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“The Happy Side of Babel”: Radical Plurality, Narrative Fiction and the Philosophy of Religion

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Abstract

Philosophers and other scholars of religion are increasingly recognizing that if philosophy of religion is to remain relevant to the study of religion, its scope must be expanded well beyond the confines of a highly intellectualized and abstract “theism.” Means of engendering this expansion include methodological diversification—drawing upon thickly described accounts of religious life such as those afforded by ethnographies and certain narrative artworks. Focusing on the latter, this article engages with the question of whether works of narrative fiction—literary or cinematic—can *do* philosophy of religion in ways that illuminate what D. Z. Phillips characterizes as the “radical plurality” of contemporary religion. Closely examining the examples of Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* and especially Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, my discussion is contextualized within broader debates over whether philosophy’s purpose is to advocate certain religious and moral perspectives or to elucidate those perspectives in more disinterested terms.

Keywords

contemplative philosophy – narrative fiction – D. Z. Phillips – philosophy of religion – radical pluralism – Wole Soyinka – Ludwig Wittgenstein

I Introduction

The phrase “happy side of Babel” derives from a book by the literary theorist Jonathan Culler. Having quoted, with reference to literary fiction, Roland Barthes’s (1973) remark that readers receive pleasure from “the cohabitation of languages, which work side by side” in a text, Culler adds that “the critic, whose job is to display and explain this pleasure, comes to view the text as the happy side of Babel, a set of voices, identifiable or unidentifiable, rubbing against one another and producing both delight and uncertainty” (Culler [1975] 2002: 304). Culler’s theoretical framework is structural poetics, which is not my concern in this article. Nor is my concern the role of literary criticism in displaying and explaining the pleasure of readers. The idea, however, of multiple voices in a text—or indeed across numerous texts—“rubbing against one another” is very central to my theme, for what concerns me is primarily the need for philosophy of religion to expand its purview in ways that embrace what the philosopher D. Z. Phillips has called “the hubbub of voices” that constitute the radical plurality of perspectives, both religious and nonreligious, in today’s world (Phillips 2007b: 205).

My project takes its inspiration from debates in recent decades among philosophers, and to a lesser extent among theorists of film and literature, over whether narrative art forms may reasonably be regarded as not merely illustrative of particular philosophical viewpoints but as, in some sense, doing philosophy themselves.¹ Simultaneous with, though largely disconnected from, these debates has been a growing recognition by many philosophers of religion that their own field of activity has been dogged by unhelpfully restrictive methods and aspirations. In particular, it has been acknowledged that philosophers of religion,

¹ The number of contributions to this debate is now legion, but prominent among them are, on literature and philosophy, Nussbaum (1992), Lamarque and Olsen (1994) and Skilleås (2001); and on film and philosophy, Read and Goodenough (2005), Wartenberg (2007) and Livingston and Plantinga (2009: Part 4).

especially those who style themselves as belonging to the “analytic” tradition, have generally been preoccupied with questions relating to a somewhat abstract phenomenon they call “theism”—or sometimes, to make its abstract nature even more explicit, “bare theism” or “standard theism”²—rather than with the nitty gritty and, admittedly, untidy complexities of real-life religions in all their multifariousness.

Renegade voices have, of course, long been audible. From the 1950s onwards Ninian Smart, for example, appreciated that the domain of philosophy of religion should be limited neither to “theism” nor to the Abrahamic faiths, but should encompass religions in the broadest sense. Indeed, Smart, being alert to the indeterminacy of the category of religion, hazarded the suggestion that philosophers of religion ought really to be engaged in the philosophical study of *worldviews*, regardless of whether these are standardly characterized as religious or as secular, for it is conceptions of the world and of how to live that should be the topic of investigation (Smart 1995; 1999). Another notable pioneer was John Hick, whose repeated calls for philosophy of religion to be concerned with “religion throughout history and throughout the world” (2010: 12–13) are increasingly being actualized in the work of innovative philosophers whose expertise extends far beyond the parochial environs of abstract “theism.” Especially noteworthy in this regard are recent contributions by Kevin Schilbrack and Timothy Knepper, both of whom emphasize the need for methodological experimentation in the philosophy of religion as well as the adoption of a more expansive vision of what constitutes the field’s proper subject matter. Schilbrack advocates vigorous engagement between philosophy of religion and “other branches of philosophy and other disciplines in the academic study of religions” (2014: xi) and Knepper, borrowing terminology from Clifford Geertz, recommends that philosophers of religion furnish “thick

² Cf. Wainwright’s (2013: 54) pithy characterization of “bare theism” as “theism as abstracted from the peculiarities of any particular religious tradition.” For the term “standard theism,” see, e.g., Rowe (1984: 95).

descriptions” of the phenomena they study in order that religion be understood “in all its messy cultural-historical diversity” (2013: 76).³

I, too, have voiced concerns about a lack of imagination in much contemporary philosophy of religion and have accentuated the fruitful potential of stronger interdisciplinarity between philosophy and disciplines such as cultural anthropology for developing an expanded approach to the subject (see esp. Burley 2015b; 2016). The present article offers a further contribution to this project of enlarging the scope of philosophy of religion, though rather than anthropology or ethnography *sensu stricto*, I focus here on the philosophically enriching potential of narrative fiction. My purpose is to argue in support of those philosophers who contend that works of narrative fiction—whether literary, aural, performative or cinematic—can and do provide not merely valuable resources to be drawn upon by the philosopher but also examples of philosophizing in action. Whether one calls it philosophizing is not necessarily the crucial matter; what is important is that narrative art forms can, and sometimes do, constitute conceptual environments in relation to which philosophers and other students of religion may develop an enriched comprehension of religion in its lived, embodied and highly variegated manifestations, as opposed to—though complementary with—the modes of understanding that arise from the study of doctrinal or theoretical sources. In short, one could say that narrative fiction, in some of its instances, is itself a mode of philosophically illuminating thick description with the capacity to deepen its audiences’ philosophical understanding of religion. Or, shorter still: works of narrative fiction can *do* philosophy of religion.

Following the present introduction, the article outlines recent debates over whether, or to what extent, it makes sense to regard works of narrative fiction—most notably works of literature or film—as instances of philosophical reasoning. Next I explore the question of

³ For Geertz’s use of the term “thick description” in the field of ethnography, see esp. Geertz (1973). As Geertz openly acknowledges, the term was borrowed from Ryle (1968a; [1968b] 2009).

whether a condition of philosophy is that the types of reasoning deployed involve advocating or rejecting something, whether this be a specific thesis or something more like a view of life or heightened moral awareness. Expounding D. Z. Phillips' "contemplative" conception of philosophy, alongside his notion of the radical plurality of religious and nonreligious perspectives, I endorse the view that philosophy need not be fixated on advocacy and evaluation. Phillips likens the philosopher to a dramatist who stages a play comprising characters with diverse perspectives on life, some of which conflict with one another. Like the dramatist, Phillips maintains, the philosopher need not strive to resolve disagreements, but to make them more visible, more intelligible—to accentuate the variety of "possibilities of meaning" in human forms of life (Phillips 2007b: 207–209). With this conception of philosophizing in mind, I then turn the analogy around and consider whether, if a philosopher can resemble an author of narrative fiction, a work of narrative fiction might itself constitute philosophy—with an eye on philosophy of religion in particular. Taking Stewart Sutherland's discussion of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* as my initial focus, I subsequently move to my principal—theatrical—example, namely Wole Soyinka's play *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), a work that poignantly elucidates several religiously inflected and secular perspectives within the context of mid-twentieth century Nigeria. By doing so, I argue, the play exemplifies among other things a way in which narrative fiction can philosophize about religion—a way that avoids the frequently homogenizing and essentializing tendencies of standard academic philosophical analyses.

