

Finite spirits as theoretical entities

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Abstract: Finite spirits can be plausibly viewed as entities postulated by a theory, comparable to the position on mental states and processes developed in the latter part of the twentieth century. This position is developed here by reference to the account in the synoptic gospels of the exorcism of the Gadarene demoniacs. The role played by specifying causal relationships between postulated entities and objects whose existence is not in doubt is examined. Also, various features of theories are discussed in relation to this example, viz. theory-laden description, classifying theories as naturalistic or supernaturalistic, kinds of evidence, and the importance of the method of hypothesis (or abduction) in critically scrutinizing the claims of religion.

The existence of evil spirits (or demons) that are capable of causing injurious and destructive effects in the lives of people is widely dismissed by educated people. Some of the phenomena once alleged in defence of the existence of evil spirits, such as malevolent behaviour, physical diseases, and mental illness, are explained in naturalistic terms; moreover, reports of the strange phenomena once also adduced in support of this theory, such as flying through the air, levitation, and clairvoyance, are widely viewed sceptically. Consequently, the theory of evil spirits is now widely considered obsolete. Alfred North Whitehead perhaps captured the academic mood of his time in his Gifford Lectures given in 1927–1928 when he claimed that belief in evil spirits was primitive and in need of elimination,¹ and Richard Rorty probably spoke for most academics in 1965 when he used the theory of demons as an example of a theory that had been eliminated in Western thought.²

In this paper I shall try to show that a specific kind of event that is occasionally alleged is best explained, at least at present, by the existence of an evil spirit (or perhaps several). The example I will examine in detail comes from the New Testament accounts of the exorcisms performed by Jesus. The following is the account in Matthew of the exorcism of two demoniacs:³

And when he [Jesus] came to the other side [of the lake], two demoniacs met him, coming out of the tombs, so fierce that no one could pass that way. And behold, they cried out, 'What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come to torment us

before the time?’ Now a herd of many swine was feeding at some distance from them. And the demons begged him, ‘If you cast us out, send us away into the herd of swine.’ And he said to them, ‘Go.’ So they came out and went into the swine; and behold, the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the sea, and perished in the waters. The herdsmen fled, and going into the city they told everything, and what had happened to the demoniacs.

I will imagine that a twenty-first century philosophical naturalist who is inclined to accept no claims about transcendent beings – call her Smith – happens to observe all the details described above, viz. the fierce behaviour of the two men, the curious verbal exchange between Jesus and the men including a request from ‘the demons’ to be sent into the herd of swine nearby, a command from Jesus to ‘the demons’ to leave the men, followed by the herd of swine rushing into the sea and the disappearance of the fierce behaviour in the two men.

The first explanation likely to be considered by a modern-day naturalist for the phenomena in question would be dissociative-identity disorder (formerly known as multiple-personality disorder), according to which people sometimes exhibit ‘voices’ that are not appropriate for who they are. Consequently, Smith might not make much initially of the strange greeting directed to Jesus by the demoniacs, ‘What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come to torment us before the time?’ However, her observations that the ‘voices’ ask to be sent into a herd of swine, which actually are feeding nearby, and that when the ‘voices’ are commanded to go, the swine immediately (implied) behave in a manner consistent with the destructive behaviour in the men (which simultaneously disappears), suggests that the dissociative-identity disorder cannot account for everything about this case. This disorder is attributed to *individuals* because of certain behaviours, including peculiar verbal behaviour, but does not explain seemingly ‘connected’ events such as the termination of certain behaviours in one followed by the onset of similar behaviours in another.⁴ Many of the other exorcism cases in the New Testament involving unusual speech or screams could perhaps be explained as instances of dissociative-identity disorder, but this one cannot. Assuming that no explanation using the naturalistic theories in her repertoire seems to account for the observed events, Smith is epistemically entitled to postulate the existence of something-we-know-not-what – call it a ‘spirit’⁵ – that has passed from the men to the herd of swine, which is also deemed to be evil because of its apparent effect on the men.

