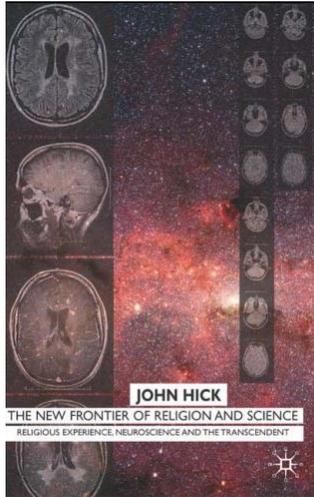


BOOK REVIEW



John Hick

*The New Frontier of Religion and Science:
Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent*



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Review by Ulrich Mohrhoff

John Hick is a philosopher of religion and theologian with doctorates from Oxford and Edinburgh and honorary doctorates from Uppsala University and Glasgow University. He is also an emeritus professor of Birmingham University, UK, and of the Claremont Graduate University, California. My first pleasant surprise while reading his latest book *The New Frontier* was the level-headed detachment with which he draws “the institutional balance sheet”:

On the one hand the religions have been instruments of social cohesion, maintaining the unity of a tribe or a nation by providing communal rituals and shared identity-defining stories handed down from generation to generation. These stories, sagas and myths refer to specific strands of history but constitute for each community an all-encompassing “grand narrative” which binds society and generations together, providing frameworks of meaning for the lives of hundreds of millions of people. The religions have also challenged their members with moral ideals, and have supported and comforted them in the sufferings and amid the anxieties and vicissitudes of life’s recurrent personal and social crises. Further, the religions have constituted the foundation of civilisations and been instrumental in the development of language, education and science. They have been responsible for the creation of hospitals and universities, and have inspired literature, music, painting, sculpture, architecture. So there is a great deal on the positive side of the balance sheet.

But on the other side they have not only been instruments of social cohesion but also of social control by a dominant class.... Again, while the religions have produced and nourished a succession of great philosophers and theologians, the monotheisms have also restricted the search for truth and new understanding by threatening and punishing thinkers who failed to conform to accepted ideas.... However, if we try to arrive at a

“bottom line” in this complex profit-and-loss account, we find that the goods and evils flowing from religion are of such different kinds as generally to be incommensurable, so that it is not really possible to reach any straightforward verdict. We can only paint the mixed black-and-white picture which history displays. The world religions all teach love and compassion, each has its own formulation of the Golden Rule, each includes great examples of self-giving love for others, and yet each has been used to validate and justify large-scale violence and merciless atrocities. (pp. 8–11)

When it comes to the “scientific” study of religion, Hick is more outspoken:

Religion as institution is the subject-matter of the academic study of religion. The historians of religion, and the anthropologists and sociologists who study religion, necessarily focus on its outer and visible aspects. Emile Durkheim, for example, studying Australian aboriginal societies in the late nineteenth century, concluded that its totem functioned as a symbol both for its god and for the tribe itself as a reality greater than and having authority over the individual, and concluded that god was society in the guise of the sacred totem. His analysis of the religion of a particular primal tribal society is convincing but he, and many others after him, made the mistake of generalising it to explain religion as such: the overarching authority and power of society have been projected by the religious imagination as the idea of God. However, this theory does not explain either such non-theistic and basically individualistic faiths as Buddhism or the important element of prophetic challenge to society among both them and the monotheisms. Such oversimplifying generalisation is indeed characteristic of all the various reductionist sociological and psychological theories. They have a valid insight into some one particular aspect of religion and then uncritically assume that they have thereby discovered the essential nature of all religion. (pp. 11–12)

The essential nature of all religion is what Hick aims to determine. And where would one find it if not in spirituality and mysticism? These therefore form the subjects of the book’s second chapter.

Within the Anglo-American analytic philosophical tradition today it is quite permissible to speak of mysticism — the study of which is focused on the rare and extraordinary experiences of some outstanding individuals. The range of religious experience is much wider. It encompasses both what Charles Taylor calls “the massive subjective turn of modern culture” and (with a great deal of overlap between the two) the New Age spirituality studied by contemporary sociologists. This wider range of religious experience is what Hick refers to as “spirituality.” But what is religious experience? This question provides the title for the third chapter. Religious experiences, according to Hick, occur in (at least) four different modes.

One is a distinctive way of experiencing aspects of the natural world, or the natural world as a whole. A second is the sense of presence, whether of God or of an angelic being or of a surrounding and indwelling more ultimate supra-natural reality. A third consists in religious visions and auditions, both inner and outer. And a fourth ... is the experience of unity with God or with the Ultimate reported by mystics within each of the great traditions. (p. 29)

In Chapter 4, titled “By Their Fruits You Will Know Them” (the quotes being part of the title), Hick seeks a universal criterion of authenticity for religious experience and finds that it “consists in its moral and spiritual fruits in human life” (p. 51). This is perhaps

the weakest chapter of the book. Since much of its content is superseded by deeper insights in later chapters, I shall pass over it without further comment.

In Chapter 5 Hicks begins his examination of the soundness and cogency of the naturalistic world view, which still dominates modern Western thought, being present as an unquestioned assumption in innumerable remarks by influential scientists.

For example, “On the one hand our lives seem so important — with all those cherished highly personal memories — and yet we *know* [Hick’s italics] that in the cosmic scheme of things, our brief existence amounts to nothing at all” (Ramachandran 1998, 176). That we know this should, in the ordinary use of know, mean either that it is self-evident or that we have compelling reason to believe it. But it is not self-evident, and we have no compelling reason to believe it; its status is that of a fundamental article of faith. It is the prevailing uncriticised assumption, or background paradigm, within the scientific community and hence the general public. (p. 55)

As philosopher John Searle, himself a materialist, admits: “There is a sense in which materialism is the religion of our time, at least among most of the professional experts in the fields of philosophy, psychology, cognitive science, and other disciplines that study the mind.” The alternative to materialism is supposed to be some form of dualism — idealism having apparently fallen out of favor with both the materialists and the non-materialists — and dualism is readily dismissed by first presenting a parody of it and then dismissing that. Daniel Dennett is particularly good at this sleight of hand — see my review of *The Two Sides of Being* by Uwe Meixner in *AntiMatters* 3 (2) ♠. Here is Dennett as quoted by Hick:

The idea of mind as distinct ... from the brain, composed not of ordinary matter, but of some other, special kind of stuff, is dualism, and it is deservedly in disrepute today.... The prevailing wisdom, variously expressed and argued for, is *materialism*: there is only one sort of stuff, namely matter — the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology. (p. 56)

What is deservedly in disrepute today is not dualism but the parody of dualism according to which mind — or whatever else there is besides matter — is composed “of some other, special kind of stuff.” Not only do naturalists of Dennett’s ilk seem incapable of forming a concept of the subjective and qualitative except in terms of some kind of stuff, but they are also blissfully unaware that the notion of *matter* as some kind of stuff went out of the same window as classical physics some eight decades ago.

Hick deals effectively enough with the neurophysiological fad of reductively explaining religious concepts and experiences, even though at times he concedes more than necessary to the believers in materialism. For instance, he writes that

different aspects of an object, such as its shape, its colour, its motion, are initially registered in different areas of the brain and then coordinated in another area to produce our actual conscious awareness of the object. (p. 59)

For one thing, it is factually incorrect that there is any one area of the brain where the different features of an object are, like Humpty Dumpty, put together again. At any rate, so far no such area has been discovered. For another, once Hick accepts that

subjective states or events are *produced* by the brain (rather than merely *correlated* with neurophysiological states or events), he needs to ask: “But how does the brain produce the moments of consciousness that constitute religious experience?” (*ibid.*) This is a pseudo-question. Like most pseudo-questions, it arises from a false assumption, in this case the assumption that the brain *produces* “our actual conscious awareness of the object” — forget about it *producing* “the moments of consciousness that constitute religious experience.”

