Cooking with Philip Quinn

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Abstract In response to various difficulties that confront John Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, Philip Quinn proposes a recipe for developing “more satisfactory” pluralistic hypotheses. In this short exploratory paper I examine Quinn’s proposal, identify some problems that it faces, and consider some alternatives.

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Quinn’s Recipe Philip Quinn proposes a procedure for developing “more satisfactory” pluralistic hypotheses. (Quinn 2000) The first step, if we set out to follow this procedure, is to decide which religious traditions “are to fall within the scope of the hypothesis and [to] determine what properties they attribute to the religious ultimate.” (Ibid, 234). In this way we develop a list of properties. Then we are to posit a “common religious ultimate” or a Real, and we attribute to it any property from this list that is not a member of a contrary pair, both of whose members are on the list. (Ibid) For example, there are traditions that say that there is a religious ultimate that is cruel. And there are traditions that say that there is a religious ultimate that is indifferent. If something cannot be both cruel and indifferent but can be neither, then neither cruelty nor indifference would be attributed to the Real.

So we have a mechanism that, at least in theory, could identify substantive properties that are to be attributed to the Real. These would either be properties that all traditions within the scope of the hypothesis attribute to their religious ultimate or properties that one or more traditions impute to their ultimate while no tradition imputes a contrary property. Hence the Real will—or at least may, depending on the results that
the process yields—be something quite different from Hick’s Real about which, as it is in itself, nothing substantive may be said. (Hick 1989, Chap. 14) However, Quinn does not tell us what are the properties that will, or might, be attributed to the Real if we follow this recipe. Nor does he set out to follow the recipe himself or even to speculate about what its outcome or outcomes might be. Perhaps he is not sure about this himself or has not thought the matter through.

Quinn says that “I suggest that this recipe will allow you to construct coherent pluralistic hypotheses if such constructions are possible” (Ibid, my underlining). Why “hypotheses” (in the plural)? The answer, or at any rate the most important part of it, is just that Quinn’s procedure has as its first step deciding which traditions fall within the scope of the hypothesis. There are many alternative ways to decide this matter. One option would be to adopt Hick’s approach in this regard, restricting the scope to traditions that have a capacity to reorient people from being self-regarding to being other-regarding. (Hick 1989, Chaps. 3, 4) But there are numerous other possibilities, some sensible and some less sensible. For example, the scope could be restricted to traditions that require great acts of charity or intense spiritual inwardness or intense and rigorous self-examination, or that hold promise of helping us to address the global ecological crisis. Or it could be restricted to traditions that posit religious ultimates that we find admirable or worship-worthy or religiously interesting, or the like. Or, less sensibly than any of these, the scope of the hypothesis could be restricted to religions that began during a certain historical period or within a certain geographical region, or whose name in your favorite language starts with the letter “m.” How one proceeds with respect to this matter of fixing the scope will make a great deal of difference to the outcome of following Quinn’s procedure.

And why is there a question whether such constructions are possible? Perhaps Quinn means that there is some question whether there will be anything left after all the contraries are stripped away. (As we shall see, the question is indeed worth asking.) Or perhaps the point is that some ways of fixing the scope would result in a property here and a property there, presumably along with their entailments, with the overall outcome being a bit of a hodge-podge that does not add up to anything very robust. When he wonders whether coherent pluralistic hypotheses are possible, perhaps what he is wondering about is in part whether the relevant properties add up to a robust and interconnected set of properties, so that coherence is not just a matter of avoiding inconsistency.

Quinn acknowledges that the outcome of following this procedure may take us far from the familiar religions, and he asks whether these familiar traditions might need to modify themselves to take account of whatever hypothesis (or hypotheses) might emerge from using his procedure:

Of course, this strategy will not yield interpretations of religion that would be acceptable to most current members of the great religious traditions. But those traditions have undergone tremendous development in the past and no doubt they will continue to change in the future. Hence it is worth asking whether the various belief systems of the great religious traditions ought to be altered to bring them into conformity with the truth of the matter as it is understood by some refined pluralistic hypothesis… (Ibid.)