

The Semantics and Pragmatics of the Term ‘God’

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PhD

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Philosophy

September 2022

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the semantics and pragmatics of the term ‘God’. The purpose is to build a linguistic framework in which to place existing philosophical work in The Philosophy of Religion. The thesis argues that the dominant methodological approaches for defining ‘God’ before argumentation fail to capture the nature of religious beliefs. A range of proposals are considered, including Perfect Being Semantics, Causal Theories of Reference, Hybrid Theories, and Descriptivism. It is argued that ‘God’ should be modelled as a title term. The consequences of such a view are considered for topics in Philosophy of Religion such as religious diversity, religious disagreement, and religious debate.

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

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0. Introduction

Just what are the semantics and pragmatics of the term ‘God’? Despite a long, and incredibly interesting history of the term’s use, as well as this question’s potential relevance to growing bodies of research in religious diversity, philosophical work dedicated to this question is surprisingly scarce. In fact, much of the debate on this topic can be found not in philosophy journals but in a series of blogs and articles written by philosophers Rae, Tuggy, Beckwith, Feser, McGrew, Vallicella, and Davis in 2015 and 2016.

The source of this dialogue was a controversy in which a professor at Wheaton College (IL) – an evangelical liberal arts college – was suspended for a claim on Facebook that Muslims and Christians “worship the same God”. In her post, she made reference to a joint declaration given by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed Al-Tayebb “In the name of God” – a document which included phraseology such as ‘We, who believe in God and in the final meeting with Him and His Judgement’ (Graham 2016, para 7). Prima facie this looks like they were indeed assuming that the word ‘God’ referred to, and meant, the same thing across their respective faiths. Pope Francis wasn’t the first to suggest such a thing; in 1965, Pope Paul VI approved the *Nostra Aetate* which stated ‘The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men’. Certainly, these statements suggest the Popes believe that the adherents of the Abrahamic faiths speak of the same God. So, were they right? This was the question that started the debate.

At that time discussion revolved around whether believing radically different descriptions to be true of God implied a difference of reference. Many traditional arguments from Philosophy of Language were deployed. Beckwith used the distinction between (Fregean) sense and (Fregean) reference, combined with the assertion that Jews, Muslims, and Christians all believe in the God of “classic theism” to argue for the affirmative (2015). Despite apparent differences in senses, he thought a descriptivist view could nonetheless establish that Christians, Muslims, and Jews do indeed worship the same God. Feser replied that while this distinction accommodated the possibility of co-reference, the God of classic theism is *by design* a set of descriptions that represent the intersection of what the Abrahamic faiths agree on, and thus cannot be used as a basis of an argument in favour of co-reference (2015). Tuggy argued that ‘God’ refers to the being that sent Moses and Abraham and since, according to Islam, the one who sent Mohammad is the same God that sent Moses and

Abraham, Mohammad and his followers must intend to use ‘Allah’ to refer to this same being, and since this is the God Christians intend to refer to, sameness of reference is established (2016a). Ultimately Vallicella concluded the issue’s resolution depends in ‘hitherto unsolved problems in philosophy of language’ (2016a, sect 5) while McGrew claimed the opposite, stating ‘no theories in philosophy of language get around the need to decide *how important* the differences are between the Muslim and Christian concept of God’ (2015, para 4).

The dialogue between these philosophers is interesting not just as a microcosm of issues in philosophy of language but as an illustration of why philosophy of religion stands to benefit from a sound grounding in philosophy of language. Since, by their nature, the short articles were pitched at a wider audience than just analytic philosophers, we never quite get a satisfactory account or even a fair ruling on what philosophy of language can and cannot deliver here. The puzzles raised are nonetheless serious and interesting – do Christians, Muslims, and Jews refer to the same God? Do they mean the same thing by ‘God’? If not, how are we to make sense of the declarations by the Popes? Can this even be decided by philosophy of language, for, wouldn’t it be surprising if the answers to deep theological questions came by way of semantics? All of these questions motivate my project of linguistic investigation into the term ‘God’.

0.1 The Abrahamic Faiths

This thesis is largely focused on the analysis of the term ‘God’ in application to the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. It is in this context that the ‘same God’ question has tended to arise and for good reason. Firstly, there is a clear and factual historical connection and common origin between the three, and secondly, to varying degrees, this connection is found in the religious scripts, teachings, and theologies these faiths. Throughout this thesis I will generally refer to these faiths as the ‘Abrahamic faiths’. I do not by this phraseology intend to presuppose the answer to the preceding questions: the phrase names a category of faiths (the ones that find common origin in Abraham) not a single faith. Furthermore, in recognising this historical connection I do not intend to presuppose whether these faiths name the same God. With all this said, while the Abrahamic faiths are the focus of this thesis, discussions of other faiths will be brought in where relevant to the proposed theory on the table. Discussion of semantic and pragmatic accounts of the term ‘God’ that aim to fit existing usage can clearly be subject to relevant counter examples from other faiths.

Thus, consideration of historically independent faiths (most often in this thesis Zoroastrianism and Hinduism) will at times fall within the scope of the thesis, particularly where examination of the term ‘god’ (lowercase) becomes relevant.

0.2 The Philosophical Landscape

Turning to more traditional avenues of philosophical materials, not many answers to these questions can be found. Broadly speaking, applications of philosophy of language to philosophy of religion have tended to focus on disputes over the meaningfulness of religious utterances. In contexts where the term ‘God’ itself has been the subject of investigation, this has mostly been in pursuit of metaphysical investigation of the nature of God through reflection on the concept of God. This work has formed the core of what I think of as “The Traditional Approach” to defining God. It derives from the Anselmian tradition and is associated with the omni-definition of God – a definition that has long served as the assumed target of arguments about the existence of, and rationality of belief in, God. The tradition can be found in all three of the major Abrahamic faiths but the philosophical canon is mostly dominated by Christians.

0.2.1 Existing Works on the Reference and Meaning of the Term ‘God’

There are nonetheless a few works that follow similar lines to the 2015 debate which focus on the reference of the term ‘God’. The majority of these are attempts to apply something like a Kripkean style account of reference to ‘God’ in response to the dominance of the Anselmian tradition. These articles tend to follow similar lines: first identification of “The Traditional Approach” – that requires ‘God’ to be descriptively defined by ‘the greatest possible being’ which, upon analysis, yields the more specific omni-God definition. Second, provision of an argument for the plausibility or even preferability of treating ‘God’ as a Millian proper name and combining this with a causal account of reference. Examples of articles like these are Alston’s ‘Referring to God’ (1998) and Miller’s ‘The Reference of God’ (1986).

0.2.2 Methodology in Philosophy of Religious Language

The two main competitors described above – Anselmian Tradition descriptivists and causal theorists – both take a similar methodological approach to analysis. There is usually a theological aim (such as defending the “same God” view) followed by an application of the relevant theory that could produce the desired consequences. Neither of these camps begin

with the aim of simply finding a view that captures the facts of observed linguistic behaviour of the term ‘God’. Due to this, where semantic accounts of ‘God’ are found in the existing literature these are frequently no more than a few paragraphs which represent a step in a broader argument within philosophical theology. As such, in my view, none of these accounts stand up particularly well under scrutiny through the lens of philosophy of language.

0.3 The Traditional Topics

I think a number of traditional subject areas within philosophy of religion could benefit from the project of developing an account of the linguistic behaviour of the term ‘God’ that aims to fit its actual usage. This is because, unlike analytic theology, these topics are often concerned with religious epistemology. And, if religious beliefs are the topic at hand, the use of definitions grounded largely in religious metaphysics are unlikely to capture the target of analysis. To understand what I mean by this let us look at two examples: arguments about existence, and examinations of the rationality of religious beliefs.

0.3.1 Existence Debates

In ‘The Reference of “God”’ (through his attempt to apply a causal theory of reference to God) Miller notes what he considers to be a surprising result. That this could have an impact on which arguments about the existence of ‘God’ are better targeted. He invites us to reframe the question ‘does God exist?’ as ‘does ‘God’ refer?’ (1986, p. 3). According to him, reference fails under causal accounts when the ancestry of the name results in a Donnellian “block” – where blocks are ‘events that preclude any referent’s being identified’ (1986, p.7). When we view the question of existence in this way we find that the atheist arguments that hit closest to their mark are ones that aim to show just this. Traditional philosophical disputes over, for instance, whether the omni-features are compatible look to be less relevant than “critiques” of religion such as those of Feuerbach, Freud, or Nietzsche (Miller, 1986, p.8). Their strand of thought is more concerned with the history of religion and the psychological desire to believe. As such, they are more likely to be able to provide Miller’s desired argument that:

1. Investigating the causal ancestry of the term ‘God’ results in a block,
2. Therefore ‘God’ does not refer,
3. Therefore God does not exist.

Traditional arguments in contrast take the roundabout route casting doubt on the truth of things one might believe about God and thereby casting doubt on existence.

Now, whether one finds the above convincing is by the by. The point here is to demonstrate how our semantic understanding of the term ‘God’ may have an impact on this area of philosophy. As Miller writes:

Philosophy is in general understood as define-your-terms-and-deduce-the-consequences, and philosophy of religion becomes in large measure the definition of ‘God’ as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, Creator of the world and the critical examination of the traditional arguments for His existence (1986, p4)

And we can see some of the potential pitfalls in this approach within the literature on Global versus Local atheism – indeed much of the work aiming to defend global atheism is spent trying to tease out what features unite all the “God-concepts” or what meaning the words ‘God’ and ‘god’ carry across contexts (Draper 2022). It is evident that this area of study could benefit from a semantic account of ‘God’ developed expressly for the purpose of fitting common usage of the term. Thus, not only does philosophy of language potentially have something to say on which arguments better hit the intended target, but it gives us the necessary tools to develop those kinds of arguments in the first place.

0.3.2 Rationality of Belief

If we accept those arguments, then it is plain that such work can also have an impact on reflection regarding the rationality of belief – after all the “critique” strand of thought on religion was primarily concerned with demonstrating religious belief to be irrational. Interestingly, the case goes hand in hand with Alston’s own attempt to apply a causal theory of reference to God. His purpose in the development of this idea was to provide an accompaniment to his work on reformed religious epistemology. Alston’s epistemology is experientially based and so he wanted a theory of reference that was likewise based to avoid extra stages in his argument.

Similarly, much work in religious epistemology is concerned with the possible challenge religious disagreement presents to the rationality of belief. While this challenge is pervasive across topics it is often maintained there is something especially troubling about religious disagreement. What is interesting to me here is the debate from 2015 presents a puzzle for the Abrahamic faiths in particular – if we are unclear on whether these faiths mean

the same thing by ‘God’ we haven’t even yet fully established where the disagreement is. The epistemic consequences for an agent assessing the rationality of their belief may well be different between the cases where: (a) that agent’s epistemic peers disagree with them on whether an entity exists, (b) that agent’s epistemic peers believe in the existence of an entity whose existence is mutually exclusive with the existence of the entity the agent believes to exist, or (c) that agent’s epistemic peers share in the belief of the existence of the same entity but disagree over its nature. If in 2015 those philosophers were right – that a semantic account of ‘God’ was needed to begin on this question – then this is another area which could stand to benefit from a firmer grounding in philosophy of language.

0.4 The Pragmatics of the Term ‘God’

Having briefly toured the existing philosophical landscape, and having examined how some traditional debates could be served by the development of a semantic account of the term ‘God’ that aims to fit the facts, I want to show how the challenge set by the 2015 debate needs to include not only a semantic, but also pragmatic, analysis of the term ‘God’.

0.4.1 Religious Diversity

I think the puzzle presented by religious diversity is likely the toughest one to solve – namely, how can we parse talk of God across religious contexts that appear to assume the term is being used in the same way with the common talk about believing in different Gods? Both atheists and theists often have quite specific conceptions of God in mind when discussing existence – that might be the omni-God, or it might be a God of a particular tradition, or a believer may speak of *their* God. At the same time the term ‘God’ often appears to be used and function like a proper name, with sameness of reference assumed within religious contexts despite wide and radical variation in conceptions even between believers who belong to the same practice. Any linguistic account needs to be able to explain this scope change whilst not leading to an untenable proliferation of meaning variations. I think it is unlikely this can be achieved without marrying an account of the pragmatics of the term with the semantic theory. Let me illustrate why.

0.4.2 Religious Disagreement

Consider one of the issues with approaching the “same God” question exclusively from the viewpoint of philosophy of language. There is a risk of conflating a number of different questions. Let us imagine we are trying to make sense of the different-God-talk that

is common in inter-religious disagreement but relatively uncommon in intra-religious disagreement. And let us begin with the instinct of many of the philosophers writing in 2015 – that Muslims, Christians, and Jews do not co-refer, or potentially even mean the same thing by the term ‘God’, based on a descriptivist theory. In turning to reference and meaning as a solution - a further challenge arises of whether internal religious disagreements entail a difference in putative reference. Not only do religious groupings involve large variation in traditional branches (e.g. Catholicism versus Methodism) but even within those branches individual believers vary wildly in their interpretations of central religious doctrines. The risk here is that using semantic tools to try to interpret or explain differences in social practices we imply definitive external religious disagreements which are not nearly as determinate as a semantic account would likely deliver. But what is it that we are trying to solve in the first place?

Well de Ridder and van Woudenberg point out there are actually a number of different questions we might be asking when we pose the “same God” question. These are just a few of the possibilities:

- 1 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews refer to the same God?
- 2 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews mean the same thing by the term ‘God’?
- 3 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews believe in the same God?
- 4 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship the same God?
- 5 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews pray to the same God? (de Ridder & van Woudenberg, 2014)

It is perfectly possible to answer ‘yes’ to the first two questions, whilst answering ‘no’ to the second three. So by focusing only on the first two questions – principally semantic questions – we may seek to explain too much our semantic theory, while intuitions are still being driven by the later questions, the answers to which could easily lie outside of semantics.

Now, the answers to these questions may be based outside of linguistics altogether – one may have a theological view on what it is to worship, or what it is to believe in something. But the last question about prayer is an interesting one – what are people doing when they pray? They might be thanking, asking, praising and so forth – and in doing so they are principally addressing some entity. In other words it looks like a paradigmatically illocutionary act. The answer to who or what somebody is addressing can be different to the straightforward question of reference – what is being done with a religious utterance can go

beyond what is literally semantically expressed. Therefore by considering the pragmatics of religious utterances involving the term ‘God’ alongside the semantics of the term ‘God’ we can make progress on these questions and avoid having intuitions about semantics driven by pragmatics.