Further on, in Chapter 7, Hick claims that “today we all — whatever our other differences — take it for granted that for every change taking place in consciousness there is a corresponding change taking place in some area of the brain. This applies as much to religious as to all other forms of experience” (p. 83). This can only be said by someone who hasn’t looked sufficiently closely at the depth and variety of religious experience, or who hasn’t come across people who beg to differ, or who willfully ignores the testimonies of such people. Hick may have a case in point with Andrew Newberg’s Buddhist monks in deep meditation, the emptying of whose minds correlates with increased activity in the “attention area” of their frontal lobes. But the correlation of an unstructured state of mind like the experience of *sunyata* or *nirvana* with an overall change in neural activity is anything but sufficient to support such a sweeping claim.

One of the spiritual giants whose testimony Hick ignores is Sri Aurobindo. Although born in India, Sri Aurobindo received his education in the West, where he imbibed the essence of the modern scientific attitude. Through an original synthesis of yogic methods he later developed psychic, intuitive, and spiritual faculties and realizations of the highest order, without any loss of intellectual clarity and capacity for systematic observation. In his major philosophical exploration, *The Life Divine* ♠ (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 2005), he wrote:

All who have at all sounded those abysses are agreed and bear witness to this fact that there are a series of subtler and subtler formulations of substance which escape from and go beyond the formula of the material universe. (p. 269)

If we scrutinise the intimations of supraphysical world-realities which we receive in our inner experience and compare with it the account of such intimations that has continued to come down to us from the beginnings of human knowledge, and if we attempt an interpretation and a summarised order, we shall find that what this inner experience most intimately conveys to us is the existence and action upon us of larger planes of being and consciousness than the purely material plane, with its restricted existence and action, of which we are aware in our narrow terrestrial formula. These domains of larger being ... subsist in themselves and have their own play and process and formulations of existence and experience, yet at the same time they penetrate and envelop the physical plane with their invisible presence and influences, and their powers seem to be here in the material world itself behind its action and objects. (*ibid.*, pp. 804–805)

These worlds and [their] beings may have nothing to do with ourselves and our life, they may exercise no action upon us; but often also they enter into secret communication with earth-existence, obey or embody and are the intermediaries and instruments of the cosmic powers and influences of which we have a subjective experience, or themselves act by their own initiation upon the terrestrial world’s life and motives and happenings.

It is possible to receive help or guidance or harm or misguidance from these beings; it is possible even to become subject to their influence, to be possessed by their invasion or domination, to be instrumentalised by them for their good or evil purpose. At times the progress of earthly life seems to be a vast field of battle between supraphysical Forces of either character, those that strive to uplift, encourage and illumine and those that strive to deflect, depress or prevent or even shatter our upward evolution or the soul's self-expression in the material universe. (*ibid.*, p. 806)

It is possible also to pass beyond a subjective contact or a subtle-sense perception and, in certain subliminal states of consciousness, to enter actually into other worlds and know something of their secrets. It is the more objective order of other-worldly experience that seized most the imagination of mankind in the past, but it was put by popular belief into a gross-objective statement which unduly assimilated these phenomena to those of the physical world with which we are familiar; for it is the normal tendency of our mind to turn everything into forms or symbols proper to its own kind and terms of experience. (*ibid.*, p. 807)

It is not possible for anyone who has had these contacts with any intimacy and not only by scattered abnormal accidents, to put them aside as mere superstition or hallucination; for they are too insistent, real, effective, organic in their pressure, too constantly confirmed by their action and results to be so flung aside. (*ibid.*)

We owe to Sri Aurobindo what is arguably the most comprehensive and meticulous cartography of these fields of subliminal experience — see “Sri Aurobindo on Subliminal Consciousness” in *AntiMatters* 1 (2) ♣. Like the word “telepathy,” the term “subliminal consciousness” was coined by F.W.H. Myers, a largely forgotten genius of scientific psychology. For Myers, too, our ordinary waking consciousness amounted to a relatively small selection of psychological elements and processes from a more extensive consciousness he called “the subliminal self.”

The operations of this *subliminal* self must be carefully distinguished from the *subconscious* operations of the embodied mind. While the latter do correlate with neurophysiological processes, the former do not. We can expect some correlation between neurophysiological goings-on and conscious *entry* into the larger planes of being and consciousness, but in view of the complexity and transpersonal reality of these planes it would be chimerical to expect correlations between neurophysiological goings-on and the *specifics* of such experiences.

F.W.H. Myers and his friend and colleague William James both advanced a “filter” theory of mind/brain relations. James spoke variously of the brain as straining, sifting, canalizing, limiting, and individualizing the larger mental reality behind the surface: “Matter is not that which produces Consciousness, but that which limits it, and confines its intensity within certain limits.” Henri Bergson likewise suggested that the function of the nervous system (which includes the brain and the sense organs) is in the main *eliminative*. The problem, for him, was not how perception (and memory) arises, but how it became limited, in the case of individuals, to their own experience, and furthermore limited to their own experience in the here and now. The senses were understood by him as a limitation on infinite perception, and therefore on infinite memory, confining us to a particular moving time and space.

In their outstanding work *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2006) — see this volume's extensive review in *AntiMatters* 1 (1) ♠ — Kelly *et al.* make the case that

by thinking of the brain as an organ which somehow constrains, regulates, restricts, limits, and enables or permits expression of the mind in its full generality, we can obtain an account of mind-brain relations which potentially reconciles Myers's theory of the Subliminal Self with the observed correlations between mind and brain.

In his review of Myers's magnum opus, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (Longmans, Green, London, 1903), James wrote:

Myers's theory, so far, is simple enough. It only postulates an indefinite inward extension of our being, cut off from common consciousness by a screen or diaphragm not absolutely impervious but liable to leakage and to occasional rupture. The "scientific" critic can only say it is a pity that so vast and vaguely defined a hypothesis should be reared upon a set of facts so few and so imperfectly ascertained.

A century later, as *Irreducible Mind* documents in extraordinary detail, it is no longer the case that the relevant facts are "so few" and that all or even most of them are "imperfectly ascertained." One apparent reason why Hick ignores this vast body of theory and experience is that he purposely avoids discussion of so-called "paranormal phenomena":

I do not omit a discussion of such phenomena here out of a lack of interest in parapsychology ... but because this is not where the science/religion debate is at present focussed, and I would like to contribute something to that debate. (p. 36)

The danger here is that along with the bathwater of parapsychology, Hick may throw out the baby of subliminal consciousness as well. This may not only deprive us of our experiential bridge to "the final focus of religious concern" (*ibid.*) but also make it all but impossible to properly understand what is going on in "ordinary" (supraliminal) experience. Quoting once more from Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine*:

[Man] is aware only of a small part of his own being: his surface mentality, his surface life, his surface physical being is all that he knows and he does not know even all of that; below is the occult surge of his subconscious and his subliminal mind, his subconscious and his subliminal life-impulses, his subconscious corporeality, all that large part of himself which he does not know and cannot govern, but which rather knows and governs him. For, existence and consciousness and force being one, we can only have some real power over so much of our existence as we are identified with by self-awareness; the rest must be governed by its own consciousness which is subliminal to our surface mind and life and body. And yet, the two being one movement and not two separate movements, the larger and more potent part of ourselves must govern and determine in the mass the smaller and less powerful; therefore we are governed by the subconscious and subliminal even in our conscious existence and in our very self-mastery and self-direction we are only instruments of what seems to us the Inconscient within us. (p. 212)