The upshot of my argument is not that philosophers of religion should stop writing academic papers and start writing plays or other works of narrative fiction instead; rather, it is that philosophers have much to learn from certain works of narrative fiction about the nuances and complexities of human religiosity, as it is amid the richly described interactions between individual characters, replete with varying perspectives on life and the world, that

those nuances and complexities can be illuminated in ways commonly neglected by more abstracted philosophical treatments that are eager to appraise religious truth-claims. Without disparaging approaches that prioritize critical evaluation, I seek to make room for alternative conceptions of philosophizing, notably—in this article—a conception that by emphasizing close attention to the intricacies of particular cases, places in question overgeneralizing assumptions or theories about what being religious “must” be like and about the boundaries between religion and nonreligion.

II Narrative Fiction and Competing Conceptions of Philosophical Reasoning

One way of giving focus to the question of whether narrative fiction can legitimately be regarded as participating in philosophy is to consider a disagreement that arose in the 1980s between Onora O’Neill and Cora Diamond, and which has subsequently been commented upon by others, notably Stephen Mulhall. What prompted the disagreement was O’Neill’s taking issue, in a review of Stephen Clark’s *The Moral Status of Animals*, with what she sees as a lack of properly philosophical argumentation in the case that Clark makes in defence of animals. If such a case is to do more than appeal merely to those readers who are already sentimentally inclined in its favour, O’Neill contends, it must engage with the debate over “the metaphysical grounds that determine who or what may have moral standing” (O’Neill 1980: 446). In other words, it must seek to ground moral considerations on something more real or fundamental than themselves by first pointing to some non-moral feature of living beings, such as their sentience or capacity for reason, and then arguing that possession of this feature suffices to warrant a certain moral status. Instead of doing this, Clark had appealed primarily to the notion of kinship between humans and animals: not so much in the sense that we have a common ancestry with them, but rather in the sense that we do in fact share, and have shared throughout our history, large portions of our lives with animals in environments

that encompass a wide variety of species. In short, Clark advocates an expanded vision of our sense of “community,” in which animals are appreciated as members of that community who are worthy of greater respect than is routinely manifested in most contemporary societies.⁴

O’Neill’s review elicited a vigorous riposte from Diamond ([1982] 1991), who takes O’Neill’s criticisms of Clark as a starting point for exploring the more general question of what count as legitimate methods of convincing someone to revise his or her attitudes, especially moral attitudes, in a particular direction. A major concern of Diamond’s is that if we were to adopt criteria as narrow as those stipulated by O’Neill for what constitutes a bona fide way of convincing, we would be forced to concede that works of narrative fiction, even works of the highest literary standing, cannot be legitimate means of transforming their readers’ sensibilities, for they contain nothing that would fit O’Neill’s conception of a genuine argument. Far from making this concession, Diamond contends that many works of literature, including the lyric poetry of Wordsworth and the novels of Dickens, *do* constitute such means; while nowhere in them do we find arguments of the form that O’Neill privileges, they are nonetheless cogent attempts “to lead their audience to new moral responses ... to enlarge the reader’s moral and emotional sensibilities” (1991: 297). With reference to certain of Dickens’ novels in particular, Diamond proposes that central to their aim is the changing of social attitudes towards children by enabling readers to more fully recognize children as possessors of a particular outlook on the world. According to Diamond, what Dickens along with many other great authors provides are “paradigms of a sort of attention”—forms of description with the power “to enlighten the understanding and ameliorate the affections” (299).

⁴ “Not a community formed in myth or history by a signed contract between adult and autonomous persons, but a community, a biocoenosis which has evolved its own regulating factors, its own enormously varied ways of life over several thousand million years” (Clark 1977: 31).

In a subsequent article O'Neill (1986) responds to what she perceives as a general and dismaying tendency of "Wittgensteinian writers"—among whom she counts Cora Diamond—to cite literary and sometimes hypothetical examples as objects for moral reflection rather than engaging with universalizing moral theories. Noting that Wittgensteinian authors speak of the possibility "of coming to see the sense or point of a mode of life in a different way" and of undergoing "an 'education of the heart' towards enlarged and deepened moral sympathies,"⁵ O'Neill (1986: 15) complains that such authors neglect the equally likely possibility that appeals to the heart will lead one's moral sympathies to be contracted and debased. In discussing this contention, Mulhall (2009: 13) observes that it hardly counts against the sort of claim that Diamond is making concerning the morally and emotionally expansive potential of literary works. If we were to dismiss this potential on the grounds that literature can also engender contrary results, we should by parity of reasoning also reject the very forms of argumentation that O'Neill valorizes, given that formally valid philosophical arguments may be deployed just as readily in support of morally constricting conclusions as in support of morally edifying ones.

This debate involving O'Neill, Diamond, Mulhall and others could be elaborated at length. For my present purposes, however, its most salient aspect is the way in which it raises the issue of whether, or how, works of literature in general and of narrative fiction in particular can play a role in philosophical discourse. While there is no disagreement between the interlocutors I have mentioned over whether literature can instigate changes in a reader's attitudes and convictions, there is pronounced disagreement over whether the means by which literature achieves these changes is properly rational and hence properly philosophical. Although Diamond herself is not explicitly arguing that works of literature, such as certain of Dickens' novels, are in fact doing philosophy, she is arguing for an augmented conception of

⁵ Cf. Diamond's (1991: 303) talk of "the education of the emotions and ... the development of moral sensibility."

what constitute legitimate means of convincing someone of something—a conception that would allow the kinds of appeals to sentiment and to feelings of kinship that are evinced in Clark’s case for the better treatment of animals to count as philosophical. Mulhall, for his part, does explicitly argue for the capacity of narrative fiction, in the media both of literature and of film, to philosophize—or, as he sometimes puts it, to be “in the condition of philosophy” (Mulhall 2008: 130).⁶ Since this claim is important for my contention that narrative fiction can *be*, or *do*, philosophy of religion in particular, let us pursue Mulhall’s line of thought a little farther.

Although Mulhall has written extensively on both film and literature in relation to philosophy, his most focused treatment of the question of whether narrative fiction can philosophize comes in his writings on film.⁷ Rather than trying to develop an a priori theoretical account to justify the contention that films can—and some films do—philosophize, Mulhall’s strategy is for the most part to discuss specific examples that demonstrate films philosophizing. In defending his contention against objections, however, Mulhall adduces some more general considerations in support of the capacious conception of philosophical reasoning that is essential to the case he is building. Following Diamond, Mulhall wants to place in question the assumption that when it comes to reasoning, the emotions and imagination ought, as far as possible, to be kept out of the picture. In the face of the temptation to regard “the imagination and the heart” as entirely separate from reason, Mulhall contends that these various faculties “might in fact be internally related,” in the sense not only “that imaginative and emotional responses are themselves answerable to the claims of reason” but also “that reason without imagination and feeling would be, morally speaking, dead” (2008: 141).

⁶ The phrase is inherited from Cavell ([1971] 1979: 14): “Art now exists in the condition of philosophy.”

⁷ Most notably Mulhall (2008), esp. chap. 5, which itself is largely derived from Mulhall (2007).

Taking issue with the objection that while films may be capable of presenting us with imaginative visions of the world, they are not capable of offering reasons for supposing those visions to be “accurate,” Mulhall (2008: 136–138) proposes that, in many instances, coming to view the world differently may be precisely the film’s point—or one of its points. It may, for example, be an articulation of “different visions of what matters in human life, different conceptions of human flourishing” (140), in which case it is far from obvious what application the concept of accuracy would have. More appropriate, Mulhall suggests, would be notions of coherence and comprehensiveness—how readily a reconceptualization of an ethically infused situation can accommodate and connect with other aspects of human life. “Giving reasons” would then take the form of showing how the vision of life at issue opens up fresh possibilities of understanding and of engaging with the world, rather than, more narrowly, of “giving reasons for and against an opinion” (Mulhall 2008: 138).

