

Why John Hick cannot, and should not, stay out of the jam pot

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Abstract: John Hick uses a distinction between the formal and the substantial properties of the Real *an sich*, the noumenal God. Hick claims that substantial properties, such as ‘being good’ or ‘being personal’, cannot be ascribed to the Real *an sich*. On the other hand, according to Hick, formal properties – such as ‘being such that none of our concepts apply’ – can be predicated of the Real *an sich*. I argue, first of all, that many of the properties Hick ascribes to the Real *an sich* are hard to interpret as anything but substantial, unless we adopt a highly arbitrary substantial/formal distinction. Secondly, I argue that it is never possible to ascribe only formal properties to the Real *an sich*, since the correct framing and application of formal properties involves a prior knowledge of some substantial properties. I show that the predication of formal properties involves having *more* knowledge than we need for the application of substantial properties. I conclude that Hick’s practice is better than his theory, and that by dispensing with the formal/substantial distinction, he would enable his doctrine of God to stand on more respectable and theological grounds.

Using formal properties to stay out of the jam pot

Hick’s Kantian-style thought is famously caught in an awkward tension. On the one hand, God is the noumenal Real *an sich*, about which nothing can be said. On the other hand, the philosophical theologian who wishes to make use of this notion must always stick her ‘fingers in the jam pot’,¹ in that she must at the same time make some statements concerning the Real *an sich*, for instance that the Real *an sich* is such that ‘nothing can be said about it’. Even if we allow Hick’s transgression into the jam pot, there is a question mark over the possibility of making successful reference when the ‘means of referring’ to the Real *an sich* (its partial and aspectival self-revelation in different world faiths) ‘seem too remote from the reality referred to to make reference successful’.²

Hick shows himself to be aware of some of the difficulties which his position faces. Hick considers two challenges to his claim that God, as the Real *an sich*, is unknowable: ‘(1) Does it make sense to say of X that our concepts do not apply

to it? and (2) If this does (though in a qualified formulation) make sense, what reason could we have to affirm it?'.³

Hick is aware that:

... it would not make sense to say of X that *none* of our concepts apply to it. For it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of 'being able to be referred to'. Further, the property of 'being such that our concepts do not apply to it' cannot, without self-contradiction, include itself.⁴

To deal with this Hick distinguishes between substantial and formal properties. Substantial properties, which cannot be applied to God, are properties such as 'being good', 'being powerful' and 'having knowledge'.⁵ Formal properties are 'logically generated properties such as "being a referent of a term" and "being such that our substantial concepts do not apply"'.⁶ Hick contends that it makes perfectly good sense to say that God has the 'formal' property that 'substantial characteristics do not apply to God in God's self-existent being, beyond the range of human experience'.⁷

To avoid sticking his fingers in the jam pot, Hick needs to use only formal 'logically generated' concepts of the noumenal Real. Because 'none of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperientable ground of that realm' we can only make 'certain purely formal statements about the postulated Real in itself'.⁸

In order not to fall to the 'fingers-in-the-jam-pot-objection' Hick must only use 'formal statements' properties when talking about God. It is easy to show that Hick immediately violates this when he comments in almost the next line that: 'the noumenal Real is such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena'.⁹

It is just not clear how 'being such as to be authentically experienced as a range of both theistic and non-theistic phenomena' is a purely formal property, rather than a substantial one. He tries to observe the conceptual rules he has set up by adding that: 'we cannot, as we have seen, say that the Real *an sich* has the characteristics displayed by its manifestations, such as (in the case of the Heavenly Father) love and justice or (in the case of *brahman*) consciousness and bliss'.¹⁰

But Hick just cannot stay out of the jam pot. He finishes his thought with the disastrous:

But it (the Real *an sich*) is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics As the noumenal ground of these and other modes of experience, and yet transcending all of them, the Real is so rich in content that it can only be finitely experienced in the various partial and inadequate ways which the history of religions describes.¹¹

So the Real *an sich* has the properties of being 'authentically manifested within human experience',¹² of being 'the noumenal ground of' experiences of the

brahman and Christ, as well as being ‘rich in content’ and ‘transcending all other modes of experience’. Now either one of two things is going on here. Either Hick is making the sort of substantial claims about God which on his own account are just impossible, and so Hick is caught with his fingers in the jam pot. Or Hick considers the statements listed above to be ‘purely formal’ and so legitimately applied to the noumenal Real *an sich*. But if the class of ‘purely formal statements’ is so wide and permissive, I can see no reason to exclude properties such as ‘being good’ and ‘being exclusively revealed in Christ’. After all the difference between ‘being authentically revealed in different human religious experiences’ and ‘being exclusively revealed in Christ’ seems not to be about the difference between formal and substantial statements; both statements look equally formal or substantial (depending on how one carves up these categories), the difference being one of substantial theological and metaphysical opinion.