[I]f we pursue our observation far enough, we shall find that the cognition and will or impulsive force of the inner being really stand behind the whole conscious becoming; the latter represents only that part of its secret endeavour and achievement which rises successfully to the surface of our life. To know our inner being is the first step towards a

real self-knowledge. If we undertake this self-discovery and enlarge our knowledge of the subliminal self, so conceiving it as to include in it our lower subconscious and upper superconscious ends, we shall discover that it is really this which provides the whole material of our apparent being and that our perceptions, our memories, our effectuations of will and intelligence are only a selection from its perceptions, memories, activities and relations of will and intelligence; our very ego is only a minor and superficial formulation of its self-consciousness and self-experience. It is, as it were, the urgent sea out of which the waves of our conscious becoming arise. (p. 577)

Naturalists have found various ways of begging the crucial questions. On pp. 83–84, Hick quotes an instance of Paul Churchland’s way of arguing against the reliability of “our faculty of inner observation or introspection.” According to Churchland, the assumption that this faculty

reveals things as they really are in their innermost nature ... is suspect because we already know that our other forms of observation — sight, hearing, touch, and so on — do no such thing. The red surface of an apple does not *look* like a matrix of molecules reflecting photons at certain critical wavelengths, but that is what it is. The sound of a flute does not *sound* like a sinusoidal compression wave train in the atmosphere, but that is what it is. The warmth of the summer air does not *feel* like the mean kinetic energy of millions of tiny molecules, but that is what it is. If one’s pains and hopes and beliefs do not *introspectively* seem like electrochemical states in a neural network, that may be only because our faculty of introspection, like our other senses, is not sufficiently penetrating to reveal such hidden details.

Let’s separate the facts from the fiction. If I look at a red apple, two types of correlation are at work: (i) correlations between (a) molecular goings-on at the apple’s surface and (b) neural goings-on in my head; (ii) correlations between (b) neural goings-on in my head and (c) the quality-rich objects I perceive. While the latter are situated in *phenomenal* space, all but the latter are situated in *physical* space.

It is still widely taken for granted that the first type of correlation is amenable to explanation in terms of causal relations of the physical kind. Yet quantum mechanics has made it clear — or ought to have made it clear by now — that a causal relation of the physical kind is much like the color of the apple. While the latter exists in the eye of the beholder, the former exists in the mind of the conceiver. Quantum mechanics — the fundamental theoretical framework of contemporary physics — deals with probabilistic correlations rather than with causal relations. Causal concepts become applicable in the so-called “classical limit,” to the so-called “classical domain,” where the probabilistic correlations become quasi-deterministic. Quantum mechanics thereby explains why causal concepts work to the extent that they do — which at the scale of everyday human experience is considerable — but it cannot, on pain of creating a vicious circle, explain this (or anything else for that matter) in causal terms.

In the classical limit, the laws of quantum physics degenerate into the laws of classical physics. Something is lost — essentially the objective fuzziness that necessitates the use of genuinely probabilistic correlations — but at the same time something is gained: the applicability of causal concepts. A similar trade-off marks the transition from the world model of classical physics to the (human) phenomenal world. As causality becomes a useful concept in the transition from quantum to classical, so qualitative

concepts become applicable in the transition from physical to phenomenal. What is gained (if we confine ourselves to a single sensory modality) is the applicability of color concepts; what is lost is the possibility of describing physical reality below the resolution of electromagnetic frequencies associated with color vision. Thus instead of saying that causality and color are, respectively, in the mind of the conceiver and in the eye of the beholder, we may – with a better chance of being on the right track – say that causality and color are successively emergent.

What follows in any case is that causality – *especially* that of the physical kind – cannot do the explanatory work that naturalists like Churchland ill-advisedly entrust it with. Churchland is one of those relics of a bygone age that made the egregious category mistake of trying to “explain” the second type of correlation – that between (b) and (c) – by postulating numerical identity between (b) and (c). Hick:

The fallacious assumption ... is that conscious sensations, sensory qualia, are identical with the neural events which make them possible – thus begging the question whether consciousness and brain activity are or are not identical. This is surprising in a distinguished philosopher of mind and can, I suppose, only be accounted for by his strongly dogmatic naturalism. (pp. 84–85)

If Churchland were to take account of the fact that the first type of correlation – between (a) and (b) – is as mysterious as the second, inasmuch as physical causality isn't available to explain it, and if he were consistent, he would have to postulate numerical identity also between (a) and (b): the goings-on at the apple's molecular surface *literally are* goings-on in my brain. If this doesn't sound like an intelligible thesis, then neither does Churchland's identity theory. As philosopher Jonathan Lowe wrote, “I do not consider the thesis that mental states ‘just are’ physical states is even an intelligible one.”

Steven Rose, on the other hand, appears to find the thesis intelligible. On p. 87 Hick quotes him as saying:

It may be because I am philosophically tone-deaf, but I have never found this a very troubling question. It is surely clear that, granted enough knowledge of the visual system, we can in principle, and to some extent in practice, identify those neurons which become active when “red” is perceived. (Indeed in animal experiments such neurons have already been identified.) This pattern of neural activity translates into the seeing of red, and seeing red is simply what we call in mind language the phenomenon that we call in brain language the activity of a particular ensemble of neurons. This doesn't seem harder to understand than is the fact that what we call a particular small four-legged furry mammal *cat* in English and *gatto* in Italian; the two terms refer to the same object in different and coherent, but mutually translatable languages. No problem.

It is one thing to translate *cat* into *gatto* but quite another to translate a pattern of neural activity into the seeing of red. The fact that some people appear incapable of seeing the difference is itself a psychological problem of the first order. Hick's response is more restrained, inasmuch as he merely argues that

there is no way in which the idea that an electro-chemical event and a moment of consciousness are identical is falsifiable if false. The identity thesis is a theory stemming

from a presupposed naturalistic philosophy, not a scientific hypothesis such that we can even imagine what could constitute its falsification if it is false. (p. 88)

He hastens to add, though, that “[t]he only way in which mind/brain identity would become falsifiable is to recognise parapsychology as a genuine science” (*ibid.*) — which of course it is, scientific denials and the deliberate ignoring of substantial evidence notwithstanding. Once again: Hick’s policy of avoiding parapsychology plays into the hands of the believers in materialism.

It borders on the preposterous what naturalistic philosophers are willing to concede without admitting or realizing the bankruptcy of their worldview. Thus philosophers Michael Lockwood writes:

I count myself a materialist, in the sense that I take consciousness to be a species of brain activity. Having said that, however, it seems to me evident that no description of brain activity of the relevant kind, couched in the available language of physics, physiology, or functional or computational rules, is remotely capable of capturing what is distinctive about consciousness. So glaring, indeed, are the shortcomings of all the reductive programmes currently on offer, that I cannot believe that anyone with a philosophical training, looking dispassionately at these programmes, would take any of them seriously for a moment, were it not for a deep-seated conviction that current physical science has essentially got reality taped, and accordingly, *something* along the lines of what the reductionists are offering *must* be correct. To that extent, the very existence of consciousness seems to me to be a standing demonstration of the explanatory limitations of contemporary physical science.