It is noteworthy that, notwithstanding the significant divergences between O’Neill’s adherence to a particular model of philosophical argumentation on the one hand, and the more capacious conceptions of philosophy’s possibilities exemplified by Diamond and Mulhall on the other, these interlocutors share an underlying assumption that philosophy’s business consists in certain modes of advocacy. While O’Neill envisages philosophy as an activity ideally uncontaminated by emotion or imagination, Diamond and Mulhall want these latter components of human reality to be recognized as having a legitimate place in philosophical reasoning. It is when—and perhaps only when—this more encompassing understanding of philosophy is adopted that, on Mulhall’s account, works of narrative fiction, in the media of film and literature, become appreciable as existing in the condition of philosophy. However, for Mulhall and Diamond as well as for O’Neill there is an operative assumption that philosophy’s task is to militate for a change in one’s audience: for a change of opinion or judgment, in O’Neill’s view, or—as Mulhall, following Diamond, prefers to

emphasize—for a change in “prevailing inclinations and assumptions” (2008: 141; 2009: 8). There are, though, alternative conceptions of philosophy, one of which in particular is concerned not with advocating either specific conclusions or specific shifts in sympathies and inclinations, but with “doing conceptual justice to the world in all its variety” (Phillips 2003: 182; 2007b: 207). I shall now turn to that conception, which is associated especially with D. Z. Phillips, who was a consistently provocative and contrarian voice amid the melee of philosophy of religion from the 1960s until his death in 2006.⁸

III Contemplation and Radical Pluralism

The way in which Phillips inherits a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy differs from that of Diamond and Mulhall. Phillips’ “contemplative conception of philosophy”—his “hermeneutics of contemplation”—is so called because it seeks only to contemplate “possibilities of sense” without appropriating or rejecting them (Phillips 1999; 2001: 5 *et passim*). In the context of philosophy of religion Phillips came occasionally to refer both to his approach and to its subject matter as “radical pluralism,” which, in contrast with the kind of religious or theological pluralism associated with figures such as John Hick, strives not to discriminate, on moral grounds, between supposedly authentic and supposedly inauthentic or corrupt forms of religion (Phillips 2007b: esp. 203–210). Of course, qua human being, one will inevitably have certain preferences and aversions that manifest in one’s thoughts and behaviour: there will be views and practices that one would advocate and others that one would wish to prevent. Phillips is not denying that. What he is denying is that these preferences and aversions should interfere with one’s philosophical pursuits.

There is, Phillips maintains, no internal relation between one’s level of philosophical understanding of a particular moral or religious outlook on the one hand and one’s own moral

⁸ For a thoroughgoing critical examination of Phillips’ work and location in the philosophy of religion up to 2003, see Bloemendaal (2006).

or religious reactions on the other. Thus, for example, there would be no inconsistency in developing a deep understanding of a religious ritual that involves animal sacrifice while at the same time being appalled by such rituals and wanting to bring them to an end (Phillips 2007a: 44). The point of philosophizing, according to this conception, is to elucidate the variety of perspectives, both religious and nonreligious, that human beings adopt in relation to the world, without trying to arbitrate between them in the name of some purportedly neutral and universally applicable standard of rationality (Phillips 2004: 55; cf. Winch 1996). It is the recognition and understanding of diversity—or radical plurality—that is prioritized by a contemplative conception of philosophy, as opposed to the changing of one’s interlocutors’ views or attitudes. There is not a sharp distinction here, for bringing one’s readers or interlocutors to see the sense in a perspective that they had previously failed to see, or had seen only in a partial or distorted manner, will inevitably effect some change on their part. The important point, however, is that seeing the sense in a perspective ought not to be conflated with adopting that perspective oneself: as Phillips was keen to emphasize, “Conceptual clarification is wider than personal appropriation [or indeed personal repudiation]” (1999: 163; cf. 1970: 166).

Accepting Phillips’ contemplative conception as a genuine philosophical option has significant implications for the question of whether works of narrative fiction can themselves philosophize. Important among these implications is the fact that in order to arrive at an affirmative answer to the question, not only will it not be necessary to show that narrative fiction supplies the kinds of arguments to which someone such as O’Neill considers philosophy to be methodologically committed, but neither will it be necessary to show, as Diamond and Mulhall seek to do, that narrative fiction can engender moral transformation in its audiences. Instead, it will be necessary only to show that narrative fiction is capable of elucidating possibilities of sense—possibilities of moral, religious and nonreligious

meaning—in ways that enable audiences to find that sense, or discover a richness of sense, where it had previously been opaque or entirely obscure to them. If narrative fiction can do that much, then it can profitably contribute to efforts in philosophy of religion more generally by making available to philosophers working in that field detailed embodiments of perspectives that might otherwise easily be neglected or conflated in the rush to pin down sharply definable “positions” that are amenable to critical evaluation in terms of rationality and truth. Once again, there is no need to reject such evaluative approaches entirely in order to appreciate the kind of challenging and problematizing of hasty assumptions and homogenizing definitions that attention to particulars can afford.

Although Phillips himself is not concerned with explicitly pushing the contention that works of narrative fiction can or do philosophize, it is easy to see from the roles that narrative fiction plays in his work that no extravagant moves would be required to extend his claims on behalf of narrative fiction to embrace that contention. Like Mulhall, Phillips acknowledges that literature can offer more than mere examples that illustrate points derived from elsewhere. Instead, it constitutes a resource “from which philosophy can benefit in wrestling with issues concerning the firm or slackening hold of various perspectives in human life” (Phillips 1982: 1), reminding us “of the heterogeneity of values in human life, the variety of moral perspectives” (3). While some philosophers share O’Neill’s view that literature’s focus on specific characters and situations vitiates its capacity to inform the sorts of universalizable claims that are the proper outcomes of philosophical theorizing, Phillips maintains that it is precisely by attending to “the detail and particularity displayed in literature” that the “obscuring generality” typical of many “philosophical theories about morality” might be avoided (4). As Phillips would freely acknowledge, these proposals apply as strongly to discussions of religious thought and life as they do to morality (cf. Phillips 2006).

I shall not be arguing in this article for the superiority of one conception of philosophy over others; for one thing, it is far from clear how such an argument could proceed. I have defended the coherence and viability of a contemplative approach elsewhere (Burley 2012; 2015a), without insisting that it is the best or only legitimate way of going on in philosophy. The essential point for my present purpose is simply that a contemplative conception of philosophy, as exemplified by Phillips, is one philosophical possibility. It is by putting it into practice that we see whether or to what extent it can generate philosophical illumination as opposed to obfuscation.

It is in the context of elaborating his notion of a “[c]ontemplative attention to radical plurality” and the kind of disinterestedness that such contemplation requires that Phillips adduces his analogy with theatrical art. “Comparisons have been made,” he writes,

between the philosopher’s interest and that of a dramatist staging a play involving characters in conflict with each other, a conflict which may end in tragic irreconcilability. The dramatist is not interested in resolving that conflict (the familiar weakness of didactic literature), but in showing it to us, so that we may understand it. The dramatist’s interest is in giving a faithful account of that segment of human life. Similarly, though inspired by the different questions of their subject, contemplative philosophers are engaged in the enormously difficult task of being conceptually faithful to the world. One’s own values, which may be held very strongly, may well get in the way of seeing points of view which are other than one’s own. One’s own values may get in the way of the moral demands of philosophical enquiry. (Phillips 2007b: 207–208)