The reference of the term ‘spirit’ is secured in this context by the causal role that the postulated entity plays in producing specific behaviours in the men (beyond those already explained by the theory of mental states and processes) and swine, particularly in the apparent transfer of a causal power from men to swine. Although the account before us is sketchy on details, the fierce behaviour in the men evidently disappeared just before the suicidal behaviour of the swine began. The spatial and temporal proximity of the events in the men and then the

swine – the events do not occur hours or miles apart – is crucial to assessing the events as causally related. A single incident of this is admittedly weak grounds for asserting a causal connection, but I surmise that those who have observed alleged exorcisms could occasionally make similar reports of what I am calling *transfer* of behaviours.⁶ In the light of this apparent transfer, Smith can legitimately reinterpret the import of the initial greeting: the perspective exhibited in this remark might not arise from dissociative-identity disorder, but from the spirit that is postulated to exist to account for the transfer. It somehow has given information to the demoniacs that ordinary humans would not normally have.

Few of the exorcisms alleged to occur by those who accept them at face value involve what appears to be a transfer of ‘something’ from one being to another; they only involve unusual behaviours in an individual for which current naturalistic theories seem adequate. The first-century historian, Josephus, reports that a test similar to the transfer alleged in the case of the Gadarene demoniacs was used in his day for ensuring that a demon had been exorcized.⁷ He says that Jewish exorcism involved putting ‘a ring with a root’ to the nostrils of the demoniac, reciting incantations, and making mention of Solomon, who was thought to have developed the ritual of exorcism. This ritual was supposed to cause the demoniac to fall to the ground, which was taken to be one sign that the demon had left. The demon was then instructed to overturn a basin of water some distance away, in order to prove to onlookers that it had indeed left. If a basin of water were indeed to be overturned at the appropriate moment in the context of an exorcism, this would corroborate the claim that an invisible agent had been present. This criterion of a successful exorcism is comparable to the transfer of causal powers alleged in the case of the Gadarene demoniacs.⁸ Of course we would want assurance that the basin was not serendipitously turned over by some natural cause, for example, by a gust of wind or an earth tremor. Phenomena that involve changes to the spatio-temporal-causal order require an explanation that describes realities beyond those that are implicated when only subjective phenomena are involved.

The strategy that I am using here for characterizing spirits is adapted from one advanced by David Lewis, who argues that mental terms could be construed as defined in folk psychology by the causal role that their postulated referents typically play.⁹ Anger, for example, can be defined in relation to the phenomena that typically generate it, and by the effects that it typically causes. If verbal abuse, say, is selected as a typical cause in introducing (or contextually defining) this postulated state, then anger is partially defined by this causal relation. An implication is that statements linking verbal abuse and anger become mere tautologies. For example, to say that verbal abuse causes anger is to say no more than that verbal abuse causes that which is caused by verbal abuse. Once anger has been introduced in a contextual definition as a postulated entity, however, it can be used to provide an explanation for other behaviours. If verbal abuse of a person is

followed by bouts of depression and self-deprecation in that person, but depression and self-deprecation have not been used to introduce anger into the theory, we can offer the conjecture that anger causes (in conjunction with other factors, not all of which will be known) depression and self-deprecation. This statement is not a tautology, but one that purports to add to our understanding of the causal role of anger.

These points about contextually defining postulated entities by specifying their causal roles can also be illustrated from physics, where baryon-II particles were first introduced as an interpretation of tracks on photographic plates. A straight line was seen to emerge from the point of collision of known particles, followed by a blank, followed by branching lines in the form of a 'V'. The straight line indicated that the collision produced a charged particle; its relatively short length indicated that this unstable particle soon disintegrated to produce an uncharged particle (baryon-II), which quickly disintegrated in turn to produce two particles of like charge – hence, the 'V' branch, indicating that the particles were repelling each other. Baryon-II is a true unobservable (in this experiment), for it corresponds to the blank on the photographic plate, and is contextually defined in relation to the event that causes its production and the effect that it in turn causes. Various other fields of science and exact enquiry demonstrate the important role played by postulated entities, which are frequently unobservable, e.g. genes (known to Mendel as inheritance factors) in biology, natural selection in evolutionary theory, tectonic plates in geology, and the unconscious in psychology.