0.4.3 Pluralism & Toleration

This approach may additionally open some avenues for reframing works in religious pluralism. Consider, for instance, pluralist works that argue that different religions make reference to the same God (such as Hicks). There is often a strong sense that Hicks’ work cannot really do justice to existing religious practices. However, if we consider the questions of whether other religions worship, pray, etc to the same God to be matters that can be resolved either by pragmatics or theological argument, rather than semantics, then worry about the possibility of pluralism undermining confidence in the content of one’s own religious assertions becomes less of a forefront of concern. This is because the religious exclusivist’s position becomes primarily about the felicity of utterances or success of religious acts, rather than the content of religious statements.

0.5 One Last Puzzle: the Names for God

There is one additional confounding factor – the many names or titles for ‘God’. The use of the term ‘God’, while widespread and varied, within religious rituals is mostly used by Christians. Different naming practices can be found across faiths and specific stands of thought. This is often due to the theological importance placed on names across religious traditions, and each naming practice has its own convention. Some branches of Islam, for instance, discourage the use of the term ‘God’ and insist that ‘Allah’ is the name of God. Despite this Arabic speaking Christians across the world use the term ‘Allah’ where English speaking Christians would use the term ‘God’. While the issue of whether ‘Allah’ can be used in this way may be theologically contentious (it is even a practice that is banned in Malaysia) I do not think it linguistically contentious. That is, I hold firm that ‘Allah’ *is* the Arabic term for God. In Judaism while YHWH is the most frequent name for God in the biblical text in liturgical use ‘Adonai’ (a term also used by Christians) is more commonly used, with ‘Hashem’ outside of these contexts. The various naming practices, and their relationship for the term ‘God’ is something I think any good linguistic account (especially one that looks at pragmatics) needs to discuss.

0.6 Concluding Remarks

This has just been a brief survey of some of the existing works and areas in which questions over the meaning, reference, and use of ‘God’ have cropped up. I hope through looking at these I have motivated the need for a better linguistic understanding of the term for work in the area of philosophy of religion and demonstrated a few exemplar ways in which our semantic and pragmatic accounts of the term may have an impact on those debates. Additionally, I have set forward a number of puzzles that any linguistic investigation into ‘God’ needs to solve – how to make sense of different-God/same-God talk, what kind of term even is ‘God’, how to account for our intuitions about the meaning of the term ‘God’ and the beliefs of heterodox believers. These are all questions I think my thesis is well placed to answer.

1. The Omni-God Definition

I want to begin with a deep look at what I have identified as “The Traditional Approach”. This approach represents a kind of consensus in much of analytic philosophical theology; that the Omni-God offers the best available definition of God. The *kind* of definition that is being offered is often left unspecified. However, it is frequently assumed by philosophers looking at religious language that the definition involved **must be** descriptive. Thus, it has been the most frequently used starting point for philosophers considering the meaning of the term ‘God’. “The Traditional Approach” is often taken to require a descriptivist semantic theory whereby the omni-features or ‘the greatest possible being’ provide us with the meaning of the term ‘God’. I argue that this is false: the omni-definition is not a descriptive definition. To do so I offer a two-pronged attack. First, I argue that the descriptivist position “The Traditional Approach” is claimed to require is untenable. This is because it results in positions that either are so restrictive they implausibly deny heterodox believers to be competent users of the term ‘God’, or the positions are loosened to the degree they undermine the entire project of “The Traditional Approach” in the first place. Second, I consider the method “The Traditional Approach” is meant to ground – Perfect Being Theology. Perfect Being Theology is usually characterised as a process of “unpacking the concept of God”. I argue that Perfect Being Theology is better framed as a revisionary project; that there is significant textual evidence in the works of Perfect Being Theologians to support the reading that the definition offered is an explicative one. While I think there is nothing radical about this position, it nonetheless has substantive implications for my project. Not least because the omni-definition is usually assumed to be the obvious answer to the question “what is the meaning of the word ‘God’”.

1.1 The Omni-God definition

When looking at the ‘Traditional Approach’ from a semantic perspective we are dealing with a number of candidate descriptions. I will focus on the main two:

- a) ‘the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence
and
- b) ‘the greatest possible being’

Both of these descriptions are thought in some way to “express” our concept of God, and all of them derive from the Anselmian Tradition, and in fact our more specific set of descriptions (a) are the output of unpacking (b).

1.1.1 Perfect Being Theology

Before looking at whether these descriptions can provide either the meaning or the reference of ‘God’ I want to talk briefly about how they relate to one another. This is important to my arguments because part of what spells trouble for The Traditional Approach is the interdependence of these descriptions. The core method that is shared by proponents of each of these descriptions is PBT – this position is that the concept of God provides all the grounding needed to reason about God’s nature. The grounding point comes from moving from various scriptural claims across each faith about God’s perfection to conceiving of God as ‘the greatest possible being’ – such that:

[PBT] $\square \forall x (x \text{ is God iff } x \text{ is the greatest possible being})$

From this point, PBT philosophers derive ‘a rule or a recipe for developing a more specific conception of God’ (Murray & Rae, 2008, p8). Through this they engage in a priori reasoning about God, to try and fill out the description of God. Since it is better for God to be maximally good than not maximally good, God must be maximally good. Since it is better for God to be maximally powerful, than not maximally powerful, God must be maximally powerful and so on. Most philosophers – in search of specifying the greatest array of “great making properties” thus arrive at the divine attributes so that whatever is God must be the possessor of the omni-features. This is how we get to (a). The job of analytic theology becomes a process of negotiating what should, and should not, be on our list of great making properties and precisely to what possessing these properties amounts. From this we can see that (a) derives from (b).

1.1.2 Descriptive Definitions

When I talk about descriptive definitions I mean a definition aimed to fit the current usage of the term. There are two kinds of descriptive definition we should be concerned with: Intentionally adequate – there are no possible counterexamples to it – the classic example of this is water = H₂O

And,

Sense adequate – the definition endows the defined term with its cognitive significance – the classic example of this is Bachelor = unmarried man.

There are some clear reasons to think PBT philosophers might be trying to offer descriptive definitions. For example, PBT is often invoked to play a role in policing the boundaries of conceptions of God – it rules on the limits of variant or heterodox conceptions of God in a principled way by asking are the conceptions ‘loyal to the idea of God as the greatest possible being’ (Inwagen 2006, p3.4). For those that are not, by this method we might rule that the conception fails to ‘fall under the concept properly expressed by the word God’ (Inwagen, 2006, p.33). One might find it hard here to see how we could understand this principle without taking that description to have a descriptive role of some kind. And it is frequently taken by those trying to offer alternative conceptions of God that this is the dominant position of analytic theologians. John Bishop for instance writes:

Can it be consistent to adhere to theism, and yet to reject the belief that omniGod exists, where “omniGod” means a unique omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural person who is creator and sustainer of all else that exists? On the assumptions prevailing within Philosophy of Religion, at least as practised by analytical philosophers, the answer is clearly “No.” Such philosophers typically presuppose that theism virtually by definition requires belief that omniGod exists. (1998, p.174)

For various reasons I suspect that to ground the *method* of PBT, it needs at least (b) to be a sense adequate definition in order to get its process off the ground. That is because it needs epistemological grounds for holding ‘God’ is ‘the greatest possible being’, but an intentionally adequate definition cannot offer this, as it cannot offer epistemic necessity. That being said, this is not my core concern. Keep in mind that the first part of this chapter is concerned with whether the traditional set of definitions of God (which may come from PBT) can play *any descriptive role in providing meaning or reference of the term ‘God’* not whether this is consistent with the philosophical practice which they derive from – I will turn to the methodological challenge as I approach the second prong of my argument. Furthermore, my arguments are not intended to deny the possibility of any descriptivist account, the argument is designed to deny that any of the candidate descriptions from the traditional approach, which come from PBT, can offer these descriptions.

1.1.3 Descriptivist Theories

Just as we have a number of candidate descriptions for The Traditional Approach, and a number of types of descriptive definition, we also have a number of different descriptivist positions that are consistent. I will focus on variations of two:

- i) Semantic substitutability – the description(s) provide the sense, or cognitive significance, of the term ‘God’ such that (some of) the description(s) is/are semantically substitutable with the term ‘God’
- ii) Reference Fixing Associated Descriptions – the description(s) is/are associated with the term ‘God’ such that competent speakers are disposed to identify the referent of ‘God’ with the referent of the description(s)

Again these are not totally exhaustive, but they are a fairly representative range of views available to the PBT descriptivist. We can think of the possibilities on a scale of restrictiveness ranging from a view that our most detailed descriptions candidate (a) provides the cognitive significance of the term ‘God’ (for competent speakers) to the view that the loose description (b) provides the community established reference conditions of the term ‘God’. I will go through them in order, starting with the most simple arguments which grow in complexity as I deal with each of the potential fixes or responses to the proceeding view. The advantage of approaching this way is by setting out the counter examples in the naïve case – it is easier to see how they work in the more complicated case. I do not think many PBT philosophers on reflection would defend (i) – although I think there is significant textual evidence that they often assume (i) without thinking about it. But the point is by dealing with (i) as we move through harder cases the counter case is easier to grasp.

The trouble for the ‘descriptive definition’ interpretation of PBT is when we start to fill out these possibilities we find ourselves in a bind as we try to walk a tightrope between too restrictive an approach that fails to account for speaker behaviour, or too loose an understanding that ends up undermining the PBT project, and the advantages supposedly conferred by the descriptivist view. The issues are largely similar to general problems with descriptivist theories, though I hope to motivate the view that some of these issues are particularly troublesome in this context - especially due to the interdependence of all the descriptions offered up by The Traditional Approach. In the following I will largely be borrowing from Speaks’ arguments in ‘Perfect Being Semantics’ (2018).

1.2. Semantic Substitutability

The central role of a priori reasoning in Perfect Being Theology heavily implies that these philosophers take their proposed descriptions to be sense adequate. So for instance, the claim that ‘God’ is ‘the possessor of the omni-features’ offers the same kind of definition that ‘bachelors’ are ‘unmarried men’ does. While there is plenty of philosophical scepticism about these kinds of definitions in general, this is less common amongst analytic theologians. The idea that the omni-definition, or at minimum ‘the greatest possible being’ “expresses” or “captures” the concept of God appears to have fairly widespread support (Speaks, 2018, p.136). Moreover, God is often treated as a special case, or exemplar of the kind of concept ripe for a priori reasoning. Nonetheless, I think this is a mistake – standard problems with this kind of descriptivist theories are well trodden arguments and, despite the claims of many PBT philosophers, I do not think ‘God’ is an exception to this rule. To show semantic substitutability cannot be plausible, all we have to establish is that this substitution results in pairs of sentences which express the same proposition but differ in truth value. This is not hard to do.

1.2.1 The Semantic Substitutability of ‘the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotence’

Let us begin then with options (a) and (i) – the descriptions ‘the possessor of the divine attributes omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipotence’ provides the cognitive significance of the term ‘God’. All we need to do to show that this is not a tenable position is to find a competent user of the term ‘God’ who does not believe that God is the possessor of the divine attributes omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotent and we can generate contradictory statements through their belief reports. I will go through two types of cases: theologically unsophisticated subjects and heterodox theologically sophisticated subjects (Speaks, 2018, pp.141-147).

1.2.1.1 Theologically Unsophisticated Subjects

The first is perfectly straightforward – there may be many theologically unsophisticated subjects who appear to use the term ‘God’ in the proper way but do not think of ‘God’ as the omni-God (Speaks, 2018, p.141). The prime example of this given is usually children, call this child Dante. We get:

Dante believes God exists

As true. If semantic substitutability was the correct interpretation of the role of the omni-God then this should be synonymous with:

Dante believes the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotence exists

But this prima facie appears not to be the case (Speaks, 2018, p.141). Of course, we may say the child cannot therefore be a competent user of the term. But this response gets harder when dealing with another kind of subject.

1.2.1.2 Heterodox Theologically Sophisticated Subjects

There are a number of pretty well established ways in which a competent user of the term ‘God’ who is theologically sophisticated might deny that ‘God’ is ‘the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotence’ (Speaks, 2018, pp.143-147). I’ll take two fairly simple examples, from theologically sophisticated philosophers all of whom are presumably competent users of the term ‘God’, and all of whom subscribe to a view of God that denies God is defined by the omni-features.

Case 1: Theologically Sophisticated subjects who deny that God possesses a particular omni-feature.

Philosophical literature discussing the compatibility of the various omni-features is full of examples of philosophers who may deny one or multiple of the omni-features. The most common strategy when dealing with apparent conflict between theological beliefs is to restrict the definition of the omni-features (e.g. Open Theists who maintain God is omniscient since there are no future facts to be known) however it is not the only strategy. Some philosophers may prefer the route of simply abandoning one or more of the omni-features. To take one example, there are a set of philosophers (such as Michael McLain) who argue God is not omniscient on the basis that this would violate his creations privacy rights (1992). As such they believe a benevolent God would restrict his knowledge of his creatures, thus God is not omniscient. These are clearly theologically sophisticated subjects, and competent users of the term ‘God’ for whom we can create a contradictory pair of statements if ‘the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotence’ is taken to be synonymous with the term ‘God’.

Case 2: theologically sophisticated subjects who deny that anything can or does answer to the omni-features while maintaining belief in God.

This is another philosophical position that I take to be more common than perhaps the central canon of Philosophy of religion would suggest – alternative conceptions of God are abundant (such as pan-theistic conceptions). Take John Bishop for example who has written extensively on what would be an adequate alternative concept to the omni-God due to his rejection of the reasonableness of belief in the omni-God, but his desire to remain within a theistic faith (1998). John Bishop is clearly another theologically sophisticated subject for whom ‘the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotence’ does not provide the cognitive significance of the term ‘God’.