By “the moral demands of philosophical enquiry,” then, Phillips means the demands of suspending one’s moral evaluations for the sake of achieving a more detached and

disinterested perspective on the phenomena at issue. This, he suggests, is comparable to the disinterestedness of a playwright who, placing competing voices in juxtaposition to one another in order to accentuate the divergences between them, does not presume that they can ultimately be harmonized or reconciled. Needless to say, the analogy would not work in relation to every dramatist. There are, as Phillips notes, didactic works of literature; and, moreover, we ought not to assume that plays are never intended to portray the reconciliation of ostensibly incongruent positions. The paradigm that Phillips probably has most prominently in mind is William Shakespeare, who is frequently acclaimed by critics for his ability, especially in his later plays, to personify multiple perspectives in his characters without allowing his own authorial voice to interfere.⁹ Phillips himself praises Shakespeare indirectly by observing that he was regarded by Wittgenstein “with awe” for his ability to simply place a world before us and invite us to inspect it—in something resembling the manner in which, by presenting to us a “city with no main road,” Wittgenstein seeks “to do justice to different ways of speaking and thinking” (Phillips 1999: 166).¹⁰

A central claim of mine in this article is that the analogy can be turned around: just as the contemplative philosopher brings out the radical plurality of human ways of looking at the world, so, when works of literary drama and other genres of narrative fiction serve to bring out that plurality, they too can be seen as engaging in contemplative philosophizing—a philosophizing that redirects attention from abstract generalities to concrete particularities. Before coming to my principal example of such literary contemplative philosophy, I want in the next section to develop the theme of narrative fiction as a form of philosophy of religion

⁹ See, e.g., Bellette’s (1978: 65) assessment that, in Shakespeare’s late plays, “Each person speaks in the way which is most directly expressive of his or her nature. Language never draws attention to itself: at its most densely involute and at its most rustically plain it has the same function, to embody a specific perception of the world which to the speaker is truth.”

¹⁰ In fact, Wittgenstein’s opinion of Shakespeare was ambivalent and complex, but this is not the place to get embroiled in that discussion; see, e.g., Huemer (2013) and Perloff (2014).

by discussing work not by Phillips but by another Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher, Stewart Sutherland.

IV Narrative Fiction as Philosophy of Religion

Although, arguably, the philosophical potential of works of narrative fiction has been underappreciated and poorly utilized in the philosophy of religion, there are some exceptions to the general rule. Stories from the Bible, for example, have been expounded and analysed in a major study of the problem of suffering by Eleonore Stump (2010). While biblical narratives are likely to be held by many believers to be better categorized as scripture or revelation rather than as fiction, Stump's work demonstrates one way in which narrative material can be treated as participating in philosophical activity in the study of religion—a way that looks to religious stories for articulations of how, often despite surface appearances, suffering may contribute towards the instantiation of redemptive meaning in a person's life.¹¹ Meanwhile, in the neighbouring discipline of theology, in which some engagement with scriptural sources is essential, certain authors have sought to inspire fresh approaches to scripture by looking to discussions in philosophy of how narrative fiction can philosophize. John Barton in particular has been prominent in drawing heavily upon work by Martha Nussbaum for this purpose (Barton 1996; 2000; 2003: 15–36; cf. Chun 2014). Closer to the spirit of Phillips' contemplative conception of philosophy of religion, however, is Stewart Sutherland's (1977) work on Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, which Sutherland interprets to comprise not merely one of the profoundest challenges to Christian faith but also the exemplification of a possible response, constituted by the literary depiction of a form of religious life that persists in the face of the challenge in question. Examining Sutherland's

¹¹ Stump's project has in turn spawned a fruitful critical debate concerning the project's strengths and weaknesses. Recent contributions include Efirid and Worsley (2015) and Fales (2013).

discussion will, I am proposing, help to deepen our appreciation of how narrative fiction can participate in a specifically contemplative philosophical approach to religion.

Sutherland's aim is twofold. First, he wants to undermine the lazy assumption, albeit one that remains prevalent in contemporary philosophy of religion, that the difference between belief in God and atheism consists in a simple opposition of attitudes towards the proposition "God exists"—an opposition in which the believer (or, as it is commonly put, "theist") holds the proposition to be true or at least to be well supported by the available evidence, whereas the atheist holds the proposition to be false or, at any rate, to be highly improbable in the light of the available evidence. Sutherland considers this to be a gross oversimplification of the nature and variety of the respective doxastic positions themselves and hence also of the complex relationship between them. To undermine this simplistic picture and replace it with a more nuanced one, Sutherland analyses the form of atheism exhibited by Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky's famous last novel. Ivan's atheism consists not in an unequivocal denial of God's existence; rather, while admitting that he "accepts God," Ivan maintains that he does not accept the world that God has created, for it is a world riddled with insufferable horrors, epitomized by the torture of children (Dostoevsky [1880] 1912: 241, 251; Sutherland 1977: 28). While some commentators remain unconvinced that Ivan's stance can rightly be described as atheism at all (e.g., Battersby 1978), Sutherland argues that Ivan's use of phrases such as "I accept God" are deliberate *misuses*, which are parasitic upon the primary uses deployed when those who believe in God confess their faith with due emotional resonance. By uttering such phrases either without expressing the emotions that inform their primary usage or in order to express entirely contrary emotions, Ivan, on Sutherland's analysis, is rejecting, not affirming, belief in God (Sutherland 1977: esp. 55–56).

Having argued, then, that Ivan Karamazov, as portrayed by Dostoevsky, does indeed embody a form of atheism, Sutherland embarks upon the second main component of his

project, which is to expound the response to Ivan's atheism that Dostoevsky offers in Book 6 of the novel. Dostoevsky himself characterized his response as "an artistic picture, so to speak"—one that does not directly address every point raised by Ivan, but addresses them "only by implication."¹² Sutherland argues that Dostoevsky's strategy can usefully be described by invoking Wittgenstein's notion of a form of life. What Dostoevsky presents us with is a detailed literary exposition of the form of life characteristic of a type of belief in God, namely the type exhibited by the monk Zossima and his disciple, the youngest of the Karamazov brothers, Alyosha. By doing so, Sutherland maintains, Dostoevsky shows us how the forms of religious language that are mocked in Ivan's deliberately vulgar appropriations have a vivacity, richness and coherence in the lives of genuine believers, which could hardly fail to be absent from the disingenuous tones of an atheist.

Central to Sutherland's argument is the idea that, by enabling the reader to imagine the form of life in question—indeed, by vividly displaying that form of life—a work of literature can disclose intelligibility in modes of language and action that readers may previously have struggled to discern. In developing this contention Sutherland draws upon certain of Wittgenstein's remarks in which Wittgenstein is questioning both what it means to discover that a sentence does or does not make sense and what it means to assert that one means something by one's words (Sutherland 1977: 86). In these remarks, Wittgenstein links the search for intelligibility with, first, the investigation of a sentence's application within a broader context or "language-game" and, second, the attempt to "imagine something in connection with it," noting that "[a]n image often leads to a further application" (Wittgenstein 1967: §247). These associations between intelligibility and imaginability, combined with Wittgenstein's assertion elsewhere that "to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (1958: §19), encourage Sutherland (1977: 86) to argue for the merit of Dostoevsky's

¹² Fyodor Dostoevsky, letter to Constantine Petrovich Pobedonostev, 24 August/5 September 1879, in Coulson (1962: 224); also quoted in Sutherland (1977: 83).

strategy, which consists in the construction of “an artistic picture” displaying the intelligibility and depth of the modes of belief, action and discourse that Ivan’s passionate diatribe has placed in question.