While many philosophers of mind are convinced, “with a dogmatism that matches that of any medieval theologian” (p. 89), that consciousness is identical with cerebral activity, neuroscientists are less sure. There is now a widespread acceptance that the nature and status of consciousness remains a sheer mystery. Even V.S. Ramachandran admits that “despite two hundred years of research, the most basic questions about the human mind ... remain unanswered, as does the really big question: What is consciousness?” (*ibid.*) Steven Rose introduces his latest book *The 21st Century Brain* (Jonathan Cape, London, 2005) ↗ with these words: “I will try to explain why I think that as neuroscientists we don’t have anything very much useful to say about that particular Big C, and why therefore, as Wittgenstein said many years ago, we would do better to keep silence” (p. 90).

In Chapter 8, Hick disposes of a wider variety of naturalistic accounts of consciousness such as epiphenomenalism, the social account, the (neo-Darwinist) evolutionary account, the emergence account (which rests on physical analogies that are completely beside the point), the “spandrel” account, and AI, the latter actually providing a powerful argument against a naturalistic theory of consciousness.

The more successfully AI (artificial intelligence) demonstrates that computers, which totally lack consciousness, can model human intelligence, the more definitively it shows that the brain as a computer cannot explain the existence of consciousness. For they model human behaviour without being conscious. If we were essentially computers, consciousness would be a mysterious add-on with no function. If it does not exercise executive power, with conscious decisions affecting behaviour via the brain, conscious-

ness becomes functionless and inexplicable.... This is something that many naturalistic thinkers have yet to take on board. (p. 101)

Keeping the worst for last, the chapter concludes with some scalding remarks on philosopher's John Searle's kind of "neuromythology." (The term was coined by Raymond Tallis.) According to Searle, "[W]e know for a fact that all our mental processes are caused by neurobiological processes," for "consciousness is a biological feature of the brain in the same way that digestion is a biological feature of the digestive tract."

It is worth noting the unsatisfactory nature of some of Searle's use of language. He complains concerning some other philosophers of mind that they "fudge" by using vague phrases such as that neural activity "gives rise to" or "is the seat of" consciousness. But his own language is that "All forms of consciousness are caused by the behavior of neurons and are *realized* in the brain system"; "Conscious states are *realized* in the brain as features of the brain system". But is "realized" any less vague and fudged than the other metaphors? (Hick's italics, p. 104)

In Chapter 9, Hick prepares for his counter-proposal by stressing the extraordinary plasticity of the brain, which does not sit too well with naturalistic theories. In people born blind, for example, who have used Braille throughout their lives, those parts of the brain that normally process visual information are so modified as to process tactile information. When stroke victims are able to recover some of their lost abilities, this is done by a constant effort, guided by physiotherapists, which leads to the formation of new pathways in the brain compensating for the damaged ones. Many of the billions of synapses between neurons are changing in strength all the time, with innumerable connections being established or lapsing from moment to moment in the ordinary course of life. Here is how Rose (2005, 146–147) describes what happens when living brain tissue is grown in a culture:

[E]ven though mature neurons form a relatively stable, non-dividing cell population, their own shapes are not fixed but in constant flux. Under time-lapse the dendrites can be seen to grow and retract, to protrude spines and then to withdraw them again, to make and break synaptic contact. In one study, in the region of the mouse brain that encodes information from the animals' whiskers, 50 per cent of dendritic spines persist for only a few days. If this be architecture, it is a living, dynamic architecture in which the present forms and patterns can only be understood as a transient moment between past and future. (p.107)

Hick's alternative to both consciousness/brain identity and epiphenomenalism is a form a dualism: "consciousness, plus the unconscious mind, exists as a non-physical reality in continual interaction with the brain" (p. 111). This at once brings up the vexed question:

But how can mind/brain interaction occur? How can the physical affect the mental, and vice versa? ... How does this happen? We can only say that it happens in accordance with natural law. (*ibid.*)

Hick thus assumes that the commerce between mind and matter is governed by laws, and that these laws, like those of the *material* universe, are *natural* laws. Yet obviously they cannot be *mathematical* laws, for sensory qualia and the like offer no handles for

the formulation of mathematical relations that involve them. It therefore seems to me that by taking it for granted that mind-brain interactions are governed by natural laws, Hick again takes too much naturalist lore on board.

As for the question of how mind-matter interactions can occur, or how the physical and the mental can affect each other, it is not a bigger mystery than the question of how matter-matter interactions can occur, or how the physical can affect the physical. Classical physics provides algorithms for calculating the effects of matter here on matter there, *not* any kind of mechanism or process by which matter here acts on matter there. (While quantum physics lets us see how causal concepts become applicable in the classical limit, it also makes us see that causal stories are but *stories*. For in the limit in which quantum physics degenerates into classical physics, statistical correlations degenerate into deterministic ones, which makes it possible to use causal concepts, but they do not degenerate into physical mechanisms or processes. So causal stories featuring physical mechanism or processes should not be mistaken for physical *explanations*.)

Quantum physics itself provides algorithms for calculating the probabilities of possible measurement outcomes on the basis of actual measurement outcomes, *not* any kind of mechanism or process by which actual measurement outcomes determine the probabilities of possible measurement outcomes. So whatever may be held against dualism, it cannot be its failure to explain the causal commerce between mind and matter, for materialists are in no position to explain even the causal commerce between matter and matter.

In Chapter 10, Hick's proposal takes on a more definite shape:

The human body, controlled by the brain, functions as an immensely complex organism that acts and reacts in evolutionarily programmed ways, thus far as depicted by the mind/brain identity and epiphenomenalist theories. But it is inhabited — that really seems the most appropriate word — by a mental flow consisting of both consciousness and the much greater volume of mental activity occurring below the level of conscious awareness. It is a normal function of the brain to control the body as it negotiates its way from moment to moment within the physical environment, the conscious self simply going along with this as its outcomes emerge continuously into consciousness... (p. 116)

So my conclusion is that most of our living is governed by accumulated unconscious knowledge and experience, but that we do exercise conscious free will in more significant moments such as our business and professional judgements, when we make carefully considered moral decisions, in creative work in the arts and sciences, in aesthetic discriminations, and when we apply our minds to some interesting and complex or debateable issue. (p. 118)

To disabuse himself of the naïve idea that we do exercise conscious free will in “our business and professional judgements,” in “our carefully considered moral decisions,” or “when we apply our minds to some interesting and complex or debateable issue,”

Hick ought to talk to a psychotherapist or read psychiatrist M. Scott Peck's *The Road Less Traveled* ♣ (Touchstone, 2003).¹ It may not be amiss to re-quote Sri Aurobindo:

[Man] is aware only of a small part of his own being: his surface mentality, his surface life, his surface physical being is all that he knows and he does not know even all of that; below is the occult surge of his subconscious and his subliminal mind, his subconscious and his subliminal life-impulses, his subconscious corporeality, all that large part of himself which he does not know and cannot govern, but which rather knows and governs him. For, existence and consciousness and force being one, we can only have some real power over so much of our existence as we are identified with by self-awareness; the rest must be governed by its own consciousness which is subliminal to our surface mind and life and body. And yet, the two being one movement and not two separate movements, the larger and more potent part of ourselves must govern and determine in the mass the smaller and less powerful; therefore we are governed by the subconscious and subliminal even in our conscious existence and in our very self-mastery and self-direction we are only instruments of what seems to us the Inconscient within us.

Hick does much better when he criticizes Rita Carter's brazen claim that "future generations will take for granted that we are programmable machines just as we take for granted the fact that the earth is round."