1.2.1.3 Casting a Wider Net

We can take this argument further. Those two routes were examples of theistic philosophers who, as it happens, do not believe ‘the possessor of the omni-features exists’ to be true, but do believe ‘God exists’ to be true for whom we could create pairs of contradictory sentences. But our search need not be so stringent. It is enough if we can find possible scenarios where we, or many others, intuitively think ‘God exists’ could be true where ‘the possessor of the omni-features exists’ would not. Consider the following example from Morris: Case 3 (call this being ‘E1’)

Suppose we somehow discovered that a less than Anselmian being, an individual who was very powerful but not strictly omnipotent, very knowledgeable but not literally omniscient, and very dependable but not altogether immutable, etc., had created our universe and was responsible for the existence of intelligent life on earth. Suppose we found that he had been the one to call Abraham out of Ur, to speak to Moses, and to send the prophets. Suppose he had somehow become incarnate in the man Jesus, and that he will be the one responsible for giving eternal bliss to all who are properly related to him. Let him even sustain directly the very existence of the universe moment to moment. Would we rightly on a-priorist grounds refuse to call him ‘God’, just because he did not satisfy St. Anselm’s precise requirements. (1984, pp. 182-183)

I think it is likely that under these circumstances plenty of users of the term ‘God’ would say that if this possibility were actual then it is true that ‘God exists’. But if the proposal is that the omni-features provide the cognitive significance of the term ‘God’ then we would have to rule that anybody who would accede to that claim under this scenario is not a competent user of the term ‘God’. This is just not plausible.

1.2.2 The Semantic Substitutability of ‘the greatest possible being’

Our second option is that description (b) ‘the greatest possible being’ provides the cognitive significance of the term ‘God’ such that they are semantically substitutable. This therefore includes those that don’t think the omni-features fall out of thinking of God as ‘the greatest possible being’. This deals with our theologically sophisticated subjects, since they were all rejecting the omni-features, but not necessarily our theologically unsophisticated subjects since they may be just as likely not to believe ‘the greatest possible being exists’.

While the case against semantic substitutability of this phrase may not be quite as easy to find examples of – the idea of God being the ‘greatest possible being’ has a more transparent and theologically intuitive feel to it – I still think a little consideration gives us plenty of potential counter examples.

Case 4: A heterodox believer with surprising views about modality (Speaks, 2018, pp.143-147)

Philosophical belief that ‘God’ is ‘the greatest possible being’ is often dependent on a background philosophical belief about modal properties – but we may find amongst philosophers some theists who are for one reason or another sceptical about modal properties and thus believe that ‘God exists’ but that ‘the greatest possible being does not’. Again, those cases can create similar pairs of sentences which undermine the semantic equivalent position.

To illustrate such a case Speaks considers the common theological discussions around whether God created the best possible world (2018, pp. 144-147). It is a fairly common position amongst theistic philosophers to endorse the No-Best-Universe view in response to Rowe’s problem of evil (Van Inwagen being one prime example of this). Now it is perfectly possible through a few theological assumptions to get from No-Best-Universe, to No-Greatest-Being – we might, for instance, think that a being that is identical to another in all ways except that it creates a better universe, is a better being. Of course, plenty of philosophers may deny the argument – it is also a common theistic position to believe the actual world is the best possible world. But as Speaks points out, whether one endorses the argument is irrelevant. The issue is that if anyone does find the step from No-Best-Universe (a relatively common theological position) to No-Greatest-Being reasoning plausible (and I take it some do), this bars them from being competent users of the term ‘God’ in virtue of their beliefs about modal properties and thus using the term with its normal meaning on the semantic equivalence view (Speaks, 2018, pp.144-147).

Case 5: Shrinking the modal space (Speaks, 2018, pp.147-149)

We can create hypothetical scenarios in which theists may wish to deny that ‘God exists’ while, by stipulation, the scenario entails ‘the greatest possible being exists’. Speaks gives us the following example:

Demos is a necessarily existing being, and necessarily creates the universe. Demos is essentially good, but not perfectly good. And, while Demos is essentially quite powerful – much more powerful than any being with which we are acquainted – Demos is not omnipotent. There are strict limits to the sorts of universes Demos can create. Furthermore, Demos knows much about the universe it creates – more, for example, than any human being knows – but not everything. But Demos knows enough never to create a universe which could give rise to a being which knows more, or is better in any respect, than itself. (2018, p. 44)

Speaks thinks it is likely most theists would be inclined to endorse the conditional:

If a being is Demosian, that being is not God

But by stipulation:

If a being is Demosian, that being is the greatest possible being

But if those two conditionals differ in truth value then ‘the greatest possible being’ cannot be providing a sense adequate definition of the term ‘God’. (Speaks, 2018, pp.147-148)

1.3 Reference Fixing Associated Descriptions

So far none of the results have been particularly surprising. Problems abound with any account that involves semantic substitutability and belief reports and in application to ‘God’ this is no different. But it was worth dealing with, not only due to a tendency in analytic theology to think in this way but also because by dealing with the easy case first it brings a clearer perspective to the harder ones. The next way in which the defender of “the traditional approach” may wish to cash out the traditional descriptions is by ceding that while they do not provide the cognitive significance of the term, they are associated with the term in such a way that they provide the reference fixing conditions. Here we have a new question: by what mechanism do they do this?

This question is of a great deal of significance in this context – let me explain why. In response to the many of the above arguments Leftow rightly pointed out that if we suppose that 1. ‘God’ abbreviates ‘the greatest possible being but that our theological subjects

haven't learned (1), that doesn't stop them from getting the reference of "God" correct. He asks us to imagine a comparator: that somebody could know truths about a country called "USA," but not know what the letters abbreviate. Now this might be the case for the child but it is a harder defence in the case of adults – to which Leftow only offers the argument that being an adult is no guarantee of knowing (2021). Notwithstanding the fact that it is hard to imagine a case whereby an adult academic that studies the USA does not know that USA stands for United States of America, Leftow has a bigger problem here. This is because most of our examples of "successful reference" have built into them established, independent modes of confirming this. Returning to our definition of intentional adequacy – our classic example of this was "water" and "H₂O". This is a problem for PBT because the general function of the "water = H₂O" example is that it is metaphysical, not an epistemological necessity. But for the PBT philosopher that won't do – there just isn't independent grounds on which to discover 'God' co-refers with 'the greatest possible being' (or any of our other descriptions). They need to be tied to the term, in some way, in virtue of the linguistic function of the word itself.

Given this requirement I think we have two primary possibilities: it is established by speaker association that the descriptions, while not synonymous with 'God' are nonetheless associated with the term 'God'. Competent users of the term associate the description with 'God' and thereby being disposed to associate the referent of the description with the referent of 'God'. Or, it is established by a community established reference fixing rule such that the descriptions provide the reference conditions for 'God' via an established community practice – such as descriptive introduction, or deference to linguistic experts. I'll begin with the latter.

1.3.1 Community Established Reference Fixing Conditions

The first possibility here to consider is whether the term 'God' was descriptively introduced with either 'the greatest possible being' or 'the possessor of the divine attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence & omnipotence' in the same way that say, Neptune was descriptively introduced as 'the planet responsible for perturbations in the orbit of Uranus'. I think we can conclude that this is historically pretty implausible for a number of reasons. Firstly, the term 'God' is on the scene long before the modal conception of God arrives. Moreover the current use of the term was, to the best of our knowledge, first introduced as a translation (Deova, 2022, para 2) of Greek Θεός – a word that finds its non-

capitalised route in use to name Greek gods (Vernsnel, 2016) Given this, the idea that the term ‘God’ was in any sense introduced as ‘the greatest possible being’ or ‘the possessor of the omni-features’ seems pretty implausible.

Our second possibility is hinted at by Inwagen in the following passage:

The list of properties that should be included in the concept of God are just those properties ascribed to God in common by Jews, Christians, and Muslims – the properties that adherents of these religions would all agree to belong to God [...] By “Jews, Christians, and Muslims” I mean those Jews, Christians, and Muslims who have attained to a high level of philosophical and theological reflection. (2006 p.19)

Now, this passage isn’t directly about the semantics of the term ‘God’ but we can draw an idea from it on how we could maintain the descriptivist view by being more discerning in the choice of speakers relevant to establishing the reference fixing condition. The idea comes from Putnam’s proposal on ‘the division of linguistic labour’ whereby speakers’ ability to use terms come from a dependence on, and cooperation with, experts who can more reliably identify the referent of a term (1973). Thus we may say that the term ‘God’ has an established use in a linguistic community in which there are linguistic experts to whom ordinary believers defer. These experts do associate “the greatest possible being” with the term ‘God’ such that “the greatest possible being” provides the reference fixing condition of ‘God’.

Problems with deference aside, it seems unlikely either that speakers do *always* use the term ‘God’ in this way, and even if they did, that the relevant linguistic experts would be philosophers: it’s hard to come up with an account whereby ordinary speakers’ linguistic behaviour is inherited from Perfect Being Theologians. More likely, in instances where it seems plausible that speakers are deferring (for instance in the case of theologically unsophisticated subjects) they would consider themselves as deferring to their religious authorities or community members who engage in the same religious practice as them. Moreover, clearly in the case of the theologically sophisticated heterodox believers, which are the cases we are trying to solve here, they are not disposed to defer to PBT philosophers as the relevant experts. In fact, most of them are “experts” in their own rights, disagreeing with PBT Philosophers. Additionally, there’s a concern about whether this could even deliver PBT philosophers what they need in order to conduct PBT. A threat of circularity is looming because the grounding for the description on which PBT is based has now become the “linguistic experts”. But these are the same experts who are claiming their understanding of

God is based on the concept of God. On this claim, the account looks to amount to the claim that PBT is descriptive of PBT philosophers' conception of God. A claim that is not surprising but only establishes that this provides a definition of 'God' if PBT philosophers can place themselves in the position of experts, in which case it is defined that way because of their edicts. Most likely the linguistic experts would be religious authorities in the structures of organised religion, but it has not been established that these authorities do think of "the greatest possible being" or "the possessor of the omni-features" as giving the reference fixing descriptions. At least, it is unlikely they would put an emphasis on this above other religious doctrines. Regardless, if these authorities are the relevant experts the claim that the "the greatest possible being" or "the possessor of the omni-features" is descriptive simply cannot be established without investigation of what those religious authorities say.

1.3.2 Speaker Associated Descriptions

Turning then to our final attempt to tie the descriptions to the term 'God' we might look at doing this through speaker associations of the description to the term. 'God' is associated with the "the greatest possible being" such that competent speakers must only be disposed to associate 'God' with the description "the greatest possible being". However, in the singular case this loosening doesn't go far enough to help in the case of our heterodox subjects as they clearly will not be disposed to make that association.

Perhaps the most common defence of descriptivism is the move to employing multiple descriptions such that the term 'God' is associated with "the greatest possible being" amongst other descriptions. There are a number of ways in which the specifics of this can be filled in but these variations matter little for my overall argument so I'll go with the simplest version – single subject cluster descriptivism. If we think of the term 'God' as 'function[ing] not as [a] description, as [a] peg on which to hang descriptions' (Searle, 1958 p. 172). To every name or designating expression "X," there corresponds a cluster of properties, namely the family of those properties ϕ such that [the user] believes ϕX . One of the properties, or some conjointly, are believed by the speaker to pick out some individual uniquely (Kripke, 1980, p.294). So we can take our descriptions as:

Φ omnipotent

Φ omnipresent

Φ omnibenevolent

Φ omniscient

Φ the greatest possible being

A speaker may associate only some of these with the term but need not associate any one in particular. It may be protested here that we can add other descriptions now associated with faith beliefs. There are two reasons I have not done that. Firstly, I have been dealing fairly loosely with which tradition we are interested in here – although by the nature of the Traditional Approach it is possible there is a Christian bias to the list. If we bring in other descriptions, we start to have to deal with the “which tradition question” – I will do that shortly but let's put a pin in that for now. More important to me is the matter of what is my argumentative target – I am not concerned here with showing ‘God’ does not refer descriptively at all, my concern is with the traditional approach which emphasises PBT and the classic theist God. Given that, the matter at hand is whether the traditional descriptions are sufficient to explain the meaning or reference of the term God, or the most important (most weighted ϕ) in determining the meaning or reference of the term God. If we start bringing in all the other descriptions we might include (e.g. spoke to Abraham) we might get closer to a descriptive account of the term ‘God’ but it would take us quite far from the traditional approach that is the target of this chapter. As such, I leave them off the list.

While this move does help in a number of our cases – those that are sceptical about modal properties but, for instance, still broadly endorse the omni-God definition, those that drop one or more of the omni-features, and solves the Demos issue – without bringing in other descriptions unrelated to the Traditional Approach I still don't think this can solve the problems. We still have two problem cases. Firstly, those that wholesale reject the modal conception of God will not be inclined to associate any of the features on this list with the term ‘God’. Furthermore, let us reconsider the ‘El’ case – if we maintain that a large number of speakers would endorse the statement ‘God exists’ in that hypothesised scenario, and we think cluster descriptivism is true, that is strong evidence that this set of descriptions is not the most important in determining the reference of the term ‘God’.

More importantly, I think there is an additional problem a proponent of “the traditional approach” should be worried about here – and that is the interdependence of these descriptions on a single method. Recall again the method of PBT I outlined at the start of the chapter – that we begin from a single conception of God as the greatest possible being and then reason about what features this involves. On the cluster account it is not required that

any one description be necessarily true of the object of reference, only the disjunction of associated descriptions. Furthermore, the primary method of PBT is a process of understanding God by understanding what it means to be ‘the greatest possible being’. So the secondary descriptions (the omni-features) are not just descriptions that are associated with ‘God’ by virtue of common beliefs about God such that they collectively determine the reference or meaning of ‘God’, rather those descriptions are supposed to fall out of the concept of God or the meaning of the term ‘God’ under analysis. Hence while under cluster descriptivism the great making properties could be seen as providing descriptions associated with ‘God’ they are not connected to the term ‘God’ in the way PBT demands. To put it another way, imagine if the description ‘the greatest possible being’ was not on this list, or that it turned out not to be true of God, but that the omni-features remained on the list (or if they were somehow true of a being that was not “the greatest possible being” – i.e. the BETTER WORLD case) then the very reason we arrived at those features, the epistemic justification for believing them would fall away. Cluster descriptivism gets the relation between the epistemic method of arriving at the omni-features, and the association of the omni-features backwards. This is really the fundamental problem for proponents of the traditional approach when moving to more sophisticated versions of descriptivism, and why, in the first place, it looked a lot like PBT philosophers would subscribe to something like the semantic substitution view – because they need something closer to that version of descriptivism in order to maintain the rational foundation of their method of analytic theology. I want therefore, to turn to one more possible route for the “traditional approach” that aims to do this method justice.