Assessing whether Book 6 of *The Brothers Karamazov* is ultimately successful as a response to Ivan’s challenge is no straightforward matter. There is a sense in which the question of success in a case such as this is not one that can be answered definitively or wholly objectively, a principal reason for this being precisely the even-handedness with which the author, Dostoevsky, delineates the perspectives in the novel. Just as Ivan’s atheism has rhetorical force and psychological complexity, so also do the Christian lives of Alyosha and Father Zossima. Far from didactically insisting that the Christian life is the more authentic or genuine, a consequence of Dostoevsky’s strategy is that the novel leaves open the possibility that readers’ strongest sympathies will lie with Ivan’s protest. This openness is implicitly evinced by the many theologians and philosophers of religion who cite Ivan’s outrage at the suffering of children as an eloquent encapsulation of the darkest tragedy that believers or would-be believers in God must somehow confront.¹³ It is the evocative strength of Ivan’s animated interlocution with Alyosha that has resulted in its occasional inclusion in the “problem of evil” sections of philosophy of religion anthologies (e.g., Rowe and Wainwright 1973: 197–205; Pojman and Rea 2012: 291–297).

One reason why the success of Dostoevsky’s literary riposte to Ivan’s challenge cannot be determined in strictly objective terms is that the success or failure of the depiction of a form of life—and hence whether that form of life, along with the varieties of behaviour and discourse that constitute it, is at all attractive or even intelligible—is not amenable to the sorts of criteria of evaluation that might be deployed in, for example, evaluating the logical validity

¹³ Such theologians and philosophers of religion include, in recent decades, Surin (1986: 96–105), Bauckham (1987), Trakakis (2008: 18–24) and Gleeson (2012: 1–6 *et passim*). Cf. Gibson’s (1973: 176) assertion that Dostoevsky “changed the face of theology. ... Henceforward, no justification of evil, by its outcome or its context, has been possible; Ivan Karamazov has seen to that.”

of a deductive argument. The kind of coherence exhibited by a form of life consists as much in the lateral connections between its constituent features as it does in the patterns of inference that obtain within it. In other words, its coherence is liable to be more a matter of its various components “hanging together” in relations of complementarity and mutual support than in linear paths of inferential reasoning.¹⁴ And even in cases where drawing logical inferences from premises does play a constitutive role in a form of life, the coherence of the entire form of life cannot reasonably be determined in relation to isolated strands of argument; for coherence may be lacking in one or more constituents without its necessarily being lacking in the whole.

Moreover, even if Dostoevsky’s depiction of a Christian form of life through his characterization of Zossima and Alyosha is deemed to be coherent, this will not secure its convincingness in the sense of leading the reader inexorably to the conviction that Ivan’s rebellion is misguided or that the Christian message is true; for whether the response is convincing in that sense will depend on any number of psychological and biographical features of the reader in question. But whether the novel is successful in presenting to us a *possibility* of religious sense—a possible way of making religious sense of the world—does not require that it convince anyone of its truth. Sutherland follows Mikhail Bakhtin in regarding *The Brothers Karamazov* as a “polyphonic” novel: a novel in which no single character constitutes a mouthpiece of the author and no viewpoint represents a reconciliation of contrary impulses. Rather, “A *plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices* ... combine but are not merged in the unity of the event” (Bakhtin [1929/1963] 1984: 6; original emphasis)—in the unity, that

¹⁴ Similar things are said by Mulhall in connection with his readings of certain films, readings whose aim is “to show how various elements within [the films] have a significance that depends on the way they hang together with other elements to make a coherent whole” (2008: 138).

is, of the shared world in which the characters in the novel coexist, for “No single vision could encompass all that Dostoevsky refused to omit” (Sutherland 1977: 140).

This interpretation of Dostoevsky’s literary production as an ongoing exchange of contrary voices, which effectively brings those voices into sharper relief by means of their juxtaposition, locates Dostoevsky’s enterprise firmly within the sphere of what Phillips describes as the disinterested task of the writer, namely the task of presenting a faithful picture of divergent perspectives on human life without privileging one or other of them as superior. Notwithstanding his own personal religious commitments, Dostoevsky refuses to paint a watered-down version of anti-religious protest: he gives us what he considers to be an “irresistible” case for the “absurdity” of human life and history: “the senselessness of the suffering of children.”¹⁵ But then, in the dignified faith of Father Zossima, he goes on to try to refute that case. The result is the vivid exposition of contrasting perspectives on the world, each of which is in its own way resolutely sincere.

Having seen, then, one example of how a great work of narrative fiction can plausibly be regarded as elucidating and thereby “doing conceptual justice to” conflicting points of view, and having seen also how in the light of a “contemplative conception” of philosophy this very activity of elucidation can be construed as a mode of philosophizing, let us now turn to a further example: an example that contributes to the liberation of philosophy of religion from the confines of narrow western-centric understandings of religious possibilities.

V Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*

¹⁵ Dostoevsky, letter to N. A. Lyubimov, 10 May 1879, in Coulson (1962: 220). Cf. Barnhart (2005: ix): “As an artist, Dostoevsky did not cheat his major characters. Whereas a lesser writer might have diluted Ivan Karamazov’s moral protest against the horrors within creation, Dostoevsky, knowing that Ivan’s ‘rebellion’ would send arrows deep into Christian theodicy, let him release them with full force.”

Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) has been a provocative and invigorating presence on the African—and the world—literary scene since the late 1950s. *Death and the King's Horseman*, published in 1975 and first performed at the University of Ife in December 1976, was his seventeenth play and was among the works cited by the Swedish Academy of Literature when Soyinka became the first African to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986 (Gibbs 1993: 58; Gikandi 2003: vii). Resonating far beyond its Nigerian context, the play has, according to more than one commentator, acquired a canonical status in the area of “modern drama in general and African culture in particular” (Gikandi 2003: xix).¹⁶ Its plot is based on events that began during late 1944 and culminated on 4 January 1945 in the Nigerian city of Oyo (Msiska 2007: 57), though Soyinka’s own prefatory note to the published edition mistakenly ascribes the events to 1946 (Soyinka 1975: 6; cf. Gibbs 1986: 118).

The events in question revolved around the figure of the Elesin (Chief Horseman) of the Alafin (King) of the Yorùbá people of Oyo. When the Alafin died in December 1944 it was expected that, in accordance with a longstanding custom, not only would his favourite dog and horse be ritually killed, but the Elesin would himself perform ritual suicide on the night of the Alafin’s burial in order to guide these animals “through the transitional passage to the world of the ancestors” (Gates 1981: 167). To enact this self-sacrifice was considered by the community not merely a matter of family honour on the Elesin’s part but a necessity for maintaining both the social and the cosmic order (Ojaide 1992–1993: 212); it was to be the defining moment of the Elesin’s life. Before he could fulfil it, however, the Elesin was apprehended by the British colonial authorities specifically to prevent the “savage” deed from being carried out. Hearing of this, the Elesin’s youngest son killed himself in place of his father (Gates 1981: 167; Msiska 2007: 57–58).

¹⁶ Cf. Williams (1993: 72): “Within Soyinka’s corpus, *Death and The King’s Horseman* has achieved the status of a classic.”

Having long been fascinated by this poignant and tragic episode, Soyinka moulded its principal components into his dramatic retelling during his time as a visiting fellow at the University of Cambridge in 1973–1974.¹⁷ In Soyinka’s rendition of the narrative the Elesin is a flamboyant character who himself embodies a deeply rooted conflict between competing impulses: on the one hand, he is inexorably drawn into the ritual that surrounds him, the hypnotic drum rhythms calling to him like an evocative communication from Orun, the world of the ancestors; on the other hand, he feels comfortably embedded in the sensuality of his present world, enjoying the pleasures of food, fine clothes and sexual intimacy. This tension within the personality of the Elesin is among the factors that prevent Soyinka’s play from becoming a simplistic portrayal of a binary opposition between two incompatible worldviews—the mythopoetic spirituality of the Yorùbá versus the hyper-rationalism of the British colonialists. It is precisely such a glib “clash of cultures” interpretation that Soyinka warns his readers against in his prefatory note (Soyinka 1975: 6). The conflict at the heart of the play is undoubtedly culturally inflected, but it is made more nuanced by the fact that none of the central characters is a mere caricature: each harbours internal complexities that evolve to greater or lesser degrees as the play progresses. I shall here summarize the play before, in the next section, analysing its significance as an instantiation of contemplative philosophy of religion in the form of narrative fiction.