Who are the "us" who know that free will is an illusion by which we cannot help being deluded? Who are the "we" who can accept rationally that the thoughts that we take to be rational are in fact mechanically determined? If this "we" is indeed deluded, how can it know that it is being deluded? If we are machines how can we accept *rationally*, rather than just being mechanistically caused to think, that we are machines? Carter inadvertently excludes herself from the domain of her statement — as do many other writers in this field.... As Epicurus said, some twenty-three centuries ago, "He who says that all things happen of necessity cannot criticize another who says that not all things happen of necessity. For he has to admit that the assertion also happens of necessity." Or as the biologist J. B. S. Haldane succinctly put it, "If my mental processes are determined wholly by the motions of atoms in my brain, I have no reason to suppose that my beliefs are true."... The question is whether those who are right in believing that they are totally determined can properly be said to know or rationally believe that they are right, or whether on the contrary if they are right they can never properly be said to know or rationally believe this? (pp. 119–120)

Suppose there is a free being, whose mode of knowing we will call A, and a determined being, whose mode of knowing we will call B.

Given this terminology, I suggest that those among us who believe that a total determinism obtains, and who of course believe that they are right in so believing, are in the impossible position of implicitly professing to function in mode A when, if they are right, they can in fact only be functioning in mode B, the determined mode. (p. 121)

¹ The author, Peck, who made millions by first writing and then lecturing about marital and parental love, is himself a case in point. At the time of an interview he gave for *Times Online* ♣, his first wife had left him and two of his three children no longer spoke to him.

Hick is certainly right in suggesting that this is a self-refuting position in the sense incurred, for example, by someone who says, “I do not exist”:

to assert in mode A — that is, as a self-critical evidence and reason-based judgement — that all judgements including this one can only be made in the physically determined mode B is to be in a state of performative self-contradiction. In other words, the argument between the determinist and the nondeterminist can only take place in what both assume to be mode A. But whereas the nondeterminist believes that what they are both assuming is true, the determinist believes that it is false, and is thus claiming in mode A to know that there is no mode A! (*ibid.*)

In Chapter 11, Hick adopts the epistemological stance of philosopher G. E. Moore, who insisted, as did his contemporary Ludwig Wittgenstein,

that the ordinary knowledge that we all share, and express in the ordinary language that we have in common, neither needs nor is able to be backed up by philosophical arguments....

It is therefore preferable in practice to mean by [knowledge] well-justified, or warranted, belief, even though this never amounts to the Platonic ideal of knowledge. This is the basis on which I am proceeding here....

Hume, standing on the shoulders of Locke and Berkeley, and supported by the common sense and ordinary language philosophers of the twentieth century, enables us to formulate the implicit principle by which we live all the time. This is that we accept what appears to be there as being there, except when we have reason to doubt it. (p. 129)

This implicit principle Hick calls “critical trust.” Now comes his point:

Why, then, should not this principle of critical trust apply to apparently cognitive experience generally, including religious experience? *Prima facie*, it should, for religious experience is as genuinely experience as sense perception. The naturalistic thinker, whose philosophy has no room for a transcendent divine reality, need not hesitate to accept this, for, according to our principle, it is rational to trust our experience *except* when we have a reason not to. (p. 131)

From a naturalistic point of view, there are of course good reasons not to trust religious experience. For one thing, whereas sense experience does appear to be universal, religious experience does not. For another, unlike religious experience, “sense experience is very largely uniform throughout the world and throughout the centuries” (p. 132). To disabuse himself of the notion of perceptual uniformity, Hick ought to take note of the pertinent insights of cultural historian and evolutionary philosopher Jean Gebser — see “Evolution of consciousness according to Jean Gebser” in *AntiMatters* 2 (3) ♣.

To defend that notion, Hick goes as far as to claim that “because we all live in the same world we are all compelled to experience it in basically the same way” (*ibid.*). The appropriate response to this claim was already made by Xenophanes, a philosopher who flourished in the 6th Century BCE: “Even if a man were to represent to himself the world exactly as it is, he could not discover that this is the case.” Hick appears to regard such a claim sometimes as warranted by critical trust (as in this particular case)

and sometimes as an instance of question begging. He doesn't always make it clear which standard applies where.

What I am criticizing here is that Hick again weakens his position by taking too much naturalist lore on board. If a non-materialist believes that "[t]he object of human sense experience through the ages and around the globe is the same physical world" (*ibid.*), he or she has ceded most of the ground on which materialism is easily refuted.

Epistemologists, we are told in Chapter 12, "distinguish three main positions (with various versions within each) concerning the relation between our conscious experience of the world and the world of which we are conscious." (p. 137) The first position is naïve realism. The second is

the "idealism" which holds that the perceived world exists only in our consciousness, or rather in *my* consciousness since the other people with whom I interact are also part of my perceived world... The third, middle, position is critical realism. (pp. 137–138)

The term "critical realism" was coined by American philosophers in the twentieth century to signify a realist affirmation of a world while recognizing the creative contribution of the mind to our awareness of that world. While this is now the default position in cognitive psychology and the sociology of knowledge, it contains the same element of blind faith that led Kant's idealistic successors to abandon his "world in itself" as an experientially inaccessible and explanatorily superfluous relic of Cartesianism. And it is essentially as such a relic that Hick treats what he just called "[t]he object of human sense experience through the ages and around the globe" when he contradicts Wittgenstein's view that "[o]ne doesn't 'take' what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery." Wittgenstein had argued that while one may say, "I see this (e.g., Jastrow's 'duck-rabbit') as a duck," one does not say, "I see this (object on the table) as cutlery," because that is the only way we can see it. For Hick, on the contrary,

Not only seeing knives and forks, etc., ... but *all* our conscious experience is experiencing-as, using our conceptual resources to find meaning in the world as it presents itself to us. (p. 140)

With this, what is left of the world *as it is in itself* has become as tenuous as the smile of the Cheshire cat. By his narrow view of idealism, which could be called *naïve* idealism, Hick deprives himself of what seems to me to be the most promising position, which could be called *critical* idealism. While a critical idealism would hold that the world exists only in consciousness, it would not identify the consciousness in which the world exists with our consciousness or with my consciousness. Critical realism effectively posits a unitary substance by which the world exists — an Aristotelian substance that need not do more work than warrant the consciousness-independent existence of the singular and the particular. By the same token, critical idealism would effectively posit a unitary conscious self *for* which the world exists.

If the critical realist is at liberty to hold that a multitude of conscious selves has emerged in a world that existed initially, and continues to exist intrinsically, out of relation to consciousness, the critical idealist is at liberty to hold that a multitude of selves has emerged from a single self, by a multiple localization of this single self

within the content of its own consciousness. The difference between the two positions is that whereas the critical realist's postulate of a world existing initially and intrinsically out of relation to consciousness is not verifiable by any kind of experience, the critical idealist's postulate that the world existed initially and exists intrinsically in consciousness or for a conscious self is verifiable by mystical experience.

