

SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TO TOWN: RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND ONTOLOGICAL CLAIMS

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Some religious believers have defended themselves from philosophical criticism by arguing that religion, properly understood, makes no ontological claims: they are referred to here, for short, as 'NOC-believers'. In order to make sense of the position of NOC-believers, the article discusses the different senses in which children and adults might plausibly claim to believe in Santa Claus. An adult might believe in Santa, in the sense of choosing to engage in a particular social practice; likewise, the NOC-believer chooses to take part in the social practices of prayer and worship. The comparison is used as a basis for illustrating some of the difficulties with the NOC-believer's position.

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Religious belief is often attacked as being insufficiently supported by evidence, or as being contrary to the evidence. For instance, critics argue that the existence of evil in the world is incompatible with a God who is both benevolent and omnipotent. Faced with this kind of criticism, some religious believers will attempt to meet it head on. Others, however, make a move along the following lines:

Your criticisms simply miss the mark, because they misunderstand what sort of thing religion is. You assume that religion is trying to describe reality; but that assumption is false. Religious belief is an entirely different sort of enterprise.

These believers say that they make no ontological claims, i.e. no claims about the nature of reality. I shall refer to them, for short, as NOC-believers.

At first sight, the idea of a believer who says that they make no claims about how the world goes may seem perplexing. I want to elucidate that idea by reflecting on the different senses in which children, and adults, might plausibly claim to believe in Santa Claus.

Consider the following discussion between two 7 year olds, Peter and John.

Peter: You don't still believe in Santa, do you?

John: Of course I do. Who do you think brings the presents?

Peter: Mum and Dad do, silly. You're such a baby!

John: That's not true. You leave your stocking out overnight, and Santa comes and fills it while Mum and Dad are in bed and asleep.

There's a debate here about a factual issue: who brings the presents? John is making an ontological claim, that the existence and activity of Santa is the explanation for the appearance of the presents. He rejects Peter's rival theory: the activity of Mum and Dad cannot be the explanation, as they cannot deliver presents while they are in bed asleep.

Some may bridle at the idea of children making ontological claims: and of course only a most extraordinary child would use a word like 'ontological'. Nevertheless, children both understand and make such claims, from an early age. A 7 year old will understand that lions and tigers are found in zoos; that dinosaurs used to be found in the world, but are no longer alive today; and that dragons are found only in stories. When a child encounters the words:

Don't you know/There's no such thing as a Gruffalo?

the child knows what is being claimed. And by the end of the story the child knows that there is after all such a thing

as a Gruffalo, inside the story – but would not expect to find a Gruffalo on a visit to the zoo. All of this is part of the child's full-time project of trying to make sense of the world in which it finds itself.

Contrast the following discussion between two parents, Paul and Jane.

Paul: Yes, I believe in Santa. I tell the children to put their stockings at the bottom of the bed before they go to sleep. Then once I am sure they have gone to sleep I creep into their room, fill the stockings, and creep out again. I love to see their faces in the morning! My parents did the same for me, and I don't want my children to miss out. I think a sense of wonder is so important, don't you?

Jane: I don't believe in Santa myself. I think it's a bad idea to deceive children, even about something that seems innocent or trivial. Mine have always been given their presents under the Christmas tree, with labels to say who they are from.

There's no factual debate here – Paul and Jane agree about who brings the presents.

There is, however, a disagreement about a social practice. Both Paul and Jane find themselves in a world in which the Santa Claus practice is well-established. In the first place, that practice consists of doing certain things – asking a child to leave a stocking at the end of the bed, filling it while the child is asleep, and so on. Talk about Santa Claus does not take place in a vacuum – we encounter it in the context of the social practice, and can make sense of it only in that context. Where Paul and Jane differ is in their willingness to carry on engaging in the practice: Paul is willing, but Jane is not.

Those who make rational criticisms of religious faith, and those believers who seek to meet such criticisms in their own terms, are engaging in the same sort of exercise as Peter and John.

NOC-believers refuse to take part in that debate, because they are claiming to be in a comparable position to Paul. They find themselves in a world where there are a set of practices dubbed 'religious' (prayer, worship, etc.) and they choose to engage in those practices. On their own account, their difference between those who abstain from such practices is not accounted for by any difference in belief about how the world goes.

Does this mean that what the NOC-believers are doing is OK? Does their strategy for immunising themselves from rational criticism really work? I suggest that the NOC-believers' position is still deeply problematic, and that thinking about both the similarities and the differences with Paul's situation will cast light on some of the difficulties. I make three points here.

The first point is that Paul's position does not insulate him from *all* kinds of criticism. Clearly, objections to his position based on the impossibility of reindeer moving with sufficient speed to deliver presents to all the world's children on a single night would be wholly beside the point: he does not believe in Santa Claus *in that way*. But other sorts of criticism are still relevant: for instance, Jane's assertion that the practice is damaging.

Secondly, the specific criticism that Jane makes of Paul is that the Santa Claus practice involves an element of deception. It involves making statements that look like ontological claims, and that are likely to be understood by (some of) their addressees in that way, even though the speaker does not understand them in that sense. Likewise with NOC-believers: if they go to church and, for instance, say the Creed, then lots of people (including lots of philosophers of religion) will understand them to be making ontological claims, even if that is not their intention. At the very least, this is likely to cause considerable confusion.

This risk of confusion presents a dilemma for the NOC-believer: is he a religious reformer or a religious conservative?

The NOC-believer who is a reformer might say that religion has in the past made ontological claims, and still does so to some extent, but that this element of religion ought to be given up. This kind of NOC-believer might seek out certain forms of 'non-credal' religion: perhaps Quakerism, or some forms of Buddhism, or particular Christian communities where everyone else is a NOC-believer and everyone shares a common understanding of what is going on.

However, NOC-believers are often conservatives: they say that the whole business about religion making ontological claims is a misunderstanding, and that once the misunderstanding is abandoned then the practices can continue as they always have done. This leaves the potential problem of confusion, identified above, wholly untouched, at least until the day is reached when everyone comes to understand religion in the way in which the NOC-believer understands it.

Thirdly, there is an important and obvious difference between the Santa Claus case and the case of religious belief.

It is unlikely that Paul or Jane thinks that it matters very much, one way or the other, whether they carry on with the Santa Claus practice.

By contrast, very often religious people think that what they do is of supreme importance. Bringing up children in their faith is a moral imperative, and for a child to leave the faith would be viewed as a disaster. Converting others is also often an imperative, one that may sometimes involve leaving everything familiar and travelling to a dangerous and hostile place. And giving up one's own faith is the worse thing of all: to be avoided at all costs, even at the cost of one's own life.

But if what is at stake in religion is engaging in a set of social practices, while making no claims about the world, then it remains deeply perplexing why religious faith, or the lack of it, should characteristically be thought by its adherents to be so toweringly important.

The question that the NOC-believer needs to answer, therefore, is this: do you say that your religious faith *matters*, and if so, why? The NOC-strategy offers no protection against the need to answer that question; on the contrary, it brings the question sharply into focus.

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