Comprising five scenes, *Death and the King’s Horseman* begins in the hustle and bustle of the marketplace. The Elesin, accompanied by drummers and praise-singers, converses rumbustiously with the market women, inviting them to clothe him in their finest garments. Spotting a young woman with whom he wishes to make love, the Elesin insists that she become his bride that very day, before he departs from the earth. The second scene takes us

¹⁷ Soyinka was not the first to adapt the incident into a play. He was preceded by Duro Ladipo, whose *Ọba Waja* (“The King is Dead”) encapsulates the events in five highly condensed acts comprising just nineteen pages in the original publication (Ladipo 1964: 54–72).

into the residence of the colonial District Officer, Simon Pilkings, and his wife Jane. Their musical accompaniment is a tango played on a hand-cranked gramophone, though the drumming that presages the Elesin's imminent death is audible from afar. The gramophone is turned off when Simon and Jane are interrupted by a local police sergeant, Amusa, who has come to inform them of the impending sacrifice and to request instructions on what to do about it. The Pilkingses, who are preparing to attend a fancy dress ball, are garbed in *egungun*, ancestral costumes that have been confiscated from Yorùbá ritual participants. Despite being a Muslim, Amusa is shocked by this desecration of traditional sacred apparel. It is to a fourth character in the scene—a young Nigerian houseboy named Joseph who has been converted to Christianity by British missionaries—that Simon Pilkings turns in order to interpret the meaning of the distant drumming.

In Scene 3 we return to the marketplace, where Amusa and two constables are attempting to find the Elesin. They are obstructed by the market women, who taunt them mercilessly both with insinuations about their lack of virility and for being lackeys of the colonial regime. When the police officers have fled, the Elesin emerges; having consummated his marriage to his new young bride, he is apparently ready to complete the night's ritual by performing a final dance of death. The location of Scene 4 is the masked ball at the British colonial Residency, where the guest of honour is the Prince of Wales, who has stopped off as part of a tour of British colonies during this time of war. The Pilkingses' enjoyment of the party is curtailed by a messenger's bringing a note from Amusa declaring that the market women are "rioting." Shortly after Amusa's own arrival the chimes of midnight strike, this being the time at which the Elesin is due to die, prompting Simon Pilkings to hurry to the market himself with the constables. After this departure, the Elesin's son, Olunde, turns up at the Residency looking for Simon. Having been in England studying for a medical degree, Olunde has come back precisely to perform the burial that should follow his father's death. A long exchange

with Jane Pilkings ensues in which he shares his misgivings about the culture he has encountered in England. Then Simon Pilkings reappears along with a handcuffed Elesin. Olunde is appalled that his father has failed to execute his ritual duty. The Elesin is mortally ashamed.

Finally, Scene 5 witnesses the Elesin chained in a prison cell, despondent. He is visited by Iyaloja, leader of the market women, who castigates him for having “betrayed” the King and the community. Other women then bring the body of Olunde, who, off-stage, has killed himself in place of his father. The Elesin, overcome with despair, swiftly strangles himself with his prison chain. The play ends with Iyaloja turning to the Elesin’s young wife, who has been there all along, and recommending that she “Now forget the dead, forget even the living,” and (on the assumption that she has conceived a child with the Elesin) “Turn your mind only to the unborn” (Soyinka 1975: 76).

Although this brief summary that I have provided hardly begins to do justice to the rich emotional and imaginative intensity of Soyinka’s drama, it is essential background for our consideration of how *Death and the King’s Horseman* might be regarded as a work of narrative fiction in the condition of philosophy of religion.

VI *Death and the King’s Horseman* as Philosophy of Religion

As we have seen, D. Z. Phillips compares the task of the contemplative philosopher to that of the dramatist who seeks not to reconcile the divergent viewpoints of a play’s characters, but to display the divergences so that the audience may better understand them. Having already considered one example—Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*—of a work of narrative fiction that can be regarded as elucidating possibilities of religious and of nonreligious sense in a way comparable to that of Phillips’ contemplative conception of philosophy of religion, let us now turn the spotlight on the specifically theatrical example of *Death and the King’s*

Horseman. To begin with, we might note that Soyinka's play immerses its audience in a cultural milieu characterized not merely by conflicting human voices but by an aesthetically rich melange of colour and sound. "*Death and the King's Horseman* can be fully realised," Soyinka writes, "only through an evocation of music from the abyss of transition" (Soyinka 1975: 7), the "abyss" being the space between life and the world of the ancestors, a space depicted in rhythm and dance that generate "an air of mystery and wonder" (Gates 1981: 168).¹⁸ The play itself can be viewed as an instance of ritual, the borderline between drama and ritual being especially porous in certain African contexts (cf. Ojaide 1992–1993: 211).¹⁹ Indeed, Soyinka (1982: 241) has characterized modern drama as "a contraction" of more traditional forms of communal activity that weave dramatic elements into festivals and ceremonies. By incorporating ritual motifs, *Death and the King's Horseman* becomes more than simply a play about the disruption of a ritual: it is in part the re-enactment of the very ritual that is disrupted.

Notwithstanding Soyinka's insistence that to conceive of the play as portraying a "clash of cultures" would be overly simplistic, the range of conflicts exhibited in the play does include the opposition between the stuffy superficiality of the British colonials on the one hand and the culturally and spiritually rich sagacity of the Yorùbá people on the other. This opposition is embodied in the architecture and atmosphere of what Soyinka describes in his stage directions as the "tawdry decadence" of the masked ball at the colonial Residency (1975: 45), which stands in contrast to the colour and vibrancy of the Oyo marketplace. So too is the opposition manifested through the poetic resonances of the Yorùbá speech patterns, replete with idiomatic phrases and proverbial allusions, which give voice to modes of perception that elude the weary and cynical secularism of the colonial officials.

¹⁸ Cf. Soyinka (1978: 145): "Tragic music is an echo from that void; the celebrant speaks, sings and dances in authentic archetypal images from within the abyss."

¹⁹ "Tragic theatre is a literal development of ritual" (Wole Soyinka, quoted in Gates 1981: 173).

How the play avoids being reducible to this binary opposition between “Europe” and “Africa” or between the “secular” and the “spiritual” is by evincing internal complexity within both the colonial and the indigenous communities and also by illustrating the possibility of transcultural values and mutual understanding. In some instances the complexities are played out in the life and psyche of a single character, the Elesin himself being the principal exemplar. Entrusted by tradition with the responsibility of mediating the King’s passage from earth to the world of the ancestors, the Elesin is ostensibly resolute in his enthusiasm to embrace this role: “My soul is eager. I shall not turn aside”—“I like this farewell that the world designed” (Soyinka 1975: 14, 18). But at the same time he is ineluctably drawn to the sensual enjoyments of his present environment: the aroma of the market women, “their sweat, the smell of indigo on their cloth, this is the last air I wish to breathe as I go to meet my great forebears” (10). Although the colonial officials’ intervention is patently momentous in vitiating the fulfilment of his destiny, it is the Elesin’s own inner conflicts—between sensuality and mortification, between accepting and forestalling death—that establish him as, more than a passive victim of colonial power, a tragic protagonist, encapsulating the tensions that plague a culture torn between tradition and modernity.