1.4 Other Routes to a Descriptive Definition

What has been discussed so far has been focused on approaching descriptive definitions through the lens of semantics first. But much of this, especially over semantic substitutability, looks a lot like general arguments against analytic definitions. Consider the following suggestion from Leftow:

A Psalmist who asserts that God is morally perfect does not have a full ethical theory in mind. But surely he means at least that whatever perfect goodness really is, that is what God has. If we take Scriptural authors to intend at least this much by what they say, what they say licenses the project of perfect being theology even as its results far outstrip anything they are likely to have understood their own words to imply. (2011, p.110)

The idea goes like this: while it may be the case that the PBT descriptions can't be linguistically associated with the term 'God' in the ways laid out above, most religious bodies, texts, and authorities make perfection claims about God, that is, it is hard to find a religious believer who wouldn't at least describe God as in some way perfect. Given this, and given a charitable interpretation of their claims couldn't we get to something like the PBT descriptions through conceptual analysis?

Thus perhaps we can think of some less demanding descriptions as associated with the term 'God' on the basis of religious claims and, through philosophical analysis, we show that whatever meets the less demanding description actually must meet the more demanding descriptions of PBT. In this way, while the PBT descriptions can't provide the cognitive significance of the term 'God', nor need they be necessarily associated by the majority of any linguistic community with the term 'God', they nonetheless could identify the referent of 'God' by being implicit in the less demanding descriptions that are associated by speakers with the term 'God'. This I think is interesting, but I don't think it is right. What I hope to do, by following this line of thought, is demonstrate the plausibility of my alternative interpretation of PBT as a revisionary project – which is the second prong of my attack on the traditional approach.

1.4.1 Actual Perfection and Possible Perfection

The kinds of arguments relevant to this section will be of a slightly different nature to the previous one. The method of PBT now takes a more central role because we are trying to argue that one description is implicit in another description. That being the case, we need to understand how it is we get from one to the other. Recall the method given in the beginning – we need something quite specific to get to the omni-definition. Namely, we need God to be the most x possible be x perfection or greatness. Why does it require this? Because the process through which God-omni is reasoned to involves ascribing not just very high levels of perfection but the most perfection possible. The chain of reasoning begins with “nothing could be a better G than G in fact is”. Of course, the term 'perfect' prima facie invokes an absolutist idea and seems to imply the 'the greatest possible being' but this need not be the case. Religious language is not philosophical language. So although in a highly abstracted sense 'perfect' could be taken to mean 'cannot be improved upon', there are charitable ways in which we can interpret the word perfect in a less restricted way. Consider, for instance, the

alternative descriptive definition of ‘God’ offered by Gellman and cited by Speaks that God is:

- (1) The most perfect actual being
- (2) Who is very high on the scale of perfection
- (3) Whose perfection is vastly greater than that of the second most perfect being,
And
- (4) Upon whom all other beings in some important way depend (Gellman, 1995, cited by Speaks 2018, p.163)

This alternative might be said to serve as just as charitable an interpretation of religious claims to perfection. It does not appear to me to be falling short in any way of capturing the meaning of religious utterances. Incidentally, this description would also solve some of the problems given in the previous section. Now I’m not advocating this definition (I’m not convinced they completely work either) but whether this list is suitable is by the by. The point it is intending to bring out is there are entirely sensible ways in which we may understand religious perfection claims without finding “the greatest possible being” to be implicit in them. And a preference for this interpretation could straightforwardly be motivated by the problems we have already seen with modal claims. I just don’t think it can be shown that in the more specific description of “maximally perfection” must be implicit in religious claims. So here we have a dilemma: on the one hand PBT needs the modal conception of God to get off the ground, but on the other hand it looks like our best candidate descriptions deliver less precise claims than the proponents of ‘the traditional approach’ think. As we have seen from the arguments in previous parts it is epistemically possible that the extensions of these two descriptions differ – it may be the case that they in fact don’t but I simply cannot see a principled way of showing they don’t without invoking some other justification. So how do we get from very great, actual perfection to the greatest possible perfection?

Let us return to Leftow again:

Perhaps all Scripture warrants is ‘pretty-impressive-being’ theology [...] In any case, even if Scripture does not fully warrant the perfect-being project – which I do not concede – perfection-claims have roots in primary religious life. They arguably flow out of Western monotheistic attitudes of worship, for arguably to see God as anything

less than absolutely perfect would make Him out not to deserve the sorts of attitude Western monotheist worship involve. (2011, pp.110-111)

Here he is directly giving a way in which we can move from ‘pretty-impressive-being’ to ‘maximally perfect being’ and one that, while Leftow thinks is not necessary, I think better captures the core thought behind PBT. In fact, it's striking just how many works in PBT include claims about the worthiness of worship. The thought is that nothing that is less than that which is understood as ‘most perfect possible’, could be worthy of the kind of worship involved in the Abrahamic faiths. In this way, ‘worthy of worship’ functions as a normative constraint for PBT philosophers. Thus in asserting ‘God is the maximally perfect being’, PBT philosophers are asserting that nothing less than that could be worthy of the religious orientation towards it: and it is core to religious commitment that religious feelings are not misplaced, misjudged, or in any way deceitful. Now if the PBT definition is implicit in the religious claims to perfection and the normative constraint taken from the religious orientation towards God is grounded on a faithful elucidation of religious norms as they are found in religious practice it may still lay some claim to descriptivism. But I think this cannot fully be the case. To show this we need to understand what kind of perfection is involved in “maximal perfection” according to PBT.

1.4.2 Perfect (Divine) Beings

Let us begin with the type of perfection that religious claims invoke. This section actually describes a problem that cuts through both the descriptiveness problem and the method of PBT itself that I have so far glossed over. The trouble is best expressed by asking ‘in what sense is God perfect?’ or ‘what would it mean for God to be perfect’. The kinds of properties that would make, say, a perfect home, would not be the same kind of properties that would make a perfect coffee. Our common notion of perfection looks like it is tied to the kind of thing being described as perfect. This of course is not a new observation and is even pointed out by Anselm; there is nothing in the method of PBT I’ve described that does not attend to this principle for recall again our description was “the greatest possible **being**”. So plausibly, it looks like we are connecting perfection to perfection in beings. Our ‘perfect-making-properties’ are related to kinds, in order to know what these perfect making properties are, we need to know what kind is under discussion.

- (i) Perfect Beings

There is a fairly straightforward reason I don't think the kind 'being' can do. As far as I can see, when we start to fill out in any substantive way what we mean by "being" such that we can talk about what makes the "perfect being" produces properties that God is not supposed to have. To consider the process, we identify properties that it would be better for a being to have, then assign to God all properties it would be best to have. So for instance, it is better for beings to be maximally good than not maximally good, and thus the maximally perfect being would be maximally good. But there are plenty of things we might think are good for the general kind "beings" as we ordinarily understand it that don't make sense to assign to God. For instance: healthy, fit, nourished, etc. It doesn't seem like 'God is maximally fit' is the kind of thing that Perfect Being Philosophers are going for. In other words, God looks like too different a kind of thing to ordinary beings, namely he is of a non-physical, supernatural, divine kind.

(ii) Perfect Divine Beings

An alternative option, whilst feeling a little fishy, but I actually think is by far the most defensible version of PBT allows some implicit knowledge about divinity in the ascription of perfect making properties. This is a kind of synthesis between Perfect Being Theology and religious text exegesis. It accepts the dilemma that either we assign good properties relative to the wrong kind or that we avoid this problem by assuming some knowledge of the divine nature, and so introduces a principled way in which this can be done by allowing a minimal concept of God from religious practice that the PBT method then fills out. Leftow calls his version of this Scriptural Perfect Being Theology (2015).

There are still problems here however, if we have two conflicting claims about the kind of thing God is, which should we be perfecting? We can make this worse by noting it may be the case that perfect making properties relative to each kind may be in conflict with one another. So, not only do we have trouble with directly conflicting claims within religious texts, we are also generating new ones with conflicting perfect making properties relativized to kind. Leftow himself notes this potential problem, he writes:

Perhaps what is good for a knower as such isn't good for a person as such, and if so perhaps what would make God a better knower isn't a property better to have than to lack, full stop. (2015 p. 424)

What does he offer as a solution to this problem? Merely that 'one just has to work out what's most important' (2015, p. 424). It looks like, as discussed, our most plausible candidate for

working out ‘what’s most important’, is by looking to which would make God “most worthy of worship” – that is, makes the most of the religious attitudes towards God.

There is trouble lurking here. The problem is “worthy of worship” on this version of PBT, now SPBT, looks like it cannot help in giving us a principled way to rule between competing perfections. To see why, remember that the religious attitude we were depending on to maintain descriptivism was that God is *absolutely perfect* because only something *absolutely perfect* could be worthy of the religious attitudes of the Abrahamic faiths. But now we have lost any sense of absolute perfection: instead, the process involves listing relative perfection properties according to kinds that are applicable to God and then ruling between candidates using the criteria of which makes God more worship-worthy. The problem is a kind of circularity is creeping in here. Let me explain.

The theological perspective provides us with, not just what it takes to be “worthy of worship” but also the metaphysical justification for that judgement. What do I mean by this? Well imagine the PBT philosopher were to drop the metaphysical assumption of the theologian – that the God they believe in exists, or that they have something roughly approximating a ‘true’ conception – and account for epistemic uncertainty about the nature and existence of God. Having done this, their own conception of God should not be governing their judgements of “worship worthiness” – instead to determine this they should be looking to elucidate religious attitudes about worthiness of worship. Our previous candidate was absolute perfection, but we couldn’t make sense of that idea, so what is it now? Well now it looks like the “worthy of worship” criteria is simply the religious attitude people have towards the God they take to be God.

Thus the choice we make here between perfect making property candidates now can *only* depend on divergent internal religious attitudes (with each faith group and therefore religious texts analysed separately), or alternatively we would have to turn to some non-religious criteria altogether. It’s no surprise then that those who prefer the omni-conception of God are philosophers with a particularly metaphysical slant. But other religious believers even from within the same faith group may rank the relationship between God and his creation, stories of salvation, stories of justice, and so forth, as more central to worship-worthiness than perfection claims. Likewise, if we are using non-religious criteria, many competent users of the term ‘God’ may (and often do) reject the idea that God (if he exists) is worthy of worship at all. But without turning to such criteria the judgement of “worthiness of

worship” upon which perfection claims are built loses its independence. SPBT seen this way looks more akin to a theological argument, from inside a religious group, about what conception of God is better, not what conception of God is implicit in religious claims.

In other words, it was claims to perfection which are used as justification for the kinds of religious attitudes towards God SPBT theologians need to rely on. Therefore, those same religious attitudes cannot be used as the ground for claims to perfection. If we step outside of the circularity and look for an independent criterion, we find that the SPBT philosopher cannot help themselves to the assumption that God is worthy of worship. The idea that God is worthy of worship is not a universally shared attitude or description of God (the coherency of arguments like the ‘evil God challenge’ rest on the possibility that God is not worthy of worship) and there is nothing conceptually out of order with claiming that God is unworthy of worship. Not only that, but we also find that even if we restrict our examination to the internal religious attitudes held by believers “worthiness of worship” does not inevitably get us to perfection due to divergent religious attitudes about what would make God worthy of worship in the first place.

Thus I have shown that the omni-god definition, and its partner the modal conception of God, cannot be providing descriptive definitions of ‘God’. I have shown it cannot provide the meaning of the term, it cannot provide the reference, and it cannot be found to be implicit in other descriptive definitions of ‘God’ without assuming the very things it was intended to demonstrate. Where then does this leave the omni-definition? And if it does not “express our concept of God”, why has it become so dominant in theological and philosophical tradition?

1.5 Taxonomy of Definitions.

To answer this, let us consider what kinds of definitions we may be concerned with. There are many different things that a definition may be offering. We can consider the following broad categories: real, nominal, dictionary, descriptive, ostensive, stipulative, and ameliorative (Gupta, 2015).

Dictionary

Dictionary definitions are practical. Their purpose is to provide information to the reader so that they may come to a general understanding of the term at hand. They also provide further contextual and historical linguistic details such as etymology, grammatical structure etc. Dictionaries vary on what information to provide to accomplish the task of imparting

understanding. In this way while dictionaries may “explain the meaning of a term” they do not do so in a way that is suitable for the task of philosophers.

Real vs Nominal Definitions

We can distinguish between real definitions and nominal definitions in the following way: the first is concerned with the properties of a thing, the real essence of a thing, while the latter is concerned with the meaning of a term. Thus to find a real definition we would investigate the thing denoted by a term, for a nominal definition we would investigate the linguistic use of a term. I am myself, wholly concerned with nominal definitions, not real definitions. Though the distinction is useful to take note of.

Descriptive

In principle, descriptive definitions spell out meaning. They are intended to do this in a way that fits existing usage. They differ from dictionary definitions in their scope. That is, the task isn't to merely provide enough information to impart a general understanding, but rather to impart a complete understanding of what is being defined (Oppy, 2021, p. 519). They can be further subdivided into different grades of strictness. Extensional adequacy, intentional adequacy, and sense adequacy. A definition is extensionally adequate iff it is subject to no actual counter examples. A definition is intentionally adequate iff it is subject to no possible counter examples. And a definition is sense adequate iff it endows the term with the right sense (Gupta, 2015, sect 1.4).

Ostensive

Ostensive definitions make use of direct demonstration. They are often contextually and experientially bound. They require the speaker defining or imparting a definition to point/draw the listeners attention to an object of experience in order to serve as a referent for the term being defined.

Stipulative

Stipulative definitions provide meaning without commitment that the meaning fits actual, existing, prior usage. They are sometimes used for introducing new terms, or they can be used for introducing a new use for an existing term. They are intended to serve particular purposes be that investigation, argumentative and so forth.

Explicative

Explicative definitions do not aim to capture existing usage but rather provide refined definitions for existing terms, to offer improvement on them, for particular purposes. In this way they are intended to be part descriptive and part stipulative.

Ameliorative

Ameliorative definitions are similar to explicative definitions. They are also, like explicative definitions, focused on what we ‘should’ mean by our terms or what would be a good thing. But in the case of ameliorative definitions this is given by the purpose of the term in our language. These purposes may be political or ideological, as well as pragmatic.

Reconsidering what kind of definition may be involved in PBT is the second prong of my argument. I think that there is an alternative way of understanding PBT and the omni – God definition, easily accessible to PBT philosophers, that allows their project to get off the ground without invoking descriptivism: that ‘the greatest possible being’ is an explicative definition. I think this approach can account for much of the textual evidence in PBT works, and that there are independent grounds for thinking that explication better captures the relationship between Analytic Theology and Religious practice.