Many of Hick's valuable insights in the remainder of the text make a good deal more sense in the context of a critical idealism than they do in the context of his critical realism. Says he,

It is the teaching of each of the world faiths that the divine reality does not force itself upon us, but leaves space for an uncompelled response on our part. On the one hand, there is an aspect or dimension of our nature that is inherently capable of responding.... But, on the other hand, the Transcendent is only apprehended through an uncompelled exercise of this capacity. For the Ultimate exists at an epistemic distance from us which makes possible the (limited) human autonomy in virtue of which we exist as responsible individual persons. Consider this first in the case of the monotheisms. If we are freely to come to God, God must be initially at a distance from us — not a spatial distance but a distance in the dimension of awareness. (p. 143)

Attempting to put in a nutshell the metaphysical positioning system I myself find the most satisfying, I would say (so far in unison with Hick) that there is an Ultimate Reality (UR, which also happens to be a German prefix meaning "original"). In keeping with the Vedanta of the Upanishads (as well as its contemporary development due to Sri Aurobindo), I would describe its relation to the world as having four aspects: it is the substance that constitutes the world; it is the consciousness that contains the world; it is the force that shapes the world; and it is the infinite delight that expresses and experiences itself in the world.

The reason why none of this is obvious is that UR is "playing Houdini," enchaining itself as much as divinely possible, challenging itself to escape, to re-discover and re-affirm itself and its powers in conditions which seem to contradict its fundamental relations to the world, but which may well be the very conditions that lend the greatest possible stability and concreteness to a progressive self-realization that may go on forever. What we call "evolution" is essentially nothing but this progressive re-discovery and re-affirmation.

Seen in this light, there obviously is an aspect of our nature that is inherently capable of responding to UR, for UR is this aspect's own transcendent reality. It is also clear that UR's adventure of evolution must begin with a maximal epistemic distance between the immanent divine emerging from its "involution" in matter and the transcendent divine "descending" or "pouring itself" into the mould of matter so as to transform it. In Indian psychology this epistemic distance is known as *avidya*, the (effectively) separate self's ignorance of its essential identity with UR. Finally it is clear that this adventure entails the experience of freedom for the evolving consciousness, and hence its freedom from any sense of compulsion. But note that it is not a question here of freedom *per se* but merely of the *experience* of freedom. For, as Sri Aurobindo once wrote (*The Synthesis of Yoga* ♠, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1999, p. 53), "He who chooses the Infinite has been chosen by the Infinite."

In the immediately following passage, however, Hick seems to be led astray by his theistic (God-vs-Nature) dualism:

If in becoming conscious we found ourselves in the immediate presence of a God of infinite knowledge and power, infinite goodness and love, but also of justice and righteousness, knowing us through and through so that no act or thought or emotion or imagination or fantasy of ours is hidden from him/her, we would have no real moral freedom in relation to the deity. In order to give us that freedom God must “stand back” as, in Martin Luther’s famous phrase, *deus absconditus*, the hidden God. (p. 143)

What would happen if “we found ourselves in the immediate presence of a God of infinite knowledge and power, infinite goodness and love” is that we would at the same time realize our identity with this God. If UR “stands back” from itself, it is to give itself the freedom to find itself — to make possible this cycle of involution and evolution, which slowly but inevitably leads to a bliss of union that culminates in identity. By the time this union is achieved, the concepts of justice, righteousness, and *moral* freedom have long been transcended, for they presuppose a separateness that has ceased to exist.

Here is how Sri Aurobindo summed up the whole shebang (*Essays in Philosophy and Yoga*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1998, pp. 203–204):

What then was the commencement of the whole matter? Existence that multiplied itself for sheer delight of being and plunged into numberless trillions of forms so that it might find itself innumerably.

And what is the middle? Division that strives towards a multiple unity, ignorance that labours towards a flood of varied light, pain that travails towards the touch of an unimaginable ecstasy. For all these things are dark figures and perverse vibrations.

And what is the end of the whole matter? As if honey could taste itself and all its drops together and all its drops could taste each other and each the whole honeycomb as itself, so should the end be with God and the soul of man and the universe.

Hick questions accounts of mystical union and identity “when taken literally” because, he says,

to lose one’s individual identity completely, like a drop becoming part of the ocean — a familiar simile in mystic literature — would be to lose the individual continuity of consciousness and memory in virtue of which the mystic would later be able to report the experience. How could someone remember being in a state in which he or she no longer existed as a distinct individual?... I suggest, then, that the unitive language of Advaita Vedanta is not to be construed literally, as reporting a total extinction of the individual memory-bearing consciousness, but metaphorically, as expressing a usually brief but vivid awareness of the limitless reality in which we are rooted, an awareness whose quality is a profound *ananda*, happiness, and whose continuing effect is a considerable degree of liberation from the domination of the ego. (pp. 22–23)

Sri Aurobindo made it clear enough that his summary description of “the end of the matter” was metaphorical — “*as if*.” In fact, a *metaphysical* statement that is *literally* true would be considered by him a contradiction in terms. “When Wisdom comes,” he wrote (*Essays Divine and Human*, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, Pondicherry, 1997, p. 431), “her first lesson is, ‘There is no such thing as knowledge; there are only aperçus of the

Infinite Deity’.” And isn’t this the position to which Hick’s own critical realism inevitably leads? Once critique of naïve realism has begun, it can only end with Hick’s own conclusion that “*all* our conscious experience is experiencing-as.” In other words, all experience is experience of we know not what as something we think we know.

On the other hand, the question posed by Hick — “How could someone remember being in a state in which he or she no longer existed as a distinct individual?” — is readily answered. The answer is that he or she did indeed continue to exist as an individuation of the One. What happened is that he or she lost sight of being an *individuation* of the One and became aware instead of being an individuation of the *One*.

The chapter’s concluding words are again beyond dispute:

It is entirely reasonable, rational, sane, for those who participate in what is apparently an awareness of the Transcendent to believe, and to base their lives on the belief, that in living as physical beings within the natural world we are at the same time living in relation to a transcendent-and-immanent reality whose presence changes the meaning for us of everything that we do and that happens to us. (p. 145)

In the thirteenth chapter Hick poses the following question: “Trying to look objectively at the world religions as historical entities, is it possible to rank them in terms of their beneficial or harmful effects on the human community?” He believes, rightly, “that the factors involved are so complex, and often incommensurable, that no overall ranking is realistically possible” (p. 148). I would add that the question of what should be considered beneficial and what harmful is not nearly as unproblematic as Hick makes it seem throughout this book.

The relevant good is not an ethical good. In the Vedantic scheme of things, or according to critical idealism if you wish, ethics or morality belongs to an evolutionary stage in which the nature, purpose, and goal of UR’s adventure of evolution are still unrecognized. The relevant good comes into view when they *are* recognized.

It might be proposed that the relevant good must be such as to lead via the shortest route to the ultimate goal of the evolutionary *nisus*. But how could such a proposal be cashed out? How does one measure the lengths of different routes in order to find the shortest? How do the experiences, obstacles, challenges, and opportunities that we encounter on the way, enter into the equation? And lastly, what sense would it make to ask these questions if it turned out (as I think it will) that the ultimate goal lies outside all present maps?

More tractable seems the question that arises from the following observation:

If religious experience is ... accepted as a genuine awareness of reality beyond as well as within us, we have to face the fact that it reports different and incompatible transcendent realities, giving rise to different and incompatible belief-systems. (p. 149)

The first potential incompatibility noted by Hick is “that between belief-systems in which the Transcendent is an infinite Person and those in which it is a transcategorical (or ineffable) Reality beyond the distinction between the personal and the impersonal” (*ibid.*). For critical idealism, this dual aspect of the relation between UR and its manifestation, far from being an incompatibility, is a matter of course. As said, UR

relates to the world not only as the substance that constitutes it (and thus impersonally) but also as the consciousness that contains it (and thus personally).