Meanwhile, suggestions of transcultural values and potential cross-cultural understanding emerge through the dialogue at various moments, most notably in the fourth scene’s extended colloquy between Jane Pilkings and the Elesin’s son, Olunde. The latter’s experience as a medical student in London has brought him into contact with war-injured soldiers, whose bravery he admires. His interlocutor, Jane, having remarked that the expat community to which she belongs has been somewhat remote from the war, mentions one exception—a “bit of excitement” when a British ship in the harbour “had to be blown up because it had become dangerous to the other ships, even to the city itself” (Soyinka 1975: 51). Recounting that the captain of the ship had remained on board in order to light the fuse, thereby sacrificing his

life for the safety of others, Jane apologizes for welcoming Olunde “with such morbid news” (51). Olunde, by contrast, views the event not as morbid but as “an affirmative commentary on life” (51)—an instance of someone’s acting out of a sense of responsibility for the surrounding populace rather than out of petty self-interest. There are, of course, pronounced differences between the sacrificial act of the ship’s captain and the ritual self-sacrifice that Olunde’s father is due to execute and which Olunde himself ends up making. As one commentator has put it, “the sacrifice of the captain is entirely secular and practical. He dies to preserve the physical rather than the metaphysical safety of his community,” whereas “[t]he sacrifice of Olunde which it foreshadows is ... essentially religious” (Booth 1993: 133). But insofar as both acts display an overcoming of attachment to one’s individual existence on earth, they represent at least a starting point for an exploration of common values.

Jane Pilkings is initially resistant to the idea that there could be anything valuable, anything worthwhile, in a rite of the sort that the Elesin is expected to perform. She can conceive of the act of self-killing only as something from which the Elesin must be protected. What Olunde tries to make clear to her, and what Soyinka elucidates through the character of Olunde, is that an alternative conception of protection is available, according to which being protected is not a matter of one’s mere physical survival being safeguarded; rather, it is a matter of living in accordance with the cultural norms and customs that give meaning and significance to one’s life, even when—or especially when—those norms and customs demand that one’s this-worldly life be ended. “What can you offer him,” Olunde asks, “in place of his peace of mind, in place of the honour and veneration of his own people?” (Soyinka 1975: 53). Although Jane’s resistance to seeing anything other than barbarism and outdated feudalism in the Elesin’s act persists for a while, there comes a moment—the moment in which Olunde is first confronted with the reality that his father’s death has been

prevented—when, in Soyinka’s stage directions, we are informed that Jane finally understands (60). Although we are not told exactly what she now understands, she displays in her gesture of gently trying to move Olunde, who has become frozen in horror at the calamitous truncation of the ritual, a recognition of what the ritual and the Yorùbá worldview of which it is an integral part mean both to Olunde and, by extension, to the indigenous inhabitants of Oyo more generally. In that moment the audience sees realized the possibility of understanding across what had appeared an unbridgeable cultural divide.

The subtlety of Soyinka’s dramatic characterization is evident, then, not only in the tragic figure of the Elesin, but also in other characters, including Jane Pilkings and Olunde. Having received medical training in London and adopted certain trappings of western culture such as the wearing of a suit, Olunde exhibits “the possibility of a *transgressive hybridity*” (Msiska 2007: 57), a dynamic confluence of European and Yorùbá elements that he personifies and articulates through his life and demeanour. And in the act of substituting his own ritual death for that of his father he epitomizes the possibility of retaining a deep connection with one’s religious and cultural heritage in the face of sustained colonial encroachment. Jane Pilkings, meanwhile, instantiates a widening of cultural horizons in her trajectory from perplexity to comprehension. “I’ve always found you somewhat more understanding than your husband,” says Olunde (Soyinka 1975: 52), and Jane does indeed “feel a need to understand all [she] can” (56). The understanding dawns gradually, through listening to Olunde and witnessing what the death ritual and all with which it is connected mean to him. In this respect, Jane Pilkings also reflects the insight gained by the play’s audience as we are enabled to glimpse the sense of the Yorùbá worldview, not through reading *about* it but by experiencing its materialization in the staged performance. This glimpsing of a possibility of sense is itself a type of philosophical comprehension: an enrichment of one’s appreciation of the possibilities

of human life—a recognition that “human life can be like that” (Phillips 2007b: 205; cf. 2000: 42).

Among the characters that embody further perspectives on life, and not least upon the varieties of religious life, are Amusa, Joseph, Iyaloja and Simon Pilkings. Amusa’s stiff posture and evident discomfort both in the presence of his colonial employers and when confronted by the local women, who deride him in the marketplace for being an “eater of white left-overs” (Soyinka 1975: 39), contrasts starkly with Olunde’s confident eloquence. The agitation exhibited by Amusa at the Pilkingses’ contemptuous misappropriation of the sacred *egungun* costumes discloses the fact that, as Olakunle George has observed, “his conceptual universe remains deeply tied to traditional Yoruba culture even though the secular demand of his job requires him not only to repudiate that culture but also to subject it to the discipline of colonial modernity” (1999: 76). It is in large part in the earnestness of Amusa’s reaction that we see the *egungun*’s symbolic depth. While Simon and Jane Pilkings can see only superstition in Amusa’s refusal to look at the *egungun*, there is in this refusal also an unwillingness to treat death lightly. Despite having been among the police officers who confiscated the costumes from men whom Jane Pilkings describes as “creating trouble in town,” Amusa did not touch the *egungun* itself: “I treat *egungun* with respect” (Soyinka 1975: 25). One might say that Amusa recognizes in the costumes an acknowledgment of “the majesty of death,”²⁰ which need not preclude there also being a hint of superstition in his conviction that “This dress get power of dead” (Soyinka 1975: 49).

In the character of Joseph, the young Nigerian boy who has been converted by missionaries, we descry an earnest Christian religiosity that contrasts with the flippancy and

²⁰ Cf. Wittgenstein, who, in his notes on Frazer’s account of the ritual killing of the King of the Wood at Nemi, invites us to “Put that account ... together with the phrase ‘the majesty of death,’” and to thereby see that “The life of the priest-king shows what is meant by that phrase” (1979: 3e). The phrase also occurs, of course, in Emily Dickinson’s poem, *Wait till the Majesty of Death* (1998 I: 205).

irreverence of the colonial officials typified by Simon Pilkings. While Joseph takes seriously the religious doctrines and customs into which he has recently been initiated, Pilkings is unable to show respect not only for traditional Yorùbá cultural artefacts but also for the very Christian heritage that, within this colonial context, is partially constitutive of his European identity (cf. George 1999: 75).²¹

Finally in this overview of alternative religious perspectives embodied in the play, let me again mention Iyaloja, who, as leader and “mother” of the market women, personifies the voice and guardian of Yorùbá tradition. Initially shown as displaying reverence for the Elesin—“Father of us all, tell us where we went astray” (Soyinka 1975: 16)—and urging her fellow stall holders to “robe him richly” in “cloth of honour” (17), Iyaloja gradually comes to discern the flaws in the Elesin’s temperament. When the Elesin, in metaphorical language, alludes to his wishing to take as his bride on the night of his self-sacrifice a young woman who, unbeknown to him, is already betrothed to Iyaloja’s son, Iyaloja says she “dare not understand” what he is suggesting, but neither dare she refuse (21). While conceding to his demand, she begins to see how tied the Elesin is to the pleasures of this world; she urges him not to make a mess of things here before he departs for the hereafter. Later, in the final scene, Iyaloja becomes the voice of rebuke, condemning the Elesin not merely for failing in his ritual duty, but for impregnating his new wife with a child whose very life will be an accursed reminder of its father’s betrayal: “Who are you to bring this abomination on us!” (68). Once the Elesin, upon being shown the lifeless body of his son Olunde, has throttled himself with his prison chain, Iyaloja turns her ire upon Pilkings, who, while meddling with the lives of those whom he does not understand—even appropriating “the vestments of our dead”—nevertheless presumes to be free from “the stain of death” (76).

²¹ See, e.g., Pilkings’ derogatory remarks about “all that holy water nonsense” in Scene 2 (Soyinka 1975: 30).