It begins to look suspiciously as if Hick places those substantial statements about God with which he agrees into the ‘purely formal’ (i.e. correct) class, and those substantial statements about God with which he disagrees into the ‘substantial’ (i.e. incorrect) class. Now Hick is entitled to his substantial views on God, but it is unacceptable for him to make them unassailable by articulating them in terms of a distinction (formal and substantial) which he claims to be independent of his intuitions about God. So Hick is either inconsistent (openly speaking substantially about God), or inconsistent (speaking substantially about God without admitting it, and without allowing others to do so). Hick, in any case, is inconsistent.

The problems that we have encountered so far are serious enough. The criticism levelled is that Hick sets up a distinction (formal/substantial), with a prohibition against speaking substantially about God, which he is unable to obey himself. The implication might be that a more cautious person could respect this prohibition, and make only formal statements about God. I consider that this implication should be eliminated. I think that the formal/substantial distinction is so problematic that there is no possibility of ever making ‘purely formal statements about God’.

Formal properties without substantial properties?

Restricting what we can say of God to ‘purely formal properties’ begs some sort of definition, or criteria for being a ‘purely formal property’, rather than a ‘substantial property’. The closest Hick comes to defining what it is to be a ‘purely formal property’ is to call them ‘logically generated properties’.¹³ Apart from this clue, he just provides us with a list of examples:¹⁴

<i>Substantial</i>	<i>Formal</i>
‘being good’	‘being a referent of a term’

‘being powerful’ ‘being such that our substantial concepts do
not apply’
‘having knowledge’

William Rowe surmises from these examples that Hick intends a ‘formal property’ to be some ‘abstract characteristic the Real has’, and a substantial property to be ‘a property that belongs essentially to its (the Real’s) nature’.¹⁵ Although there is nothing wrong as such with this elucidation, I find it less than useful in that the terms ‘abstract’ and ‘essential’ are at least as mysterious as the terms ‘formal’ and ‘substantial’.

I suggest that a more illuminating analysis of these terms might be that formal properties are ones which determine directly and solely what *other* properties can (or cannot) be ascribed to the subject, whereas the substantial properties have no direct bearing on what other properties can be ascribed to the subject. Although it may be possible with substantial properties to work out that some properties must co-instantiate (such as omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipotence), formal properties are distinct in that *the only information that they convey concerns which other properties can (or cannot) be ascribed to the subject*. An example of a formal property might be the property which numerals have such that ‘it is inappropriate to predicate colour properties of them’, whilst a substantial property of a particular number might be that ‘it is a prime number’.

Although Hick calls these formal properties ‘logically generated’ there is nothing particularly ‘logical’ about them. That God is such that ‘none of our substantial concepts apply’ is not analytic on any non-controversial understanding of the intension of the ‘God’ concept. If there are really ‘logical’ grounds which generate these formal properties, Hick needs to spell them out. The prospects for this sort of activity are not good, though. The only way that Hick could unravel his formal properties from an analysis of the ‘God’ concept would be in some sense to stipulate that God was by definition such that ‘none of our substantial concepts apply’. Such a stipulation would just be a restatement of his controversial view, rather than a support for it.

Of course, Hick might not restrict himself to logical analysis to generate his formal properties. He could turn to other considerations to support his formal properties. But now things get interesting. What ‘other considerations’ could Hick turn to? There are I think two possibilities:

- (1) We ascribe the formal properties to God because of what we know about God (we know that God is an ontologically and conceptually transcendent being, who is infinitely greater and more perfect than we can conceive).
- (2) We ascribe the formal properties to God because we are aware of the limitations of our human knowledge. We can ascribe substantial properties to everyday objects and people, but because

God is so ontologically and conceptually transcendent (who is infinitely greater and more perfect than we can conceive), we know that we can not apply these same concepts to God.

What emerges on both these possibilities is that the formal properties Hick ascribes to God emerge from *substantial* metaphysical beliefs and claims about God. Even when we turn the focus on the limitations of human knowledge, we need to make some sort of substantial metaphysical claim about God (i.e. that God, for reasons pertaining to God's nature, is outside the scope of our human concepts).