Hick finds the key to resolving the question arising from the incompatibility of belief systems in a common element of at least the post-axial religions — the element of “salvation.” While I dislike the term — from whom or from what does UR need to be saved? — the definition offered by Hick makes it acceptable:

each of the post-axial religions acknowledges, indeed stresses, our human finitude, suffering, mortality, and our inveterate tendency to injure one another both individually and collectively; and each affirms the real possibility and availability of a limitlessly better existence, to which it shows the way. In the generic sense of the word that I am using, each offers salvation. (p. 150)

Salvation, then, is simply the evolving consciousness’ overcoming of its present limitations and realizing of its infinite potential for growth.

Having demonstrated, in the remainder of Chapter 13, the inadequacy of both exclusivism and inclusivism with respect to the plurality of faiths, Hick devotes the fourteenth chapter to an initial discussion of religious pluralism, paying particular attention to the “multiple aspect pluralism” of Peter Byrne. Hick’s own brand of religious pluralism is presented in Chapters 15 and 16. Hick insists, first of all, on the need to recognize a Transcendent whose

inner nature is beyond human description or comprehension. In traditional theological language it is ineffable or, as I would rather say, transcategorical, beyond the scope of our human concepts. It is to this ultimate transcategorical reality that the religions are oriented and to which they are human responses. (p. 163)

Correspondingly, there is

an inbuilt human capacity to be aware of the universal presence of the Transcendent, in virtue of its immanence within our own nature — indeed according to some traditions an inner unity with the Transcendent — which is, however, always manifested in particular culturally and historically conditioned ways. (p. 164)

The distinction between the ineffable Transcendent and its culturally and historically conditioned manifestations — Eckhart’s distinction between God and the Godhead — is central to Hick’s thesis. It brings us face to face with “a serious problem”: On the one hand, there are the doctrines of the Church. On the other, Christian testimonies to God’s ineffability abound (pp. 165–166):

[God is] incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words. (Gregory of Nyssa)

God transcends even the mind. (Augustine)

The divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. (Thomas Aquinas)

God is without name, for no one can comprehend anything about him. (Meister Eckhart)

God is, and yet He is neither this nor that which the creature, as creature, can perceive, name, conceive or express. (*Theologia Germanica*)

The names which are attributed to God are taken from creatures, since he in himself is ineffable and beyond everything that can be named or spoken. (Nicholas of Cusa)

To know God as he is in himself ... is impossible to anyone save God. (*The Cloud of Unknowing*)

The problem – “more acute for Christianity than for the other religions because of its heavier doctrinal superstructure” (p. 166) and “its authoritative enforcement of orthodoxy” (p. 174) – is that

the theologians who declare God’s ultimate nature to be beyond human description or comprehension nevertheless profess to know that this same God is ultimately triune, consisting of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three “persons” in one and one in three, the second of whom became incarnate on earth as Jesus of Nazareth. Thus the developed system of Christian doctrine contradicts the principle of divine ineffability. (p. 166)

The obvious solution, according to Hick, “is to see theological formulations, as distinguished from historical statements, as couched in symbolic or metaphorical language” (p. 167).

The outcome, then, seems to be that the categories which in theology and religious practice we apply to the objects of worship do not apply to the Transcendent either positively or negatively.... The Ultimate in itself cannot be said to be either personal or impersonal, good or bad, loving or hating, purposive or not purposive, etc.

But such attributes *do* apply to the manifestations of the ineffable transcendent reality to humanity, to the personal deities and non-personal “absolutes” which are the definable objects of religious worship, meditation and much mystical experience. These are products of the universal presence of the Transcendent both beyond us and in the depths of our being, together with the human images and concepts that our creative imagination and conceptualising powers make possible. (p. 169)

As Eckhart said pointedly,

before there were creatures, God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was. When creatures came to be and took on creaturely being, then God was no longer God as he is in himself, but god as he is with his creatures. (pp. 169–170)

Ibn al-'Arabi expressed much the same idea and also touched on the exclusivism and sectarianism to which conflicting metaphors (when not recognized as metaphors) tend to give rise:

In general, most men have, perforce, an individual concept of their Lord, which they ascribe to Him and in which they seek Him. So long as the Reality is presented to them according to it they recognize Him and affirm him, whereas if presented in another form, they deny Him, flee from Him and treat Him improperly, while at the same time imagining they are acting toward Him fittingly. One who believes [in the ordinary way] believes only in the deity he has created for himself, since a deity in “belief” is a [mental] construction. (p. 170)

While there is much truth in Hick’s position that “the worshipped deities do not exist apart from the community that worships them” (p. 169), a simple dichotomization of the spiritual into an ineffable Transcendent and its culturally and historically conditioned manifestations in the human mind is untenable. By no means all

manifestations of the Transcendent are culturally or historically conditioned. There are manifestations of the Transcendent on supraphysical planes of existence, which do not depend on any human or material conditions, even though these manifestations themselves are reflected in the evolving mind in culturally and historically conditioned ways. This complex of questions has been extensively discussed by Sri Aurobindo. Thus in a chapter titled “The order of the worlds” he wrote that

as it grows, man’s mind enters into relation with new ranges of being and consciousness not at all created by him, new to him, already pre-existent in the All-Existence. In his increasing inner experience he opens up new planes of being in himself; as the secret centres of his consciousness dissolve their knots, he becomes able through them to conceive of those larger realms, to receive direct influences from them, to enter into them, to image them in his terrestrial mind and inner sense. He does create images, symbol-forms, reflective shapes of them with which his mind can deal; in this sense only he creates the Divine Image that he worships, creates the forms of the gods, creates new planes and worlds within him, and through these images the real worlds and powers that overtop our existence are able to take possession of the consciousness in the physical world, to pour into it their potencies, to transform it with the light of their higher being. But all this is not a creation of the higher worlds of being; it is a revelation of them to the consciousness of the soul on the material plane as it develops out of the Nescience. It is a creation of their forms here by a reception of their powers; there is an enlargement of our subjective life on this plane by the discovery of its true relation with higher planes of its own being from which it was separated by the veil of the material Nescience. This veil exists because the soul in the body has put behind it these greater possibilities in order that it might concentrate exclusively its consciousness and force upon its primary work in this physical world of being; but that primary work can have a sequel only by the veil being at least partially lifted or else made penetrable so that the higher planes of mind, life and spirit may pour their significances into human existence. (*The Life Divine*, pp. 808–809)

According to Hick,

the “great world faiths” are, so far as we can tell, equally effective contexts of the salvific transformation from natural self-centredness to a new orientation centred in the Transcendent; ... to account for this we should postulate an ultimate ineffable reality which is differently conceived, and hence differently experienced, within the different traditions. (172)

This again is too simplistic an account of the matter. While the general purpose of religion appears well characterized as a transformation from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centered in the Transcendent, one must look beyond the culturally and historically conditioned manifestations of the Divine. What one discovers as a result is that the cultural and historical conditions are themselves manifestations of the Divine. Their terrestrial manifestation is mediated by supraphysical manifestations which, instead of being determined by conditions on Earth, contribute to determine the conditions on Earth. This also applies, as a matter of course, to the colorful plurality of existing religions. There is much in them that is human and even, with Nietzsche, “all too human,” but at their origin they too are supraphysical manifestations of the Divine. Rather than being determined by terrestrial conditions, they contribute to determine them.

A frequent criticism of Hick's religious pluralism is that, in believing it, "the transformational power of [the] religious tradition would be undermined for most ordinary believers," as Kelly J. Clark put it in a 1997 essay. While this might have been the case in the past, by now the exclusivism that comforts the "ordinary believer" has passed its expiration date. The Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Centuries and the scientific discoveries of the 19th "began the still-continuing decline of traditionally orthodox belief and practice. The time is now ripe for the further step, *perhaps a kill-or-cure for traditional Christianity*, of accepting that it is one among other equally salvific traditions" (p. 175, emphasis added).