1.6 Perfect Being Theology as Explication

There are a number of motivations one might have for offering an explanation; the classic motivation is to remove vagueness or defects. The Carnapian inspired process involves taking a concept – the explicandum – as it is used in one area or context – the explicandum language – holding some aspect of it constant while shifting another – to endow it with a new but related definition – the explicatum – for a particular purpose of work in a different area or context – the explicatum language (1950). It is then judged against a set of criteria of adequacy. These usually include specific criteria proposed by those doing the explication, as well as four general ones:

similarity – so the explicatum must capture a sufficient amount of the use of the explicandum

exactness – the rules for the explicatum must be in an exact form

fruitfulness – the explicatum must be useful

simplicity – the explicatum must have a simple form and relation to the other concepts (Novaes, 2018, pp.1014-1017).

There are more elements that may be involved in this but for my purposes this is sufficient to get to grips with the alternative proposal of how to understand the omni-god definition.

The view that the omni-god is an explication is most explicitly endorsed by Morris. He provides a defence of PBT on the grounds, not that it captures the core of the concept of God, but rather because it provides a good methodological process for analytic theology to be conducted upon. He writes:

The idea of God as a perfect being has long provided an important orientation and methodological direction for the attempt to arrive at a philosophically adequate conception of deity. [...] purported revelations are to be found which conflict. We must somehow separate the wheat from the chaff. How is this to be done? [...] The philosophers already mentioned, for instance- Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, and Leibniz-all took themselves to be explicating a conception of God faithful to the scriptures and interpretive thought of the Christian tradition. [...] For all its centrality and unparalleled importance to a Christian theologian or philosopher, the Bible is just clearly not a metaphysical treatise (Morris, 1987, p.21)

The language here of methodology, orientation, and adequacy, is incredibly useful. He does not speak of conceptions of God needing to be faithful to the concept of God as ‘the greatest possible being’, but rather of the omni-God needing to be faithful to religious conceptions. Furthermore, he rather directly invokes the principle of fruitfulness. Morris is here, in essence, defending the view that there is a need for explication of religious concepts and that this is justified by the explicated concepts usefulness in philosophy.

1.6.1 Assessing the Need

Broadly speaking I think there are three reasons to motivate the view that the notion of God from within a particular religious practice (in this case we are mostly dealing with Christian scholars) is defective such that there needs to be a more exact definition with which metaphysically minded theologians can work. One of them is cited in the Morris passage above: that there are inconsistent religious claims about God. The second is that there seem to be normative constraints by religious believers on how the term ‘ought’ to be used. And the last is that our conceptions of God appear to involve second person information. Let us go through each in a little more detail to try and understand why they imply the need for an explicative definition.

Philosophically Inconsistent Religious Claims

This is one of the more straightforward reasons to motivate an explication. If we accept that religious claims often are (philosophically speaking) inconsistent or mutually exclusive, then we have a case that (for the purpose of metaphysical analytic theology) the conceptions of God from a particular practice simply are defective. In order to be able to get substantive metaphysical reflection off the ground an explicated definition is needed.

Normative Constraints

Cashing out the normative demands of religious practice in terms of total perfection appears to be a large motivation behind the PBT project. This would further explain why PBT theologians are keen to invoke the description ‘the greatest possible being’ as policing the boundaries of God. The demand to only use ‘God’ for a being that is ‘worthy of worship’ requires some determination of what would fit this criteria. This is a potential driver of perfection intuitions.

Franciscan Knowledge

The final reason to prefer the explicative interpretation is that specific religious conceptions of God plausibly involve second-person information. We can look at this as the role of many stories in religions about God – they aim to communicate something about what God is like. This information is not descriptive in kind. Yet it is likely driving intuitions on what kinds of things could properly be called ‘God’.

1.6.2 The Explicative process

On this alternative reading of their work then, the story of PBT would go something like this: an explicative question is posed such as ‘for the purposes of analytic theological analysis how should the concept of God be understood. The conceptions of God (the explicandum) in a particular religious setting (the explicandum language) – has been found insufficiently clear or otherwise unsuitable for the purpose of analytic theology (the explicatum language). Ensuring that the concept of God arrived at (the explicatum) is as consistent as possible with the usage in religion through some adequacy conditions (fruitfulness, sufficient similarity, exactness and simplicity) the omni-god definition was arrived at. Thus PBT is equipped through this method with all the apparatus it needs to get off the ground.

We have seen then, some reasons why we may assess the conceptions of God within a particular religious practice as in need of an explication for the purposes of analytic theology. It also often looks like the kind of arguments that PBT theologians launch in favour of PBT require an explicative interpretation because they involve methodological fruitfulness.

Consider Leftow again, who writes:

Theists who criticise particular perfect-being arguments – say, mine – may well wind up offering others of the same sort if they do not either limit themselves to Scriptures explicit claims or go silent (2013, p.12)

He seems to be arguing here that something like PBT is necessary to continue to do philosophy within a religious tradition. Additionally, we have seen how the explication process works. Regardless of whether PBT philosophers see themselves as offering explications (I suspect many do not) they still seem to offer arguments that imply just that. Furthermore, there's a great deal of reason to be sketchy of semantic accounts of the term 'God' that are tied to a particular theological perspective. This is because from within a particular theological perspective there appears to be a demand on what is proper and right to call 'God' – it is a term that is the subject of a kind of linguistic battle. Those from within a particular camp may well deny that those outside their camp are using the term correctly in virtue of these theological demands – however, this does not imply that in fact the term does mean what they claim it should: claims about how we should use the term 'God' are different to claims about how we do use the term 'God'. As such I think it is an alternative interpretation of the omni-definition that does not imply implausible semantic conclusions.

1.7 Concluding Remarks

I have here tried to demonstrate that we cannot think of PBT as descriptive. I have shown substantive reason to think of it as explicative and considered ways in which this process might be approached. I have argued interpreting PBT through this lens has significant explanatory power for our understanding of vast swathes of philosophical literature. On the other hand, from this view, I think that some of the roles which PBT has been employed to play look untenable: it cannot 'police the boundaries' of the concept God, or establish sameness of reference between Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Faiths and there is some question over its role in epistemological questions too. Understanding PBT as one way of answering the question 'how *should* we use the term 'God' for the purpose of philosophy?', rather than 'how do we use the term God?' helps us in isolating what is at stake in

philosophical debates. More importantly for my project it is once we rule that PBT never offered a descriptive definition of 'God' a great deal of demands on, or potential stumbling blocks, to understanding the conceptual space of religious language are removed.

2. Applying a Causal Theory of Reference

In this chapter I explore the proposed alternative to “The Traditional Approach”: applying a historical-cum-indexical account of reference to the term ‘God’. On this view ‘God’ is framed as an ordinary Millian proper name such that the semantic contribution of the term ‘God’ to a sentence is the referent, which in turn is determined by the history of the term’s use, speakers’ intentions, and ostensive definition. The basic idea at the heart of this proposal is that the history of the Abrahamic faiths is one in which humans frequently encounter God and thus it is possible that one or any of these events could be seen as reference grounding events from which a linguistic community can form a referential practice. I argue that this position is untenable. That ‘God’ does not function at all like “classic” cases of Millian proper names but rather like descriptive ones. Furthermore, I show that it is hard to make sense of God-talk on this view without relying on significant theological and metaphysical assumptions. Finally, I argue that this model of the term ‘God’ does not fit either the grammatical or historical facts around the term’s use. I conclude that the causal view cannot be considered a substitute for “The Traditional Approach”. However, while this theory cannot fit the demands of semantic reference, proponents of this view nonetheless present a compelling picture of pragmatic reference. As such, it may present a potential complement to an alternative account of the meaning and reference of the term ‘God’.

2.1 The Causal Proposals

In application to ‘God’ the versions of this picture of reference that are usually borrowed from are that of Kripke and Donnellan. There are a number of people who have written positively on this possibility including Alston, Miller, Sullivan, Jeffrey, and Burling. I will primarily follow Alston’s paper ‘Referring to ‘God’’ as the commonly cited work dedicated to the mechanics of this proposal.

The various proposals to deploy a historical-cum-indexical account of reference in this context usually begin by attacking the prevailing descriptivist view. While something like what I’ve named “The Traditional Approach” is usually identified as the target for these philosophers, their arguments tend to focus on the problems for descriptivism in general. Thus the debate follows the contours of the work in philosophy of language on proper names rather than the specific descriptions offered. This is unlike my previous chapter whereby I was focused on whether the specific descriptions offered could be *the* descriptions or the

main descriptions involved in either giving the reference or the meaning of the term ‘God’. In arguing against “The Traditional Approach” I therefore, unlike proposers of the historical-cum-indexical accounts of reference, did not commit myself to an anti descriptive position.

Additionally, in my last chapter I covered a range of different semantic accounts that in some way could frame these descriptions as playing a central role in meaning or reference. There were broadly three ways I considered: descriptive meaning, description association, and descriptive introduction. Endorsing “The Traditional Approach” therefore did not necessarily commit the proponent to a particular semantic theory, or even the type of term ‘God’ might be. In contrast the causal alternative proponents are all committed to a more specific set of positions – that ‘God’ is a proper name, that proper names are Millian, that the reference of proper names are determined causally, and that (in the case of the name ‘God’) this name was introduced ostensibly. Thus their arguments are constructed to show that any descriptivist account of the term ‘God’ is unsuitable and that the historical-cum-indexical alternative solves the problems associated with descriptivism in this context. I will therefore survey these arguments briefly in order to follow their line of argument and understand their motivations for defending the causal alternative.

2.2 Anti Descriptivist Motivations

We covered descriptivist theories at length in the last chapter, which broadly speaking endorse a view whereby a speaker uses a proper name to successfully refer through the association of that proper name with some descriptive content that uniquely determines the referent. Thus when a speaker employs some name ‘N’, and in doing so successfully refers to a unique object, the speaker must be thinking of N as the object which uniquely satisfies some description(s), and the object must, in fact, uniquely satisfy the description(s) the speaker has in mind (Michaelson & Reimer 2022).

2.2.1 A General Problem

There are a number of widely debated problems with descriptivist theories, with varying degrees of pertinence in application to religious terms. Firstly, there is a general complaint one could make about the ambiguity in the theory itself. For there are a huge variety of descriptions available for reference grounding. When offering up the descriptions that could be associated with the term ‘God’ there are a huge number available beyond those already explored. For instance ‘The entity who spoke to Moses’, ‘The entity that created the universe’, and so forth. The more popular Searlean form of descriptivism attempts to resolve

this problem by proposing that the reference is fixed by a set of descriptions that the speaker has in mind, of which, if a sufficient number are true of some unique object, then that is the object of reference (Searle 1982). However, it is still not clear what ‘a sufficient number’ would be, especially when we consider that some descriptions surely remain more central than others, even if we cannot pick a single crucial one (Alston 1988). I may, for instance, offer superficial descriptions, descriptions that aren’t shared, or descriptions that are false (even when others I associate with the term are true). So in addition to deciding what ‘a sufficient number’ may be, we would also have to make decisions about which of our descriptions are ‘more crucial’.

This issue, of which descriptions, how many descriptions, and how these descriptions should be weighted, is may be problematic for application of the descriptive theory to the term ‘God’. In my last chapter we covered some of this difficulty in discussing whether the omni-God definition could be the main set of descriptions associated with the term ‘God’. Consider, for example, the well-cited gulf in the Christian tradition between ‘the God of the philosophers’, and ‘the God of Abraham’. Regardless of one’s theological stance as to whether these are one and the same, the differing descriptions associated with each throw up an issue for descriptivism because it is at least conceivable that the descriptions associated with one could uniquely pick out some object, whilst the descriptions associated with the other could all be false. Some of the case examples in my previous chapter traded on teasing these apart. If the descriptivists were right, then determining which, and how many of these descriptions need to be true in order to successfully refer, as well as which take priority, would have large theological implications. However, actually applying any descriptivist formula for answering the ‘which descriptions?’ question seems *prima facie* an implausible approach to resolving these questions. Just as we shouldn’t allow theological assumptions to determine semantics, it would be odd for semantics to determine theology.

2.2.2 Ignorance and Error

Further to that more general concern, Kripke has launched two famous objections to Descriptivist Theories of Reference (henceforth DTR): the twin problems of ignorance and error. The problem of ignorance arises from cases in which speakers know of no definite descriptions that *uniquely* identify an object, for example, a speaker may use the term ‘Einstein’ knowing only that he is a famous physicist; since this is true of multiple individuals, according to descriptivism the speaker would fail to refer (1980, pp.81-83). However, this issue may not

cut very deeply for reference to ‘God’ as the descriptions associated with the term are more famous and more unique than most (Alston, 1988). Moreover, it has been suggested that descriptions taking the form ‘the individual whom others in my community call...’ will also feature in the content associated with a name, thus securing uniqueness (Searle 1982). Far more problematic is the problem of error: that it may be the case that either (a) the vast majority of descriptions associated with a name are not true of any object, yet that term is nonetheless successfully used refer to some object x, or (b) the vast majority of descriptions associated with a name are true of some object y, yet that term is nonetheless successfully used to refer to some object x (Alston, 1988, p.116). First off, consider Kripke’s example of Jonah (1980). The descriptions we associate with Jonah will be derived from the Bible, such as ‘the prophet swallowed by a big fish’; however, were we to search for the historical Jonah – assuming that there was actually a historical Jonah - it would likely turn out that the vast majority of these descriptions were false (Kripke, 1980, p.67). Thus, descriptivism would give the result that the term ‘Jonah’ does not refer to the historical Jonah, but rather fails to refer. This illustrates scenario (a). Second, consider Kripke’s famous fantasy about Godel (1980, pp.83-84). In this story Kripke lays out a scenario in which he thinks the description ‘the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic’ associated with the term ‘Godel’ would pick out the wrong referent; he instructs us to imagine that the work was actually done by a man named Schmit, who died in mysterious circumstances, that his friend Godel, got hold of his work and thereafter Schmidt’s feat was attributed to him (Kripke 1980, pp.83-84). Under a descriptivist theory of reference then, we get the result that the term ‘Godel’ refers to Schmidt and not the man named ‘Godel’. This illustrates scenario (b).

Alston, amongst others, thinks that these arguments can be launched against treating ‘God’ as a descriptive term. I will look at these arguments shortly but first, I want to turn to the difficult mechanics of how historical-cum-indexical theories can be employed in the case of ‘God’.