Lewis's observation about the mechanisms used to introduce theoretical entities highlights the significance that narrative has for the development of theories. The fact that the New Testament accounts narrate specific events in some detail – although the detail is seldom enough for the purposes of developing or properly evaluating theories – is more significant than it might appear. In this way their authors have provided us with phenomena requiring explanation and a rudimentary theory to explain them. We might question the adequacy of the theory, and even the occurrence of the reported phenomena, but narratives alleging actual events form the basis for any serious theorizing. Carefully laid-out theories expressed in precise language might please purists, including some theologians, but the grounds for advancing a hypothesis about some feature of the universe are the data the theory is introduced to explain. Every scientific endeavour and exact empirical inquiry has narration about observed phenomena at its core. Physics books that introduce students to the double-slit experiment, to take one well-known example, narrate events observed in the laboratory. Just as claims about the unobservable,¹⁰ indirectly observable, or rarely observable objects of science are won only through careful scrutiny, repeated tests, and ingenious theorizing, so too the claims about spirits can be won only through the hard labour involved in collecting, assessing, and classifying observations, and in conjecturing about their supposed causes. The tradition in philosophy of religion

that supposes that claims about transcendent beings might be obtained in short, decisive proofs appears to have overlooked the role of narratives in contextually defined entities.

The account of the exorcism of the Gadarene demoniacs is intriguing inasmuch as the description of events cannot be coherently told without introducing the theory of spirits into that description, whereas other accounts of events supposedly implicating spirits need not introduce spirits into their description. In a critical study of vision experiences, I gave an account¹¹ of the latter kind from a woman who witnessed events that convinced her that spirits exist. She reported that doors would slam behind her, plants would move across the table, water taps would turn on and off, music would come from the corners of the rooms, lights would go on and off, and furniture would move across the floor – all without any visible agent. Her experience with these troubling events culminated with the outside door opening and closing of its own accord, followed by the bathroom door opening, the bathroom light coming on, the bathroom door closing, the toilet flushing, and then a sequence of events corresponding to someone leaving the bathroom and then the house. The phenomena alleged to have taken place could be described without presupposing the theory of spirits. Data and theory can be independently advanced in her story, rather than in a coherent whole whose parts cannot be separated from one another without destroying its integrity.

The account of the Gadarene demoniacs, by contrast, involves theory and observation in a coherent whole, for the story includes as a crucial component the conversation between Jesus and *the demons*, which certainly would not need to be postulated to account merely for the fierce behaviour of the men. When we come to the conversation, we cannot substitute the men into the place that the demons occupy, for the portion that describes how the ‘voices’ suggested leaving the demoniacs and entering the swine cannot be coherently told if the men are given the speaking role: no clear sense can be attached to *the men* asking to leave themselves and enter the swine. This account of exorcism is an example of theory-laden description. All description is sometimes said to be theory-laden, but this might only be a way of saying that assumptions about existent things and their properties and relations are involved in all description. A more important sense of the theory-laden character of descriptions is illustrated by the case of the Gadarene demoniacs, where the description itself requires presupposing the entities whose existence the theory postulates.

Two ‘transcendent’ orders are suggested by exorcism cases: one order appears to be intent on human destruction, or at least on creating a debilitating influence upon human life, whereas the other appears to rescue humans from these destructive forces that they are apparently incapable of withstanding or overcoming on their own. As soon as these two orders are considered to be real, the difficult task arises of trying to determine which order is at work. This problem is not unique to religion, but is found whenever unobservable objects are postulated to

explain observed phenomena. Although the more powerful of the two is generally considered to be divine and consequently to be infinite in power, this assumption about infinite power would not have to be made. The relevant observations in the Gadarene demoniac case do not require infinite power operating in or through Jesus, but only greater power than that which evidently prevents the demoniacs from living human lives free of destruction.