In Chapter 17, Hick notes that it is "an essential aspect of each faith that the salvific path leads beyond this life" — by which he means, I hope, "beyond life as it is at present" rather than "beyond life on Earth."

The different traditions offer different pictures, but for all of them the present life is part of a cosmic process leading finally to a limitlessly good conclusion. In the famous words of the English mystic Lady Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well". (p. 182)

Such brazen optimism immediately raises questions about the past and the present, in which "all manner of thing" didn't and still doesn't seem to be all that well.

Suppose there is a car crash and three of the people involved are killed but one survives and sincerely thanks God for this deliverance: God has protected her. This implies not only that God decided to save her but also that God decided not to save the others. It also implies that God could miraculously intervene to abolish poverty, disease, wars, injustices and disasters of every kind, but prefers not to do so. This is the ancient theological problem of evil: If God is omnipotent he must be able to abolish all evil; if he is all good he must want to abolish all evil; but evil exists; therefore he is either not omnipotent or not all good. Theodicies have been developed along both lines, and also more complex theories which avoid this dilemma. But they all presuppose the personal God of traditional monotheism. (p. 185)

This is the nub of the matter. As Sri Aurobindo wrote,

All theistic explanations of existence starting from an extra-cosmic Deity stumble over this difficulty and can only evade it; it would disappear only if the Creator were, even though exceeding the creation, yet immanent in it, himself in some sort both the player and the play, an Infinite casting infinite possibilities into the form of an evolutionary cosmic order. (*The Life Divine*, p. 317)

On no theory of an extra-cosmic moral God, can evil and suffering be explained,— the creation of evil and suffering,— except by an unsatisfactory subterfuge which avoids the question at issue instead of answering it or a plain or implied Manicheanism which practically annuls the Godhead in attempting to justify its ways or excuse its works. But such a God is not the Vedantic Sachchidananda. Sachchidananda of the Vedanta is one existence without a second; all that is, is He. If then evil and suffering exist, it is He that bears the evil and suffering in the creature in whom He has embodied Himself. The problem then changes entirely. The question is no longer how came God to create for His creatures a suffering and evil of which He is Himself incapable and therefore immune, but how came the sole and infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss to admit into itself that which is not bliss, that which seems to be its positive negation. . . .

Still the ethical difficulty may be brought back in a modified form; All-Delight being necessarily all-good and all-love, how can evil and suffering exist in Sachchidananda, since he is not mechanical existence, but free and conscious being, free to condemn and reject evil and suffering? We have to recognise that the issue so stated is also a false issue because it applies the terms of a partial statement as if they were applicable to the whole. For the ideas of good and of love which we thus bring into the concept of the All-Delight spring from a dualistic and divisional conception of things; they are based entirely on the relations between creature and creature, yet we persist in applying them to a problem which starts, on the contrary, from the assumption of One who is all. We have to see first how the problem appears or how it can be solved in its original purity, on the basis of unity in difference; only then can we safely deal with its parts and its developments, such as the relations between creature and creature on the basis of division and duality. (*ibid.*, pp. 102–103)

This again chimes in with an analogy by Hick, “which illustrates the way in which awareness of our supra-natural environment changes our awareness of our natural environment and the way in which we live in it” (p. 189).

Imagine that I enter a large room in a strange building and find myself, to my consternation, in a meeting of a militant secret society. Many of the members are armed, and everyone takes me to be a fellow member. I judge it expedient to go along with this assumption. Subtle and ruthless plans are laid for the violent overthrow of the constitution. The whole situation is alarming in the extreme, and I am in a state of acute fear. Then I suddenly notice that behind me there is a gallery with silently whirring cameras, and I realise that I have walked by accident onto the set of a film. This realisation consists in a radical change in my interpretation of the situation, my understanding of its meaning, and hence of how to behave within it – in this case, ceasing to be afraid but joining in the pretence and not interrupting the proceedings. Until now I had automatically interpreted it as a very dangerous real-life situation; but now I am instead interested to be part, unintentionally, in the shooting of a film. But there is no corresponding change in the course of events. The meeting and the plotting and the blood-thirsty rhetoric go on as before. But the same empirical situation now has a quite different meaning for me, radically changing my attitude to it and the range of ways in which I would behave in response to the various ways it might develop.... This is the strange room into which we walk, unintentionally, at birth. (pp. 189–190)

Another analogy would be the *Matrix*-like discovery that one is living in a virtual reality. Taking account of the previously unrecognized “supra-virtual” reality radically changes one’s experience of the virtual one. By the same token, taking account of the natural world’s supra-natural environment leads to a total interpretation that differs radically from the previous interpretation, now known to be incomplete and therefore wrong. According to Hick,

the religious total interpretation is that the ultimate reality undergirding it is, in our human terms, good or loving, so that in Lady Julian’s words “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.” (p. 190)

Hick’s “religious total interpretation,” however, isn’t as total as it could be, for it still suffers from the “dualistic and divisional conception of things” mentioned by Sri Aurobindo, inasmuch as it adopts the fragmented perspective of the Many rather than the integral perspective of the One.

The final chapter inquires into the mystery of death. While conceding that the numerous cases of children that apparently remember their previous lives are impressive (particularly the cases that were carefully investigated by Ian Stevenson), Hick ends up stating that “I am not myself confident that the reported memories are indeed of previous lives” (p. 195). Hick’s skepticism in this regard seems well-advised. He nevertheless arrives at the conclusion that without the element of reincarnation no religious or spiritual worldview can be complete. Here too I cannot but agree with him.

What we should take from Hinduism and Buddhism, I suggest, is the thought that in the unconscious depth of the present personality there is a deeper moral/spiritual essence which can survive bodily death and be re-embodied in a new conscious personality – or indeed in a series of new conscious personalities. (p. 196)

The only kind of existence that we can imagine which makes [continued moral and spiritual growth] possible is a further finite life, bounded by birth and death, because it is the pressure of these boundaries that makes time precious and development possible. But one more such life will not be enough for most of us, hence the idea of many future, and probably past, lives. This option permits the cosmic optimism that through a series of lives, in which any moral/spiritual maturing achieved in one is carried forward to the next, human existence may eventually be perfected. (p. 198)

The cosmic optimism of the religions anticipates a final end state that has a value in itself so great as to make worthwhile the many lives that have led to it... Such cosmic optimism depends on the principle that the significance of our present actions and reactions is created by the larger pattern of our lives to which they contribute as this develops over the years... [T]he meaning or significance of what we do now is largely determined by what comes out of it in the future. We can project this principle onto a much larger scale in which a present human life receives its ultimate meaning from the future lives to which it leads, and the ultimate future to which they all lead. There are, to use visual imagery, widening circles of meaning, from the often intense immediate meaning inherent in each present moment of experience, to that same moment as it takes its place in the larger context of a further, say, fifteen years of living, to the further, sometimes different, meaning that it takes on after another period of years, and so on as our life develops, to its meaning far beyond this life in the light of the all-encompassing ultimate future...

My proposal, then, is to see our present life as contributing something to a cumulative process which continues through many more impermanent selves... Our present lives thus have profound meaning, contributing something positive or negative, by advancing or retarding the succession of future selves who will continue the same spiritual project, eventually to its completion. (pp. 199–200)

I must congratulate Hick for his profound insights, which set him well apart from most of today’s theologians and philosophers of religion.