2.3 The Casual Alternative

The basics of the alternative are that there are two components to reference: reference fixing and reference borrowing. Names come to designate objects through an initial baptism of the object, based on ostensive definition. That is, a speaker, having come into perceptual contact with an object, names it – this is the reference fixing component (Michaelson & Reimer, 2022, sect 2.2). The name is then transmitted through linguistic communities, with

each speaker (reference borrower) intending to use the name to refer to the same object as the speaker (reference lender) from whom they heard it – this is the reference borrowing component (Michaelson & Reimer, 2022, sect 2.2). Thus, given successful reference fixing and borrowing, any use of a proper name can be traced back through the members of the linguistic community to a baptismal event, in which a unique object was named. This object is the referent of the name. According to this view, both the reference-borrowing and, more notably, the reference-fixing stages are purely causal; descriptions associated with the proper name, whether by a borrower or a dubber, need not be true of the object in order for reference to, or naming of, the object to be successful.

While this is the bare bones framework there is significant variation in the ways this picture can and has been cashed out. The fine grained details of these go well beyond what is coverable within this chapter but I do want to do my best to cover a broad range of possibilities and clear a little theoretical ground as will be relevant for my arguments. So let me first give a sketch of how we might think of this picture working in the context of application to God.

2.3.1 A Framework

First, we have a question to answer, what might have been the baptismal event for the term ‘God’ in this proposal? None of the proponents of this view picked a particular religious experiential event as their favoured candidate – perhaps this is not surprising considering the possibility that we simply don’t know and that the number of candidates will vary substantially given pre-existing theological, metaphysical, and historical opinions. This is a somewhat awkward hurdle for a causal account – especially if we think a speaker’s intentions might matter in the dubbing of an object. But for illustration purposes only let us imagine that the Moses and the burning bush story is our favoured candidate.

From then, I think the best way of conceptualising the historical-cum-indexical view in this context is to think of that event as initiating a referential practice. As such, regardless of the event in the historical stories of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism we pick, from that point forth the baptiser then initiated members of their linguistic community into the referential practice such that their use of the term fit the condition that they intended to use the term in the same manner in which the baptiser did (i.e. to refer to the same object). They in turn initiated new users into this naming practice and so forth. Hence establishing the linguistic community as users of the term ‘God’. From any particular use of the term ‘God’ by these speakers its

reference can therefore be found by tracing the history of the term back to the initial baptismal event.

2.3.2 Variation in the proposals

Now, as a starting point the above account will do, however I do want to highlight some issues and variations in versions of this story that have been put forward in application to God. Both Alston and Miller fail at times to distinguish between the original baptism event, and future contact with the object of reference by those speakers who have antecedently been initiated into the reference practice. This has generated a few problems cited by those defending hybrid theories over reference shift. So I want to just briefly follow more closely the papers of both Miller and Alston to get a view on precisely what work they think their proposals are doing.

Miller takes himself to be following a version of historical-cum-indexical reference given by Donnellan (Miller 1986). He begins with basic cases of references which are ‘direct references of a language user to some referent, typically physically present in his immediate environment’ (1986 p5). He writes, this condition allows for a ‘tagging’ of the object with a name. This then ‘makes possible remote references’ by using the direct reference as an ‘anchor’. A name use refers in the case of remote reference by a causal historical chain leading from a direct reference to a name use. So far, so good – this looks to be a fairly standard version of the view. He adds that a name use fails to refer when the chain of those uses ends in a Donnellan “block” – which are “events that preclude any referent’s being identified” (1986, p.7). Miller recognises that this definition is a little vague but imagines that we might say that if the history of the term ends in ‘a fiction told as reality, or an egregious misperception’ then there may be no plausible candidate in the context for the referent (1986, p7). This is a useful addition to the view that will help us in looking at what we might say in the circumstance that we wish to deny that anything answers to the term ‘God’. However, he then additionally writes:

It is not always the case that a single direct reference anchors the chain. The original direct reference may not be traceable to a single individual. In normal cases remote references are grounded in multiple direct references which may even be widely separated in time. For example, remote references to Jerusalem are grounded in direct references to that city in the present and stretching back into antiquity. (1986, p7)

This is crucial because this is, in fact, a departure from the standard picture. It is well observed that historical-cum-indexical reference stories are better equipped to deal with cases of remote

references, however those that prefer this account of reference in terms of its application to ‘God’ tend to lean towards revelation based theologies in which they assert God is continuously in contact with speakers. As such, they seem to prefer versions of the picture which employ a “mini-baptism” or “multiple dubbing” version of the story. We can see a similar sort of perspective arrive when we turn to Alston’s paper.

Alston takes himself to be following a Kripkean version of the historical-cum-indexical reference story. Although his outline is in some ways much the same as Miller’s he actually begins with non-derivative reference to God which is ‘secured by labelling something presented in experience’ (Alston, 1988, p.188). Referential practice is then shared with others to communicate what entity it is the initiator was referring to – in the context of God this is done by shared religious practices such as communal worship and prayer. He writes members of this community can therefore pick up this practice ‘much as Kripke suggests’. But then he writes:

By being initiated into the practice we picked up the sub-practice of referring to God, of referring to the object of worship our predecessors in the community had been referring to. And, if things go right, we also attain some first hand experiential acquaintance with God to provide still another start for chains of transmission. (1988, p.119)

Now I presume Alston does not mean here to suggest each speaker that names ‘God’ as an object of experience starts a brand new referential practice, so I cannot see how to parse the claim that a speaker’s experience provides ‘another start’ unless he means, with Miller, to be endorsing a kind of multiple dubbing view to deal with the fact that what he is interested in primarily isn’t ‘remote reference’ but ‘direct reference’.

2.3.3 A Multiple Dubbing Framework

So let us briefly adjust our sketch as follows – borrowing from Devitt and Sterelny we might say:

Many uses of a name are relevantly similar to a dubbing. They are similar in that they involve the application of the name to the object in a direct perceptual confrontation with it. ... Such uses of a name ground it in its bearer just as effectively as does a dubbing. As a result it becomes multiply grounded. The dubbing does not bear all the burden of linking a name to the world. (Devitt and Sterelny, 1999 p.75)

This has the added benefit of helping with our trouble in identifying the initial baptism. So now, the causal chain we follow for uses of the term ‘God’ has multiple grounding events (links between word and world) in which the speaker intended to use the term in the manner of the referential practice to which they have been initiated. Each of these events could reinforce or weaken the existing referential practice. There are more details and complications to this story but I won't go into them. My purpose on raising this here is to firstly provide the most charitable version of Miller and Alston's proposal as I can, and secondly to raise an issue in readers minds that I will return to over whether Alston and Miller are paying enough heed to the distinction between semantic and pragmatic reference.

With our two versions of the historical-cum-indexical reference story in hand, we can therefore consider the motivations for this proposal returning to our arguments against descriptivism and considering how and whether they apply in reference to ‘God’.

2.4 The Proper Name Intuition

The instinct to think of ‘God’ as a Millian proper name might seem *prima facie* odd – ‘God’ in particular is a term that seems more prone to descriptivist intuition than our classic cases of proper names. That said, there are a few intuitive drivers at work here. I think these all fall under what Alston calls the “primacy” of direct reference. What does he mean by this? Alston thinks that this instinct applies across language – that how we understand the notion of an object satisfying a reference is by antecedently having the necessary apparatus to refer to it (1988, p.120). He however does not focus on this argument in his paper but rather demonstrates the idea (in the context of application to ‘God’) by launching the classic arguments against descriptivism surveyed in the first part of this chapter.

2.4.1 Ignorance, Accessibility and Scope

Let us return then to our first case, scenario (a): the vast majority of the descriptions associated with a name are not true of any object, yet that term is nonetheless successfully used to refer to some object *x*. Now suppose that it is actually the case that religious believers have direct experiences of God – God frequently reveals himself and presents himself to people experientially. However, for whatever reason we radically misconstrue his nature, perhaps due to human shortcomings we are constantly getting the message garbled – so much so that, even if there were a number of correct descriptions we could deploy such as ‘the individual who addressed me at *t*’, the vast majority of descriptions we attribute to him are false. *Prima facie* it still seems that in this scenario, despite how radically mistaken we are about him, due to our

direct epistemic relation with God we should be able to successfully refer to ‘God’. Thus in this imagined scenario ‘God’ would refer. The historical-cum-indexical story provides this result, the descriptivist one does not.

The same argument used here by Alston can also be deployed to solve problems around accessibility (e.g. the problem of theologically unsophisticated subjects given in Chapter One), scope (e.g. it accommodates the theologically heterodox believers from Chapter One). This goes some of the way in explaining the phenomenon noted by Miller about the persuasiveness of psychological arguments against religious belief. The problem case of theologically unsophisticated subjects was explored in Chapter 1 as a problem with accessibility under “The Traditional View”. Under that view it seemed like it often demanded users of the term ‘God’ to employ sophisticated conceptual apparatus in order to use the term competently. In other words the semantic theory performed badly in terms of accessibility. In contrast, under this view, users of the term need only to have been initiated into the referential practice (and have the right sort of speaker intentions) in order to refer to God. Similarly, the problem case of our heterodox believers is solved – under this view since successful semantic reference places no requirements that speakers share the same set descriptions in identifying God in order to successfully refer, or co-refer, only that they be initiated into the linguistic practice (and have the right sort of speaker intentions) the problem for heterodox believers does not arise. In other words the view performs better in terms of scope. But for me the really interesting force behind this argument is the third - its relationship to arguments over existence. I think this goes to the heart of what Alston thinks is being delivered by the historical-cum-indexical story. Because driving thought in Alston’s work goes deeper than just a mere fix for a problem of reference – what lies behind it is an instinct on how religious believers, particularly those who are drawn to revelation based theology, think about God.

Although he doesn’t frame it in these terms Alston appears to be strongly committed to the view that believers can, and do, have singular thoughts about God. This is perhaps unsurprising given his view of religious experiences. Consider the following passage:

I take it that direct reference is the natural, baseline mode of reference; it takes place "automatically" without the need for any deliberate intervention. (1988, p.123)

Again, his purpose here is to appeal to the primacy of what he calls “direct reference”. And we can see under this view why it is that naturalistic accounts about the origins of theism, or the psychological disposition of those that believe in “God” would therefore be more troubling to

Alston. Because they strike at precisely the set of assumptions Alston uses in order to facilitate the singular thought intuition – the epistemic relation religious believers take themselves to stand in relation to God. Alston’s framing religious believers as standing in an appropriate epistemic relation to God to have singular thoughts about God is likely the reason that he places such an emphasis on direct reference. And it is often the case that philosophers frame proper names as strongly related to singular thoughts. To understand this point more fully I want to turn to Alston’s attempt to come up with a Godel-like case for God.

2.4.2 Error and the Devil as ‘God’

So let us recall scenario (b): the vast majority of descriptions associated with a name are true of some object *y*, yet that term is nonetheless successfully used to refer to some object *x*. Alston gives us the following thought experiment. Suppose that it is actually the case that we have direct contact with Satan, such that we have perceptual experiences of him. In this unsettling scenario Satan has decided to disguise himself as ‘the creator’, ‘perfectly good’, ‘all knowing’ and so on. Furthermore, all these things are true of our actual creator. In fact, Satan constantly reveals true things about the creator – although he claims them for himself – so much so that while a few of our descriptions pick out Satan such as ‘the entity that addressed me at *t*’, the vast majority pick out the actual creator. Alston thinks that here the term ‘God’ would refer to Satan. One reason we might think this is that a semantic theory that systematically requires speaker reference and semantic reference to come apart is an unsatisfactory one (1988). Granted, Alston’s intuition that ‘God’ would refer to Satan is an odd one which others have taken to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Alston’s view, but let us stay with it for the time being because Alston says a number of things that are revealing here. He implores us to imagine our view if tomorrow we discovered that the religious experiences of Moses and Abraham and so forth had actually been of Satan, that the covenants he had made had actually been with Satan. For all the true descriptions of the creator which are central to the Abrahamic faiths – the creator, perfect divine being etc – he asks:

Would we not have to admit that our religion, including the referential practices involved, is built on sand, or worse (muck, slime), and that we are a Satan-worshipping community, for all our bandying about of descriptions that fit *the only true God*? [emphasis mine] (1988, p.121)

Now, this argument shows us what Alston is getting at when he talks about the primacy of direct reference, especially in the case of God. There is some way that, to Alston, God’s

revelation and believers' epistemic relation to 'God' is essential to religious practice, and this includes referential practice. Since he Alston believes speakers' thoughts would be about Satan, the referential practice would pick out Satan, and hence we should think Satan is the semantic referent of the term 'God'.

Yet Alston's own words present us with good reason to think that 'God' is not a Millian proper name. Because, if we were in this scenario, how would the 'Satan masquerading as God' view be properly expressible? The semantic contribution of the term 'God' to that sentence would be the object of reference, which in this scenario would be 'Satan'. The whole purpose of Alston's argument was to motivate us to think of direct reference to 'God' as primary, yet in articulating the thought experiment Alston by his own words clearly demonstrated that speakers descriptive intentions might be more important than he would like to admit by appealing to our concept of 'the one true God'. In order to make his argument, he all but admits that the term 'God' is, in some important way, descriptive. Before I turn to what I think is a more plausible way of accommodating Alston's referential intuitions, I want to briefly look at a couple of objections to Alston's proposal.

2.5 Objections to the historical-cum-indexical account

I won't go into the details of all the mechanics of why I am hugely sceptical of the possibility of making an account like this work, because I think there is a more powerful positive case to make here. But I do want to briefly mention some concerns.

2.5.1 Some Potential Pitfalls in the Mechanics of a Fleshed Out Account

Alston's application of the causal-cum-historical is paired with his framework for religious experiences in which they are modelled as a kind of perception. Even if we grant Alston this controversial claim, there remains a problem with the nature of religious experiences – namely that they are private. One might think that a crucial feature of ostensive definition is the ability, at least in principle, for the speaker to be able to direct an audience's attention to the referent. Without that we might be worried about private language problems – how can we make errors in our referential practice without a publicly verifiable standard of application of the term? I am even more sceptical of the problem error throws up when combined with a multiple dubbings view – we could come up with many scenarios where reference became totally indeterminate with no possibility of discovery of this fact – where a different mystical object stood at the end of various different religious experiences.