We thus witness in the character of Iyaloja a movement from deference to suspicion, and finally to a recognition that the Elesin, whom she had assumed to manifest the will of the community, is unworthy of his title. Far from giving up on the Yorùbá tradition, Iyaloja speaks with the confidence of a faith in its veracity; it is from the strength of that faith that the force and poetry of her admonitions derive.

VII Concluding Remarks

Although cultural differences and conflicts between sets of values are at the heart of *Death and the King's Horseman*, it would, as Soyinka insists, be a travesty of the complexities of these differences to reduce them to a simple bifurcation between two mutually incompatible cultures. Instead of a binary opposition, Soyinka's subtle characterization enables us to see tensions internal to both the British colonial and the indigenous Yorùbá communities. Indeed, in some cases he even shows us how tensions can obtain within the life and psyche of a single character (most notably the Elesin) or how someone (such as Jane Pilkings) can undergo a shift in understanding, from ignorance about a cultural or religious perspective to seeing how the perspective in question can infuse a life with meaning. This shift of understanding on the part of a character foreshadows the dawning of understanding that may occur among members of the audience. What I have been arguing is that by facilitating such understanding on the audience's part, a work of drama, or of narrative fiction more generally, of the quality of Soyinka's play fulfils a philosophical purpose, that purpose being the kind of elucidation of possible perspectives on the world that D. Z. Phillips has termed a contemplative conception of philosophy or a hermeneutics of contemplation. For this to be the case it does not matter in the least that at the end of the play the audience do not feel compelled to adopt in their own lives one particular religious or cultural viewpoint rather than another; for a contemplative approach to philosophy of religion sets out not to convert but simply to make

intelligible—to indicate how a way of looking at the world has the sense that it does within a given sociocultural milieu.

Of course, many philosophers of religion will not be satisfied with a contemplative approach. They will insist that philosophy's preeminent task is to critically evaluate the phenomena it investigates, and in the case of religious and moral perspectives this evaluation consists in determining which perspective should be adopted, either because it is true or because it is valuable in some non-epistemic way—perhaps because it will improve one's own or others' well-being.²² The proper task of philosophy remains an ongoing question for philosophy itself. In the early portions of this article I have highlighted how that question has been played out in debates over the philosophical significance of works of narrative fiction, whether these be filmic or literary works. I have not tried to argue in favour of one conception of philosophy or another but merely to affirm that there are indeed different conceptions and that a contemplative conception has a legitimate place among them. What is gained from a contemplative approach is what Phillips terms a “kind of philosophical attention which seeks to do justice to the world” (2001: 33), by which he means “doing conceptual justice to the world in all its variety” (2003: 182). By switching the focus away from building an argument in support of one particular viewpoint and against others, and endeavouring instead to maintain a disinterested stance, the philosopher is at least in principle less open to the temptation to distort the phenomena under investigation or to privilege certain aspects over others for the sake of making an optimally convincing case.

Inevitably, a great deal more could be said about the examples I have offered than I have had space to say in this article. With regard to *Death and the King's Horseman* in particular,

²² See, e.g., Schilbrack (2014: 25), who speaks for many when he asserts that “the distinctive contribution of philosophy of religion has to do with the evaluation of truth claims, which means the assessment of reason-giving and arguments.” For discussion of the view, typified by William James, that the task of philosophy of religion is to evaluate “religious experiences and beliefs ... in terms of practical and ethical criteria,” see Slater (2009: 235).

a more thorough discussion would need to consider whether Soyinka really does maintain a disinterested stance in relation to his characters or whether, instead, the play is implicitly arguing for a specific point of view. At least one commentator has claimed, for instance, that the character Olunde “is the ideological spokesman for the playwright, who is obviously in profound sympathy with the young man’s aspirations” (Williams 1993: 74).²³ This commentator views Olunde’s self-sacrifice as Soyinka’s means of asserting that, “if suicide is the ultimate option available to Africa’s revolutionary intelligentsia in the struggle for a cultural revalidation of the continent, it must be embraced without flinching” (75). It would of course be naïve to suppose that there are no ideological motivations behind Soyinka’s literary works. So too would it be naïve to presume that merely bringing out the intelligibility of certain perspectives—such as the perspectives present among a colonized people vis-à-vis those of their colonizing antagonists—does not in itself have ideological, political and religious ramifications. But a work of narrative fiction can wear its ideological affiliations more or less lightly. As both Diamond (1991: 297) and Phillips (2007b: 207), among many others, readily acknowledge, there are such things as didactic works of literature, and when didacticism is present it frequently detracts from the artwork’s overall quality. However we interpret the ideological implications of a work such as *Death and the King’s Horseman*, an injustice would be done to the work’s sophistication were we to suggest that these implications lie close to the surface.²⁴ On the contrary, Soyinka’s play, like almost any great

²³ Cf. George (1999: 87): “... Olunde is the one figure who not only takes it upon himself to initiate some kind of redress but also has the wherewithal to do so. In this sense he is the playwright’s alter ego, and the play is the idiom of redress.”

²⁴ Soyinka is well known for rejecting reductive ideological readings of his works; see, e.g., Soyinka (1988).

work of art, is amenable to multiple interpretations.²⁵ That is one of the factors constitutive of its greatness.²⁶

My purpose in discussing Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* and also Stewart Sutherland's treatment of Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* has not been to provide thoroughgoing—still less definitive—interpretations of these works, but simply to illustrate my contention that some works of narrative fiction can usefully be regarded as doing philosophy of religion in a contemplative vein. Even if one wishes to quibble with the description of these works as doing philosophy, it will I hope be evident that the contemplative philosopher, along with philosophers of religion more generally, has much to gain from engaging with narrative fiction. The methodological lesson to be learnt from my discussion is, as I noted in the introduction, not that philosophers of religion should write plays or novels instead of academic books and essays—though there have of course been great philosophers who have also been literary virtuosos²⁷—but rather that works of narrative fiction should be taken seriously as more than merely sources of examples that might be borrowed to illustrate arguments developed independently of the narrative works themselves; beyond this, they can be, as it were, dialogue partners who disclose ways of deepening reflection on the multiplex phenomenon of religion, not by giving us a clear-cut definition with which to demarcate the religious from the nonreligious, but precisely, at least in many cases, by exposing its complex and unstable conceptual boundaries, serving to inform rather than settle debates over the category of religion.

²⁵ As the good Brother says of the eponymous “great good place” in one of Henry James’s short stories, “There it is. The thing’s so perfect that it’s open to as many interpretations as any other great work—a poem of Goethe, a dialogue of Plato, a symphony of Beethoven” (James [1900] 1996: 173).

²⁶ Cf. Curtler (1997: 131), who remarks that a great novel “does not have ‘a point’; it has many,” a consequence of which is that “it yields multiple interpretations and invites repeated reading.”

²⁷ Obvious examples include Voltaire, Rousseau, Sartre, de Beauvoir and Camus, though we might also view certain composers of philosophical dialogues, from Plato to Berkeley and from Cicero to Hume, as imbuing their work with a degree of literary theatricality.

Both ethnographic studies of the religious forms of life of diverse communities and works of narrative fiction that juxtapose the viewpoints of diverse characters bring to our notice a “hubbub of voices,” “rubbing against one another and producing both delight and uncertainty”; they assist the philosopher as well as other scholars of religion in avoiding what Wittgenstein (1969: 17–18) terms the “craving for generality,” which seeks a unified account of phenomena at the expense of attention to particular cases. It is attention of the latter kind, combined with an eye for resemblances and broader implications where they obtain, that is among the factors that will enable the horizons of philosophy of religion to expand well beyond the limited sphere of an abstract and largely decontextualized “theism,” thereby permitting conceptual justice to be done to the radically pluralistic nature of religious, nonreligious and religiously ambivalent perspectives in the contemporary world.²⁸

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²⁸ For valuable comments on a previous draft, I am grateful to the editor and to two anonymous referees for the journal.

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