My point can be illustrated by looking at the way in which Hick brings Aquinas in to his fold, by making the model of 'analogical predication' an alternative and compatible model to the noumenal and phenomenal model. So Hick reads Aquinas as affirming the claim that only formal properties can be ascribed to God: 'Aquinas was emphatic that we cannot know what the divine super-analogue of goodness is like: "we cannot grasp what God is, but only what He is not and how other things are related to Him"'.¹⁶

The case of Aquinas exactly confirms our point here, in that the reason Aquinas considered that 'substantial properties' such as goodness and power could only be ascribed analogically to God, was that he ascribed the substantial property of simplicity to God. It is precisely because we know that God is simple that we know that properties that are distinct in us (knowledge, power and goodness, for instance) are the same in God, and so that 'goodness' as applied to humans can only be analogous to 'goodness' as applied to God. Hick shows an awareness of the role of the substantial property 'simplicity' in Aquinas' thought, but does not realise the extent to which it damages his distinction between substantial and formal properties:

Further, the divine attributes which are distinguished in human thought and given such names as love, justice, power, are identical in God. For 'God... as considered in Himself, is altogether one and simple, yet our intellect knows Him according to diverse conceptions because it cannot see Him as He is in Himself'.¹⁷

Aquinas realizes, in a way that Hick does not, that 'formal properties' can only be applied justifiably to subjects *when we have substantial reasons to apply those formal properties*. This makes intuitive sense. Formal properties, as used by Hick, determine solely and directly what other properties can be ascribed to a subject. To know what sorts or properties can be ascribed to a subject we are going to have to know quite a lot about the subject, such as:

- (1) its ontological type (physical entity, fictional entity, divine reality etc.);
- (2) its ontological nature (simple, composite, personal, transcendent, immanent, etc.);
- (3) our epistemological access to this sort of ontological type, and

- (4) the types of properties it is appropriate to ascribe to the subject, given what we know about (1) (2) and (3).

It almost seems that to ascribe a formal property to a subject, we have to know rather *more* about the subject than we do to ascribe a substantial property. To ascribe a substantial property we only need to know for instance that the 'table is red', or that 'Sherlock Holmes is clever'; we do not have to reflect very systematically on the general ontological type and nature of the subject, or the sort of epistemological access we have to the subject. Before we can do this we have to compile a list of the substantial properties we know different subjects have, before we can then go on to generalize about what criteria could describe the sorts of substantial property we are entitled to ascribe to the subject.

In the case of God we have a list of substantial properties that can be ascribed to God. This list can be controversial, and the resources we use to arrive at these properties very different (inductive reasoning, conceptual analysis, revelation, intuition and so on). We can then use this list (which tends to include transcendence, power, love, goodness) to work out what formal properties apply to God (i.e. what we can say in general about the sorts of properties which can be ascribed to God). My claim is that although Hick does not acknowledge or realize it, he carries out a procedure very much along these lines. On his (admittedly small) list of substantial properties he has things such as: ontologically and conceptually transcendent, authentically self-revealing in not one but many faiths. From these he then derives the formal properties 'being such that none of our human concepts apply'.

That Hick must be able to say something substantial about God is suggested also by his reasons for accepting the postulation of the Real *an sich*. Hick offers the noumenal Real *an sich* as a postulation, an hypothesis to explain the evidence of diverse religious experience. When presented with the diversity of religious experience Hick sees two main hypotheses presenting themselves: the naturalistic and the noumenal.

The naturalistic response is to see all ... systems of belief as factually false although perhaps as expressing the archetypal dreams of the human mind whereby it has distracted itself from the harsh problems of life. From this point of view the luxuriant variety and the mutual incompatibility of these conceptions of the ultimate, and of the modes of experience which they inform, demonstrates that they are 'such stuff as dreams are made on'.¹⁸

Although such a response is 'reasonable' (not irrational), Hick endorses the rationality of his noumenal hypothesis: 'it is entirely reasonable for the religious person, experiencing life in relation to the transcendent – whether encountered beyond oneself or in the depths of one's own being – to believe in the reality of that which is thus apparently experienced'.¹⁹ Hick spells out the 'pluralistic hypothesis' as the claim that: 'the great world faiths embody different per-

ceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human'.²⁰

Hick does not spell out the criteria for what a good hypothesis should look like. To fill in this gap, I would claim that the minimal requirements for being a good hypothesis are as follows: a good hypothesis needs to make the evidence it is explaining more likely than it would have been (1) without the hypothesis and (2) with any other hypothesis. Whether the postulation of the Real *an sich* is a good hypothesis depends on whether it makes the existence of evidence of diverse religious experience more likely than it would have been without (1) the postulation of the Real *an sich* and (2) with any other hypothesis. Whether it does this or not depends partly on the innate plausibility and simplicity of the hypothesis being presented. Hick shows an awareness of this when he considers the possibility of a large number of 'ultimate realities' to explain the diverse religious experiences had by humankind:

Why, however, use the term 'Real' in the singular? Why should there not be a number of ultimate realities? There is of course no reason, *a priori*, why the closest approximation that there is to a truly ultimate reality may not consist in either an orderly federation or a feuding multitude or an unrelated plurality.²¹

The consideration that Hick highlights is the greater simplicity of the singular 'Real' hypothesis:

But if from a religious point of view we are trying to think, not merely of what is logically possible (namely, anything conceivable), but of the simplest hypothesis to account for the plurality of forms of religious experience and thought, we are, I believe, led to postulate 'the Real' ... the postulation of the Real *an sich* (is) the simplest way of accounting for the data.²²

It should be made clear how distinctive and un-Kantian this use of the Real *an sich* is, and how incompatible it is with the notion that we cannot coherently affirm anything of the noumenal Real. Kant would have no role for the noumenal Real as a 'good hypothesis' for explaining our phenomenal experience. If the noumenal Real is an X of which we can assert only that nothing can be asserted of it, how can this begin to be a good hypothesis for explaining a huge diversity of experience? The Real *an sich* would be a good hypothesis for the evidence of religious experience only if we could posit substantial properties to the Real: such as the Real *an sich*'s power, omnipresence, the desire of the Real to reveal itself, the Real's goodness, and that the Real created and sustains the universe. The list of properties which would make the hypothesis a good one could be contested, but one thing is clear: an X of which we can only say that we cannot assert anything of it is no sort of explanation at all.

We should remember Hick's own questions to himself: '(1) Does it make sense to say of X that our concepts do not apply to it? and (2) If this does (though in a qualified formulation) make sense, what reason could we have to affirm it?'.²³

It is clear by the way that Hick answers his second question that he means

‘what reason could we have to affirm the existence of the X?’, rather than ‘what reason do we have for saying that none of our concepts apply to X?’, which as we saw, is also a question which needs answering. Hick answers this question in terms of the considerations we have been discussing, claiming that the postulation of the Real *an sich* is the best hypothesis for the data. It should now be clear that there is no possibility of answering both questions successfully. If we claim that it does make sense to assert of X (God/the Real *an sich*) that none of our concepts apply to it, then we lose the only reason Hick presents to us for affirming the existence of such an X (the reason being that it is the best hypothesis for explaining the evidence). We can only be justified in asserting the existence of X on the grounds provided by Hick, if Hick is wrong about the claim that none of our concepts apply to X.

Summary

Hick is unable to keep to his injunction not to make substantial claims about God for two reasons. First of all, the ‘formal’ claims which Hick wished to make, relied on substantial metaphysical beliefs. Secondly, Hick’s only reason (distinctly un-Kantian at that) for postulating the Real *an sich* was that it was the ‘best hypothesis to explain the data’. An X of which we can assert nothing is not a good hypothesis.

Hick’s practice is better than his theory, in that generally he does not stick to his unreasonable rules. He does make substantial claims about God, and offers ‘God’ as a reasonable hypothesis to explain the evidence of diverse religious experience.

Hick believes that the Real *an sich* is a transcendent divine reality which reveals itself partially (but never fully) in different faiths, but never fully in one faith, and which brings people from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.²⁴ This is a substantial doctrine of God for which Hick has compelling and serious reasons (the plurality of religious traditions and soteriological concerns). The Hickean doctrine of God is made stronger and clearer when it stands – theologically speaking – on its own feet, and finds the courage to dispense with its philosophically disreputable attachment to the formal/substantial distinction.²⁵

Notes

1. William Alston coins this phrase, which I adopt, to describe the position of theologians who ‘acknowledge an independent but ineffable reality (Tillich, Hick, early Kaufman) ... (who) constantly, in spite of themselves, fall back into purporting to speak non-symbolically or non-mythically about that which, according to the official position, can only be spoken of symbolically or mythically’; ‘Realism and the Christian faith’, *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion*, 38 (1995), 37–60.
2. Peter Byrne *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 154.
3. John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 239.
4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 246.
9. *Ibid.*, 246–247.
10. *Ibid.*, 247.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 239.
14. *Ibid.*, 239, 246.
15. William L. Rowe ‘Religious pluralism’, *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), 145. The main target of Rowe’s argument is Hick’s claim that the Real *an sich* has neither one of many pairs of contradictory properties. Rowe denies the coherence of this claim, arguing – for example – that it is a ‘necessary truth, if not a truth of logic, that whatever is real is either personal or non-personal’ (150) and that Hick is incoherent in as much as he claims that the Real *an sich* is neither personal nor impersonal. I accept this, but as will become clear, consider that Hick does in fact – against his own strictures – assert that the Real *an sich* in some cases has one of a pair of contradictory properties (e.g. ‘revealing itself partially, but never fully, in different faiths’ rather than ‘not revealing itself partially, but never fully, in different faiths’).
16. Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 247. The Aquinas reference is *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.30.4.
17. *Ibid.* The Aquinas reference is *Summa Theologica*, I.13.12, I.13.3.
18. Hick *An Interpretation of Religion*, 235.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 240.
21. *Ibid.*, 248–249.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 239.
24. *Ibid.*, 240.
25. I am grateful to Richard Swinburne and Ralph Walker for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.