Furthermore, most versions of historical-cum-indexical theories of reference bring back some descriptive elements in order to deal with mythological names or empty names. In general these are separated into two categories – semantic empty names (such as fictional characters), and metaphysically empty names (such as ‘Vulcan’, whereby the entity is introduced descriptively), both mythological names and ‘God’, seem to sit between these two types. If we were to try to assimilate ‘God’ into one of these two categories it would have to be the metaphysically empty kind as long as we think that God’s existence is a live question. But the most common strategy for these types of name is to frame these as descriptively introduced – usually they are descriptions invoked to explain some kind of observed phenomena, as in the case of ‘Vulcan’ which is framed as being introduced as “the planet responsible for the perturbations in Mercury’s orbit”. In this case ‘God’ would be something like “the supernatural entity that causes these religious experiences” or “the supernatural entity that caused the burning bush” or such like. But in doing that it seems like we have to invoke, in some way, the concept (or a similar concept) of God in the first place – at minimum we need some kind of powerful supernatural entity. In other words, on this strategy for dealing with the possibility that the term ‘God’ is empty, we have to depend on identifying the object as a ‘god’ or something similar. Something that does somewhat undercut the purpose of the general proposal.

Alternatively, a proponent of this view that wishes to maintain ostensive definition happens without the use of any descriptions would need some other compelling account of how we make sense of God-talk that accommodates the possibility that ‘God’ does not refer. It is hard to think of many comparator terms to build on here – except for other religious or spiritual names, and mythological names. Which have often been used in literature of examples of where descriptive intentions can be said to be more important, or trump, ostensive definition. Furthermore, at minimum a proponent of this view that wished to rely only on ostensive definition (not descriptive intentions or descriptive introduction) would need to have a theory that secures intentional identity. The most intuitive way to do this would be by tying it to referential practice. But again, if we have no possibility of error in reference due to the private nature of religious experiences, and/or the multiple dubbings version of the historical-cum-indexical theory of reference, and additionally no way of discovering a potential shift in reference, then this will be difficult to do – our definition of a referential practice looks on shaky ground whilst needing to do a lot of philosophical heavy lifting.

Not to mention we will need alterations to the idea that ‘God’ fails to refer when the chain ends in a “block” to account for a multiple dubbing historical chain rather than one – what if most end in a block? What if only some, say those belonging to a particular religious practice, end in a block? What is our criteria for a divergent religious practice in the absence of externally verifiable information? All this to say, nobody has yet done this work, and whether this can be done goes well beyond the scope of this paper - a variation on historical-cum-indexical accounts will be revisited in Chapter Five - but given the problems causal-cum-indexical theories have with error, reference shift, and empty names, the fact that the term ‘God’ demonstrates the potential for all of these troubling features, combined with the particular difficulties in applying ostensive definition to a private object of experience, and the tendency for advocates of the historical-cum-indexical accounts of reference to fall back on deploying descriptions or descriptive intentions when dealing with possibly mythological or empty names, I think it is fair to say that I see problems ahead for this view when expanded upon.

2.5.2 Some General Objections

Even if this can be done, there are a few principled reasons to think that such a view would be false anyway. Firstly, there are reasons to think that reference to God does not seem to be dependent on revelation. Let us suppose now that it is actually the case that Deism is true – that there is some kind of necessary, good, supreme deity that stands at the head of creation but which after the act of creation withdrew and was not involved in the affairs of man – thus there are no veridical religious experiences. On the historical cum indexical theory ‘God’ could not refer to this being, rather ‘God’ would be empty term because our use of the term would be grounded in a historical reference practice based, by hypothesis, on God experientially revealing himself to the religious believers. Which leads us to our second problem.

There are monotheistic religions that developed outside of the Hebrew tradition. Zoroastrianism for instance. As well as faiths which are monotheistic but are not generally considered Abrahamic – Sikhism for instance. Both faiths are often attributed to belief in “God”. Now suppose the claims of either of these religions is true. This creates difficulties under the causal-cum-indexical theory of reference because if ‘God’ referred through the same theoretical mechanism, it would have to be via a separate chain. Things get a little difficult here. Let's stick with Zoroastrianism as our example case. The Zoroastrian name for God is ‘Ahura Mazda’, who, according to their tradition, was revealed to Zoroaster. So we have a

candidate baptism event and a different name given which, in modern contexts, is translated into ‘God’ in English. This translation is a little odd if we think of ‘God’ as a Millian proper name but it’s not the final word on the matter. Perhaps it might be argued that this is the closest word representing a similar individual amongst English speakers to the individual referred to by Zoroastrianism. However, while proper names do get transliterated, I am hard pressed to think of cases of Millian proper names getting translated into other Millian proper names. Alternatively we may turn to the term ‘god’ to explain this, with capitalization a convention for representing a monotheistic God. The issue there however is that it rather seems like an abandonment of the historical-cum-indexical story. If capitalised ‘God’ is just used for any god that is monotheistic, it rather seems like we don’t need the historical-cum-indexical story of reference at all.

Furthermore, the problem is not restricted to non-Abrahamic monotheisms. Something that has been rather glossed over so far is the many orthographically distinct names and terms which are used across the faiths to refer to the Hebrew God – ‘Allah’, ‘God’, ‘El’, ‘YHWH’ and so forth. As I earlier raised ‘God’ isn’t even the original word used in scripture – the most plausible candidate as the original name if we are going for the Moses and the burning bush view is ‘YHWH’ – who in this story additionally identifies himself as the same deity as ‘El’. Our causal-cum-indexical theories need a story about the later translation of various terms used to refer to relevant deities in scripture into ‘God’. While this may be possible from a religious standpoint, it’s a lot messier when viewed through a historical lens. This is because the practices surrounding worship of deities who are later assimilated into one deity obviously implies separate existing referencing practices prior to any of our baptismal candidates. In addition, this jump doesn’t happen immediately, post Jewish polytheism we move into Jewish henotheism before we reach Jewish monotheism. Thus, it is hard for such a theory to remain neutral on its stance towards the accuracy of any particular faith – that is, coming up with a version of the historical-cum-indexical theory that both accounts for historical facts, does not presuppose a theological position, and has mechanics that produce the right results for all possible scenarios is a serious challenge due to the historical merging and divergence of referencing practices across time. This is an area in which the historical-cum-indexical account of reference is already weak.

Perhaps these problems aren’t entirely fatal for the historical-cum-indexical view, I do think variations on it for some names for divinities is possible, even possibly necessary given the nature of some of the names. ‘YHWH’ for instance looks like an obvious candidate to be

interpreted in this way. However, in Alston's framework, the cumulative impact of the objections explored is, I think, highly suggestive that at minimum this view leaves something important out. If this is granted, then I think we have a much more palatable proposal available to us – one that can be found in both Alston's and Miller's work.

2.6 Speakers Reference versus Semantic Reference

Despite both Miller and Alston couching their arguments in terms of the causal theory of reference, in multiple passages they both concede that reference can happen descriptively. Miller, borrowing from Donnellan additionally writes:

Direct reference is not limited to those words which are grammatically names. A description may be used referentially (non-descriptively) as the name of something which does not fit the description (1986, p.6)

The thought comes from Donnellan's famous example of a man drinking a martini. In this case, Donnellan asks us to imagine we are at a party and see a man with a martini glass (1966, p287). A speaker uses the description "the man drinking a martini" to ask who he is. In doing so, the speaker is able to draw the attention of the audience to the man and thus in some sense refers to him, even if it should transpire that the description is false and the man was actually drinking water. One way of understanding this story is that the speaker's reference is the man drinking the water, even if nothing answers to the description "the man drinking the martini". In other words, we might think we have speakers' reference, not semantic reference.

Both Miller and Alston I think did themselves a disservice in framing their proposals in terms of the historical-cum-indexical theory of reference in the first place. The arguments that they put forward, and their proper name intuitions can entirely be accommodated on much more modest proposals – namely by focusing on speaker reference rather than semantic reference. Semantic reference is what we have been concerned with so far. If something is the semantic referent of the term, it is given by linguistic conventions or rules – be that through meaning or some other set of rules such as causal historical ones. Speaker reference on the other hand is more complicated. It is tied to an occasion of use and involves contextual facts, linguistic convention, and speakers intentions.

When we return to Alston we see that he actually seems to be solely interested in speaker reference. Let me re-quote his argument on direct reference in full:

where the direct reference mechanisms are in place they will determine reference unless the subject makes special efforts to counteract this [...] That is, I take it that direct reference is the natural, baseline mode of reference; it takes place "automatically" without the need for any deliberate intervention. Whereas descriptivist reference requires more active involvement on the part of the subject. It does not strictly require anything as explicit as a consciously formed resolution, but it at least requires some implicit version of that. Since most of us most of the time take the path of least resistance, most of us most of the time will be making direct reference to what we are talking about. It is only in rather unusual and special circumstances that the descriptive mode will win a contest for referent-determination. (1988, pp.123-124)

Alston's argument is clearly about reference *on an occasion*. We can see this through his concern about the ways in which the subjects' thoughts about the object of reference are mediated. So my question here is if we already have baked into our account that we can use descriptions referentially why are we talking about semantic reference at all? Why not simply speaker reference? What Alston wants to say is that speakers can think about and use terms to refer to God directly, but this doesn't necessitate the whole of the historical-cum-indexical account – he needs direct reference, but this need not be at the semantic level.

One answer to why Miller and Alston chose to pursue the project of the historical-cum-indexical account of semantic reference is they might have been concerned at providing a version of reference where speaker reference and semantic reference consistently come apart. Most of our classic cases where these two separate depend on speaker errors and trade on stories about successfully drawing an audience's attention, something that is not possible in the case of religious experiences. Moreover Donnellan himself is equivocal about whether his distinction is a semantic or a pragmatic one. I have a few things to say here.

Firstly, even if one does choose the semantic distinction (not pragmatic) interpretation of Donnellan, one still doesn't *need* a historical-cum-indexical theory of semantic reference since we would be moving into a semi contextualist semantic view anyway. Regardless, for my purposes, I prefer the pragmatic interpretation of Donnellan suggested by Kripke. What I have to say further down the line on this could be fit into a semantic theory - especially if one subscribes to an indexical view of proper names. But that's a theoretical commitment I have no need to make so I do not intend to make it.

On the second problem – that our cases of pragmatic reference usually trade on directing an audience’s attention – it is obviously the case that any story about direct reference in this context will run into these problems. However, I think the problem is lessened by considering direct reference to be pragmatic, not semantic. Because at the very least, even if we do have a pragmatic reference that is essentially private, we still have some public standards of application for the term ‘God’. This is a significant improvement.

Finally, while I do think a systematic separation between semantic and speaker reference in the proper name case could be problematic - I do not think this is as much of a problem for descriptions – since we can relatively easily be under systematically false beliefs about what descriptions apply. As an example, we might mistakenly refer to somebody’s partner as their husband – falsely believing them to be married. We might systematically use ‘her husband’ to pragmatically refer to this man, never discovering our error. Additionally, we might refer to a mirage in the desert as ‘that pool of water’ never getting close enough to discover our error. Here semantic and speaker reference can systematically come apart. In fact, these examples work through our understanding of what in ordinary cases the terms we are using mean – it is because we understand terms like ‘water’ and ‘husband’ to have an ordinary meaning that we can labour under false beliefs that these descriptions apply to a particular object. Likewise, we might think that it is because we have an understanding of the term ‘God’ that we could in theory systematically misuse it to pragmatically refer to something other than God.

The important point here is that we can shout “Oi, you man drinking a martini” across the room, we can mistakenly refer to a mirage as “that pool of water”, or a bachelor as “her husband” and we can in our duped state call Satan “God”. But none of this need determine the semantics of “the man drinking a martini”, “her husband”, “that pool of water”, or indeed “God”. At minimum, if we grant that we can frequently use descriptions in this way, and that Alston and Miller’s concerns are about direct references on occasions of reference, then our first move shouldn’t be looking to a historical-cum-indexical theory of reference at all. I think we would do much better at trying to account for their intuitions via pragmatics since what we are really interested in these cases looks to me to be speakers’ reference.

2.6.1 The Proper Name Intuition Revisited

So now, let us return for a final time to our scenarios motivating the application of the historical-cum-indexical story in the case of ‘God’. This time I’ll start with the “Satan

masquerading as God” case. Bear in mind we haven’t got a semantic theory of the meaning and reference of the term ‘God’. But for now, for the purpose of illustration, we can use the descriptions from the traditional approach as placeholders. Under this scenario while the actual referent of the term ‘God’ would be “the one true God”, the vast majority of speakers will have used the term ‘God’ to pragmatically refer to Satan. The simplicity of this story perfectly happily delivers Alston the intuition he wants – that ‘that we are a Satan-worshipping community’ (1988, p.121). Because in addressing, in worshipping, in prayer, religious communities will all be directing their words at Satan. But it doesn’t deliver the more difficult result that the semantic contribution of the term ‘God’ to their statements about God is literally Satan. Speakers can, and do, say true things about “the one true God” when using the term ‘God’ whilst also in their religious referential practice systematically misapplying the term ‘God’ to Satan. Their object directed thoughts will be of Satan, while the truth evaluative content of their statements about ‘God’, will be about God.

This alternative on first glance might seem not as well equipped to deal with our other scenario that speaks in favour of the historical-cum-indexical view of reference whereby none of our descriptions are true of an object yet we still successfully refer to it. However, I think that this alternative interpretation still has a lot going for it here. Firstly, it seems that speakers do actually have descriptive intentions in their use of the term ‘God’ not just object directed intentions. This being the case I do think we want some restrictions on what the semantic referent of ‘God’ could be. Imagine for instance the slightly weird scenario that there is no creator, no necessary good being, nothing supremely powerful; but there are some kinds of mischievous supernatural entities (spirits or ghosts perhaps) that are the cause of religious experiences. We probably don’t want a theory of reference that makes the proposition “God exists” true on the basis of the existence of these mischievous spirits. The puzzle of what our minimal criteria for the term ‘God’ obviously remains a live task. We still want an account that does not deliver the counter intuitive results discussed in Chapter One, and one that accommodates the possibility of successful reference even where many of our descriptions are mistaken. But the observation that many or most of our descriptions may be wrong in a scenario where we think that reference to ‘God’ is successful does not entail that no descriptive intentions whatsoever can trump object directed intentions.