No criterion can seemingly be given for claiming that something with *infinite* powers is being observed in action. A different example will help to make this point. Suppose we were to discover a small, nearby planet undergoing the evolutionary changes supposed to constitute the long history of our planet, only collapsed into a few years. With our telescopes we could watch flora and fauna appearing and disappearing every few days or even minutes. Someone would surely construe these events as the acts of an infinitely powerful being, but they would not uniquely select the actions of an infinite being as opposed to a being with extraordinarily great powers. Infinite greatness and, for that matter, infinite smallness are seemingly incapable of being given empirical criteria, although mathematicians have found ways of making sense of these properties for mathematical entities, which appear to be rather different than the objects we directly or indirectly encounter in perceptual experience. But even though infinite properties might be incapable of being experienced in their infinitude by finite beings, and might be devoid of empirical criteria, an infinite being could apparently exist.

Although the beings alleged to be involved in 'demonizing'¹² people and exorcizing those who are thus influenced are normally viewed as transcending the natural order, they would not have to be viewed that way. In order plausibly to claim that something is genuinely non-natural or supernatural, the boundary of the natural would have to be known. It is not, however, since much of the universe remains mysterious, in spite of great explanatory achievements in science, especially in the last two centuries. We could choose to include in the natural order all that which is capable of being introduced using the causal mechanism described above, where the other objects, states, or processes with which the newly introduced items are deemed to be causally related are already conventionally considered to be natural. In this case, both good and evil spirits thought to be involved in describing and explaining the phenomena of exorcism would be natural. This manoeuvre goes contrary to established conventions about the demarcation of the natural and supernatural, I admit, but those conventions appear to have been a methodological choice made by our intellectual forebears.¹³

Although causality remains the most important relationship for grounding newly postulated entities, other kinds of relationships between postulated entities and other objects already accepted as existing also help to do so. Relationships of similarity, of parts and wholes, of classes and members, for example, also help to specify the kind of entity being postulated. Spirits have often been considered to

be similar to minds, for example, so having a well developed theory of mind in place could conceivably illuminate what we are talking about when we talk about spirits. But minds do not need to be understood as non-materialistic objects in order to be construed as similar to spirits. Spirits are simply entities postulated to account for certain kinds of human behaviour or other kinds of observed phenomena. Anthropologist Felicitas Goodman begins a recent book on demon possession with the remark: 'In order to understand possession, we need first of all to come to terms with the concept of the soul.'¹⁴ She goes on to talk about the repudiation of the soul in the behavioural sciences, and the need to address the conflict between dualistic and naturalistic views of human nature. According to the view I am advancing here, however, no endorsement of body–mind or body–soul dualism is required to give credence to the theory of spirits. Spirits are postulated entities that can be understood primarily by the causal relationships that they have with phenomena whose existence is not in doubt. Showing similarities between them and other entities postulated by theories, including minds or souls, might illuminate the theory of spirits, but spirits are not dependent upon the viability of dualistic concepts of soul or mind.

Spirits are *epistemically* characterized, not ontologically defined¹⁵ in the approach I am advancing here. Nothing is presupposed about the nature of spirits, if they actually exist. Although this position is not consistent with reductive physicalism, it might be consistent with a non-reductive version of physicalism (or naturalism), such as that advanced by Nancey Murphy¹⁶ and Arthur Peacocke.¹⁷ These theorists acknowledge the familiar, structured view of science, according to which the sciences demonstrate increasing complexity: chemistry is dependent on physics, biology on chemistry, psychology on biology, history on psychology, etc. However, they also hold (a) that emergent properties are found at levels above the 'lowest'; (b) that each level has relative autonomy from others, e.g. theories about mental states and processes can be developed without knowing how these might fare in an attempt to 'reduce' them to neurophysiological theories; and (c) that 'downward causation' exists (in addition to the familiar 'upward causation'), according to which some phenomena at level N occur because of the causal role of phenomena at level $N + 1$ (besides level $N - 1$). An example of downward causation occurs when the organizational structure of the whole brain determines the particular kind of sensory information that is received by a perceiver. The theory of spirits that is being envisioned in this paper would have epistemic autonomy, like other domains of inquiry, whether these are natural or social sciences, now do. We cannot know at present exactly how (or whether) the theory of spirits would fit into a non-reductive naturalistic framework, but what this framework does for all critical inquiry is allow that inquiry to go forward without having to be preoccupied with the ultimate ontological structures found in the universe. Gone are the days when the only ontologies available for discussion were ones that traded on matter and soul.¹⁸

