute properties

such as these to God. A personalist may of course believe without inconsistency that information about God may be conveyed through the use of impersonal imagery and terminology. For example, God is said by some to be light, by others to be a consuming fire. The appropriateness of using impersonal terminology in describing a personal being should be clear from its constant occurrence in discourse about human beings. This is just to recognize that information can be conveyed by the use of terms which are functioning outside of their normal contexts.

2. Elsewhere Hick writes that "the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate . . ." (CRT 485)

3. In this paragraph and in the preceding one I concur with some points made by Harold A. Netland in his interesting paper "Professor Hick on Religious Pluralism" *Religious Studies* 22, 249-61, especially 252-53, 259. See also Dan Cohn-Sherbok "Ranking Religions" *Religious Studies* 22, 377-86, especially 379-82. Hick links the view that there are a variety of equally legitimate interpretations of the RR with the view that we have "cognitive freedom." The idea is that we are free to make up our minds on certain important religious matters. That the RR has a certain nature, that a particular group of theists has an accurate picture of it, are not conclusions which are forced on us. In Hick's view, our experience is ambiguous with respect to whether or not there is an RR. Likewise, according to Hick, whatever experience we have that is relevant to the nature of the RR is ambiguous: there is room for a variety of interpretations, including interpretations which seem at odds with each other.

4. Unpublished note by John Hick on this paper. See also his "Towards a Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" in *Religious Experience and Religious Belief: Essays in the Epistemology of Religion* Edited by Joseph Runzo & Craig K. Ihara (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1987, 99-116).

5. I say that this is true "for the most part" since Hick presumably allows that *existence*, for instance, may correctly be imputed to the RR *an sich*, and he appears to think that the RR *an sich* is causally related to us, and may correctly be described as such. I do not wish to exclude the possibility that members of different faith communities would be in a position to declare that the RR *an sich* exists or is causally connected to us. But the important point is that most of the uniquely Islamic beliefs that Muslims have about Allah are beliefs about the Islamic conception of the RR, and not about the RR *an sich*.

6. But even in recent work such as the essay referred to in n. 4, Hick's Noumenal Pluralism does not always seem wholehearted. There he says that the various conceptions of the RR are valid (102, 113). Now "valid" here means something like "authentic," or "salvifically effective": the suggestion that the various conceptions of the RR are all true, a suggestion that put in an occasional appearance in earlier work, is not being made here. Yet at the end of that essay he writes that

it is clearly possible that [the various conceptions] . . . are not all equally adequate, but that some mediate God to mankind better than others. Indeed it would be hard to maintain—to take examples from the Judaic-Christian scriptures—that the images of God as a bloodthirsty tribal deity urging the Israelites to slaughter their neighbours . . . , and the image of God conveyed in Jesus' parable of the prodigal son . . . , are equal in validity or adequacy or value. [It] remains entirely possible that more adequate and less adequate images of God operate within different religious traditions. (116)

It is hard to read such remarks and not find intimations of the idea that the images of the RR may vary with respect to their truth or accuracy. This idea is suggested too by his usage of the term "image" and by the examples he cites in explaining Noumenal Pluralism. For to say that *a* is an image of *b* is to suggest, if not imply, that *a* resembles *b*, in which case we *can* have information

about *b*'s nature. And Hick's illustrations of the relation between the RR and the various conceptions of it, such as his appeal to the fact that different people have different images of major historical and religious figures, and his appeal to certain psychological cases and to information theory (106ff.), also strongly suggest that he has not disabused himself entirely of the idea that the conceptions of the RR held by the various faith communities yield information about the RR *an sich*. And if the images are capable of being true, the question of whether or not Radical Pluralism is correct once again raises its head. But the alternative reading, according to which talk of some images being more "adequate" or more "valid" or "mediating God to mankind better than others" boils down (or is it up?) to talk of salvific effectiveness, and has no implications for truth, cannot be ruled out either. Hick may simply deny that he intends the term "image" to have its usual connotations, and he may deny that the illustrations should be construed in the way I have suggested. (Incidentally, in this passage Hick uses the term "God" in a much broader way than it is usually used: its usage is roughly equivalent to that of "RR" in this paper.)

7. I say a bit more about Hick's conception of salvation in section 4 of this paper.

8. I am aware that Hick would resist this conclusion. He writes in "Towards a Philosophy of Religious Pluralism" that

God as experienced by this or that individual or group is real, not illusory; and yet the experience of God is partial and is adapted to our human spiritual capacities. God as humanly thought is not God *an sich* but God in relation to mankind, thought and experienced in terms of some particular limited tradition of religious awareness and response.

However, such remarks are not without their perplexities. For example, what does the claim that God as experienced by Muslims is real amount to? The RR is certainly real, and insofar as a certain faith community has a conception of, and is experiencing or engaging, the RR, they are experiencing (etc.) something real. But Allah is not a separate entity over and above the RR. There are not as many separate beings as there are images which are the product of interaction between the RR and faith communities. On the Noumenal Pluralist view, it is true that those who worship Allah worship a being that is real; but, to put it crudely, what is real about Allah is just the RR.

9. Nor will I raise the question of how we might decide if it is true. For reflection on this see George Chrystides, "God and the Tao" (*Religious Studies* 19, 01-11); also William P. Alston "Religious Experience and Religious Diversity," 2ff. (Unpublished).

10. Roger Trigg discusses what he takes to be a tendency to relativism in Hick's views in "Religion and the Threat of Relativism," *Religious Studies* 19, 297-310, especially 299ff.

11. In another essay published about the same time as this one, however, Hick appears to qualify this remark somewhat: "... each of these ... traditions is so internally diverse that it is impossible for human judgment to weigh them up and compare their merits as systems of salvation. It may be that one facilitates human liberation/salvation more than the others; but if so this is not evident to human vision." (CRT, 490; also GR, *passim*.) I suspect that the view expressed above in the text is his considered opinion.

12. In this paragraph I take it for granted that Hick, at one point at least, thought the soteriological test to be a test for *truth*. I am interested in defenses of Radical Pluralism, and since Hick does not now hold that view, he now sees the soteriological test as having a different function; but the view is worth mentioning, partly because while Hick does not now hold it, he did, and someone else might. In the note referred to on this paper referred to in n. 4, Hick writes that

[if], as seems to be the case, men and women, [in different traditions] ... show the spiritual and ethical fruits of Reality-centeredness and love/compassion, we conclude that

[the conception of the RR of that tradition] is in soteriological alignment with the [RR]
 Ideas about the RR (as Jahweh, Allah, Brahman . . .) are true in the pragmatic
 sense that they help to open human being[s] to the [RR]

So Hick's view now seems to be that soteriology is a guide to *effectiveness*, but not to truth in the correspondence sense of "true." Further questions about Hick's soteriological test are raised by Netland, *op. cit.*, 257-57.

13. For suggestions along these lines see Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models & Paradigms* (London: SCM Press, 1974), 85.

14. Similar questions are raised in a somewhat different context by Thomas V. Morris in *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1986), 34ff.

15. An earlier version of this paper was read to members of the faculty at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) in July 1986. I am grateful for the comments I received on that occasion. A later version was presented, in summary form, at the AAR (Midwestern Regional Meetings) in April 1987. Work on this paper during the summer of 1987 was generously supported by an NEH Summer Stipend. My thanks to Philip Devine and Robert Ennis for critical comments, and to Hugh Chandler for helpful conversations.