I am interpreting the theory of finite spirits as capable, in principle, of reduction, in any of the relevant senses of this widely used term.¹⁹ We can correctly say that the theory has been substantially eliminated in recent academic thought, primarily because many of the kinds of paranormal phenomena once explained using it²⁰ are no longer considered to occur, or because the rather ordinary phenomena once said to be caused by demons are now explained naturalistically. The many implausible examples in earlier times of supposedly demonic influence have helped to popularize the idea that all of the phenomena that evil spirits were once postulated to explain have been successfully explained by science. Moreover, the horrors undertaken under the dubious authority of those who have believed in demons have motivated many to dismiss the theory altogether. The pragmatic aspects of allowing certain theories to run amok in society are too complex to deal with here. It is clear, however, that people who harbour irresponsible beliefs about diabolical forces should not be trusted with affairs of state.²¹

The phenomena adduced in the story of the Gadarenes are a mix of ordinary and paranormal phenomena, as these generally understood. Stephen Braude has introduced a classification scheme that is helpful in discussing paranormal phenomena.²² He classifies evidence in general as experimental, semi-experimental, or anecdotal. Experimental evidence is that which can be obtained in settings such as laboratories where the control of variables allows us to obtain as much information as time and resources allow. This kind of evidence is not likely to be found in connection with conjectures about evil spirits. Semi-experimental evidence consists of reports of similar events that occur repeatedly, but cannot be obtained at will. Anecdotal evidence consists of reports that occur too infrequently to warrant being included in theorizing about the world.

The fierce behaviour, extraordinary strength, and peculiar but intelligible remarks found in the account of Gadarene demoniacs occur frequently enough in cases of psychopathology for them to be readily classified as semi-experimental. However, the part about the swine rushing into the sea and being drowned seems to belong to the category of anecdote, for reports of swine or similar mammals behaving in such a way are seldom given. That many features of this account belong to the category of the semi-experimental gives it a plausibility that other accounts allegedly implicating evil spirits do not enjoy. So rejecting it simply because it postulates the existence of spirits seems epistemically irresponsible, especially in the light of the fact that numerous accounts of phenomena now explainable as instances of dissociative identity, but earlier explained (implausibly, in my view) by invoking spirits, are sufficiently widely reported that new allegations are generally accepted. Whether instances of transfer cases, as I am calling them, or other cases involving significant changes to the spatio-temporal-causal order, are numerous enough to place them in the category of the semi-experimental is unclear. Perhaps we need to enter a plea of 'not yet proven'.

The methodological importance of the case I have focused on for the critical study of religion is far-reaching. It shows that what Charles Saunders Pierce called abduction (sometimes called ‘the method of hypothesis’) is vital to the critical scrutiny of the existential claims of religion. More specifically, because the entities postulated by religious belief systems (including Christianity, but by no means limited to it) are either unobserved, or poorly observed, if at all, or perhaps even unobservable, the methodology that is vital to a critical study of the claims of religion is abduction to unobservables. This remark naturally does not imply that deduction and induction are of no value to this critical study.

If the kind of event that I have made central to this paper does occur, the theory of finite spirits that purports to provide a rudimentary explanation is not merely the thought of ‘primitives’ or the superstitious, but reflects the kind of theorizing found in many branches of critical inquiry. At the very least, the approach I have taken here to a New Testament incident reveals something about the thought of some of its authors.²³

Notes

1. Published as A. N. Whitehead *Process and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1929), 150.
2. Richard Rorty ‘Mind–body identity, privacy, and categories’, *Review of Metaphysics*, 19 (1965), 25–54.
3. Matthew 8, Mark 5, and Luke 8 say of seemingly the same event that there was only one demoniac, but I will ignore this difference.
4. Experts in animal husbandry would be needed at this point to confirm or disconfirm that the behaviour of the swine was unusual.
5. I will assume that a single spirit is postulated here as a theoretical entity. The grounds in experience for considering spirits to be more than one are curious in their own right, but are not uppermost in this example.
6. I have heard first-hand of several from those who accept the existence of spirits and the possibility of exorcism.
7. *Antiquities of the Jews*, in *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus*, William Whiston (tr.) (Philadelphia PA: J. B. Smith & Co., 1854), bk 8, ch. 2, §5.
8. Josephus says that he saw Solomon’s methods used in his own day in the presence of Vespasian, the Roman emperor, but he does not say whether the ‘basin test’ was included.
9. David Lewis ‘Psychophysical and theoretical identifications,’ *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 50 (1972), 250f. Lewis also addressed these and related issues in ‘An argument for the identity theory’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 63 (1966), 17–25, and ‘How to define theoretical terms’, *Journal of Philosophy*, 67 (1970), 427–446. Other prominent philosophers involved in the interpretation of mind as an entity-postulating theory include Wilfrid Sellars, J. J. C. Smart, David Armstrong, Jerry Fodor, and Hilary Putnam.
10. The notion of observation itself varies as theories of varying complexity and technical instruments are developed; cf. Dudley Shapere ‘The concept of observation in science and philosophy’, *Philosophy of Science*, 49 (1982), 485–526.
11. Phillip H. Wiebe *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72f.
12. Those who accept the existence of evil spirits seldom speak now of ‘possession’; the preferred expression seems to be ‘demonization’ and its cognates. Fr Gabriele Amorth, Rome’s chief exorcist, however, still uses ‘possession,’ identifying it as one of seven possible stages of demonic influence, in *An Exorcist Tells his Story*, Nicoletta V. MacKenzie (tr.) (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1999), 32f.
13. Perhaps the distinction between the natural and the supernatural could be made by construing the latter as having necessary existence, not contingent existence, or by construing the supernatural as that

- which creates the natural *ex nihilo*. My method does not address these topics, but nothing in it is inconsistent with either attempt to distinguish the natural from the supernatural.
14. Felicitas Goodman *How About Demons? Possession and Exorcism in the Modern World* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 1.
 15. Cf. Janet Soskice *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 129ff.
 16. Nancey Murphy *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 135ff; and *idem* 'Nonreductive physicalism: philosophical issues', in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony (eds) *Whatever Happened to the Soul?: Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1998), 127–148.
 17. Arthur Peacocke *Theology for a Scientific Age*, enlarged edn (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 1993).
 18. Richard Schlagel advances a form of realism that he describes as contextual realism, where reality is described as 'an inexhaustible matrix of relatively autonomous contexts' in his *Contextual Realism: A Metaphysical Framework for Modern Science* (New York NY: Paragon House Publishers, 1986), 274. He is opposed, unfortunately, to the inclusion of 'spiritual realities' in his otherwise accommodating approach to theorizing.
 19. Cliff Hooker identified many important kinds of reduction in 'Towards a general theory of reduction', *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, 20 (1981), 38–59, 201–236, and 496–529.
 20. *Malleus Maleficarum (The Witch Hammer)*, authored in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer (also known as Heinrich Institoris) and James Sprenger, was the most widely used medieval document for prosecuting people accused of employing diabolical powers, according to its modern editor, Montague Summer (New York NY: Dover, 1971). It identifies as many as seventy phenomena in which demons were supposedly implicated, including madness in animals, precision archery, fragmenting human foetuses in their mothers' wombs, assuming the shape of animals, and striking objects with lightning.
 21. Many dangerous beliefs render people unfit to hold public office, e.g. former US President Ronald Reagan, who is reported to have believed that nuclear missiles fired from submarines could not be recalled, but those fired from land could be.
 22. Stephen Braude *The Limits of Influence: Psychokinesis and the Philosophy of Science* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 1f.
 23. I acknowledge the helpful comments of an anonymous reviewer for this journal.