Furthermore, in addition to the idea of direct reference, there is much theoretical apparatus that comes with the historical-cum-indexical theory that does not need to be thrown out – namely reference borrowing/ speaker deference through causal links. Recall that the

theory helped us solve our scope and accessibility problem. The matter of scope is a problem yet to be solved. But accessibility need not wait. We can say that a term used to directly refer to an object can still be borrowed by another speaker with the right set of speaker intentions. Returning again to the example of ‘her husband’ – even without the historical-cum-indexical theory of reference the cases of ‘reference borrowing’ still work in this example. Imagine if I started discussing our mutual friend's “husband” (falsely believing this to be an applicable description of her partner) with another speaker, let's say a child who does not know precisely the meaning of husband (i.e. that there is a contract involved). Clearly they can additionally use the term ‘her husband’ with the intention of referring to the same man as me without any trouble. The term ‘God’ can work in exactly the same way – just because we are rid of the historical-cum-indexical account as a theory of semantic reference, doesn't mean that we can't deploy aspects of its mechanics in the pragmatics of conversation.

2.7 Concluding Remarks

Interpreting Alston and Millers' proposal this way, we have some clear upsides and downsides. On the upside we can maintain their intuitions about direct reference and thought without getting ourselves into a semantic quandary. We also have solutions to some of our problems: theologically unsophisticated believers can still use the term to pragmatically putatively refer to God if something like the epistemic relation proposed by Alston and Miller holds. Furthermore, there is no need to abandon concepts like linguistic deference, borrowing, or practices by moving away from an indexical-cum-historical account. We can still borrow pragmatic references. On the downside we still do not have an answer to the central question – what the meaning and *semantic* reference of the term ‘God’ is. Once we see this, it is clear that proposals about direct reference are not an alternative to the “The Traditional Approach” at all but they may be a compliment to some other theory of meaning and reference.

3. Descriptivism and “The one and only god”

So far I have set out the case that the traditional descriptions offered as definitions of ‘God’ cannot give us a semantic definition, only an explicative one. But neither has the causal approach to provide us with a satisfactory alternative to descriptivism. Instead it has given us an account of speakers' reference. So I now want to look at our last alternative, more often found in the literature on atheism, which I will call ‘Permissive Descriptivism’. The proposal is really a strategy split into two parts – the first is that the term ‘God’ by linguistic convention names a unique God. The second part is to search for a general notion of what it is to be a ‘god’. I am largely concerned here with part one of the strategy, for which I will focus on Oppy’s paper ‘Gods’ (2009). Oppy argues that the description ‘the one and only god’ is the canonical reference-fixer for the name ‘God’ (2009). Of particular interest to me is his rejection of Leftow’s proposal that the term ‘God’ is a title term and his reliance on ‘conceptions’ of God as distinct from the concept of ‘God’.

I will argue that the proposal that ‘God’, by linguistic convention, expresses ‘the one and only God’ provides us with by far the most satisfactory launching point for an account for the semantics of the term ‘God’, solving many of the dilemmas raised in the previous two chapters. However, it nonetheless has a set of wider shortcomings common to the general project of developing a descriptively adequate definition of the term ‘God’. In particular, it relies on a naturalistic assumption about the nature of religious belief in God or gods – one that is not shared across religious contexts. It also misconstrues how sharply the line is drawn between monotheisms and polytheisms. And in addition, this account of the semantics does little to resolve the underlying puzzles motivating this thesis. But rather, places much of the philosophical heavy lifting of analysis into the realm of pragmatics. This can be seen through Oppy’s dependence on ‘conceptions’ which are not theoretically fleshed out in his work. Thus, while I find the atheistic proposal for the semantics of the term ‘God’ *prima facie* the most technically satisfactory, I argue that it is not without its problems, cannot serve as a solution to the puzzles set out at the beginning of the thesis, and certainly is not a theory which can stand on its own. Given this, and other remarks made by Oppy, my position is that we should take this definition as a stipulative one. I conclude by arguing that Oppy's proposal serves as a launch pad into what I take to be the most promising avenue for this project: looking first to a definition of ‘god’ and determining its relationship to the term ‘God’.

3.1 The one and only God

The idea behind Oppy's semantic account of 'God' is relatively straightforward in principle. In his paper 'Gods' he defends the claim that:

to be God is just to be the one and only god, where to be a god is to be a supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings or forces (2009, p.1)

This is based on his observation that monotheism largely developed out of polytheism – i.e. the belief in multiple gods preceded belief systems with a unique God. As such, it follows that the most promising route to an adequate semantic account of the term 'God' would find its foundation in our definition of 'gods'. If 'god' is a term that names a category of beings or forces, then it seems to naturally follow that the capitalised form 'God' which is used by the monotheistic faiths names a being that is supposed to be the only thing that belongs to that category of beings or forces. It does this in Oppy's view by linguistic convention. An idea that he also found in Sobel's work:

'God' (uppercase) does by a natural and compelling convention of language—explicable in terms of its etymology—purport to name what would be the one and only true god (lowercase). ... My semantic proposal is that the name 'God' today expresses our concept of a unique god. It expresses our concept of what would be the one and only true god, even if this concept is not strictly speaking the sense or meaning of this name. (Sobel 2004, pp.4-7, cited by Oppy, 2009, p.5)

Something of note here is that Oppy rejects the formulation of 'the one and only *true* god', preferring just 'the one and only god'. I draw attention to this now as it will be of interest to me in the final part of this chapter. For now, I will move forward with the semantic proposal that by linguistic convention 'God' names 'the one and only god'. Oppy summarises this position as:

the description 'the one and only god' is the canonical reference-fixer for the name 'God', and it gives expression to the concept that is properly associated with the name (2009, p.24).

3.1.1 Canonical Reference Fixers

Oppy doesn't expand on this proposal with the same kind of depth as I did in Chapter One but we can fill in the gaps here. Given the phraseology 'the canonical reference-fixer'

Oppy clearly has the semantic frameworks we explored in 1.3 here. We shouldn't be thrown by the implication of 'gives expression to the concept' because a description could provide the cognitive significance of the term 'God' without cashing this out in terms of semantic substitutability. In 1.3 we considered three different mechanisms by which a description can be associated with a term such that it provides the reference fixing conditions for that term.

- 1) Descriptive Introduction – whereby a description is associated with a term through descriptive introduction.
- 2) Linguistic Deference – whereby a description is associated with a term by linguistics experts or authorities in a linguistic community. Users of the term defer to these experts when using the term
- 3) Speaker Association – whereby a description is associated with a description such that competent speakers must only be disposed to associate the term with the description

Oppy's arguments suggest at times an endorsement of both 1 and 3. On 1 his arguments about monotheism developing out of polytheism, as well as discussion of linguistic conventions would lend itself to a view that the etymology of the term 'God' is such that it was introduced in its capitalised form to refer to 'the one and only God'. On this version of description association we could therefore trace back the historical use of the capitalised form to a kind of dubbing event whereby the term 'God' was introduced (based on the earlier form 'god') to indicate 'the one and only god'. Alternatively, Oppy's arguments also appear to be relatively consistent with 3 – that competent users of the term 'God' must be disposed to associate it with the description 'the one and only God'. There are some drawbacks to this version but I will not go into them – primarily because I think Oppy has 3 in mind. In particular later arguments he makes rely on the following claim:

In the case of many standard proper names, we are satisfied that someone has what it takes to come to know who it is that bears the name provided that the person in question is disposed to rely upon a non-trivial reference-fixing description that actually picks out the bearer of the name (2009, p.19)

This I take it means Oppy has speaker association in mind. We can restate his view therefore in the following way to make it clearer where it fits within the schema I have thus far been using: 'God' is a standard proper name associated with the description 'the one and only god', which while not synonymous with 'God', is nonetheless associated with the term 'God'

such that competent users of the term associate ‘the one and only god’ with ‘God’ and thereby are disposed to associate the referent of ‘the one and only god’ with the referent of ‘God’.

3.1.2 Revisiting the Problem Cases

So how does Oppy’s account fare against the considerations for an adequate semantic theory I have set out thus far? We split up our problems into: ignorance, accessibility and scope.

Firstly, we have ignorance: reference in the case where the vast majority of descriptions associated with a term are false. Since this proposal only employs by linguistic convention a single description – that ‘God’ is ‘the one and only god’, this problem largely doesn’t arise. We need not be right about the majority of God’s attributes if we have a single shared canonical reference fixer. There are some potential pitfalls here with the secondary question of the definition of ‘god’ but this is something I do not want to spend significant time on here. It will receive more attention in later arguments.

Secondly, we have accessibility: that theologically unsophisticated subjects appear to be competent users of the term ‘God’. It is clear that this proposal performs well on scope. Competent users need only to be using ‘the one and only god’ as the canonical reference fixer for the term. This is not a heavy theological burden. And furthermore, it does not seem too contentious that those users who fail in this regard would not be considered competent users of the term.

Finally, we have scope: that theologically sophisticated but heterodox subjects should be able to co-refer using the same term. Again, *prima facie* it looks like the proposal performs well here. The fairly minimal description required looks to secure co-reference across all the examples of heterodox believers we have discussed so far. Once again, there are some possible problems around the corner on the secondary definition of ‘God’. However, that is better explored in the context of later criticisms of Oppy’s view.

3.2 Oppy’s Case for Permissive Descriptivism

Having seen how Oppy’s proposal resolves some of the cases we have previously looked at, and meets some of the conditions set out for a semantically adequate account, I want to turn now to Oppy’s own case in favour of this formulation. My reason for doing so is that within his arguments I believe we can start to identify some of the shortcomings of his

proposal. These shortcomings, unlike those in the previous two chapters, are largely not difficulties with the semantic proposal itself (although there are a few I will draw attention to) but rather its unsuitability for resolving the puzzles about ‘God’ I set out to solve at the start of the thesis. And additionally, some unsatisfactory answers about how we should characterise the proposals explored in chapters one and two. The argument I am trying to make here does not easily follow a linear format. There are a number of pieces of the puzzle I want to bring together in the second half of this chapter. As such, while some of what I say here may feel like it’s treading familiar ground from chapters one and two, a little patience is needed as it is important to consider the differences between the negative cases Oppy makes, and the negative cases I have made. I will of course attempt to skip over any areas of repetition as quickly as possible.

Oppy largely makes his own case by, as I have, arguing against the alternatives. He considers the following alternatives: that to be God is to be the only proper object of worship, variations of the PBT and the classic omni-God definitions, that ‘God’ as a name refers by virtue of a referential chain that goes back to a named being’, and that ‘God’ is a title term (2009).

3.2.1 Against Objects of Worship

I have already discussed the first two at length in Chapter One (since I’ve argued the omni-definition partly falls out of the intuitions that the ‘proper object of worship’ definition generates). But let’s look at how Oppy’s arguments differ from mine. Firstly, Oppy argues that not all gods have been considered to be proper objects of *worship* but rather some were to be feared. Here he uses the example of Zoroastrianism in which there are two gods: one good, one bad. And while those who think to be a proper object of worship is a necessary condition to be a god may be inclined to reject the bad god is a god at all, Oppy points out that the semantic expression of that description of Zoroastrianism is perfectly sensible and understandable. The fact that we can describe the theology of Zoroastrianism in such a way using the terminology ‘bad god’ is suggestive that being good isn’t a necessary condition for being a god and thus it seems unlikely that being a proper object of worship is a necessary condition for being a god (it seems implausible that something that is bad is a proper object of worship given a standard interpretation of that phrase).

Of course this could be resisted by claiming that the term ‘god’ isn’t being given its standard definition in that phrase – but intuitively this claim does not seem obvious.

Moreover, the idea of a “bad god” is used frequently in a number of different contexts and philosophical arguments; a significant branch of atheism argues against particular theisms on the basis that if the entity which is described by them and their religious texts exists, then that entity is a bad entity and should not be worshipped. While it may be considered of interest that this is categorised as atheism, we should note that this is generally set up as an argument against an established religious practice. Consider an atheist of this type arguing against engaging in the practice of Christianity. Their claim is, even *if* the thing which Christians call ‘God’ exists, which they do not grant, the existence of God does not justify religious practice since that entity is morally bad. This is frequently stated as “if God exists, then God is bad”. To argue that the term ‘God’ is being used in a non-standard way in those arguments, especially when specific gods belonging to particular religious traditions are under discussion is a difficult position to hold.

If we agree that it is not a necessary condition for gods to be proper objects of worship, Oppy argues that it is less plausible that it be a necessary condition for God to be a proper object of worship (2009, pp.6-9). For it would seem strange that the move from multiple gods to single Gods brought with it a change that unlike gods, a God, must be a proper object of worship. Moreover, once we consider the addition of being ‘the *only* proper object of worship’ this move becomes even more peculiar, because it implies that by virtue of being a monotheist it becomes inappropriate to worship objects that are not God (2009, pp.9-11). Now this is a common theological position within many monotheistic groups – but adherence to that theological doctrine is a different matter to the more ambitious claim that belief in a single God requires the belief that no other object is to be worshipped in virtue of the definition of the term ‘God’. Furthermore, Oppy argues that there are plenty of existing monotheists who do think it perfectly appropriate to worship angels, saints, martyrs, prophets etc. Again, it is hard to argue that these theological positions are wrong in virtue of a semantic/conceptual mistake about what the term ‘God’ expresses (2009, pp.10-11).

3.2.2 The Omni-Definition as a Conception

Regarding the omni-definition of God (which unlike Oppy I took to be closely related and partially derived from the ‘only proper object of worship formulation’) Oppy follows a similar negative case for this definition as myself – pointing out that there are plenty of theologically sophisticated heterodox believers who reject such definitions of ‘God’ and as such, it is untenable as a semantic definition because we would have to hold that they are

making a conceptual mistake in holding these beliefs. If there is reasonable disagreement over these attributes then it would be implausible to think it is a conceptual truth that God possesses these attributes (Oppy, 2009, pp.24-28).

Further to this, Oppy argues we should think of these as “conceptions of God” (2009, pp.24-28). There is little expansion on what precisely Oppy takes a conception to be, and how it differs from concepts. He expands on the idea by drawing a parallel to “Atlantis” cases whereby there are some uses of the term that believe in the existence of the object and some who do not (Oppy, 2009, pp.22-24). In such cases there are a number of associated descriptions competent users of the term may provide as reference fixers: ‘an island lost under the ocean’ ‘an ancient civilisation’ etc., Some taking those descriptions as factual, some taking those descriptions to be ‘playing along with a mistaken theory, or a myth, or a fiction’ (Oppy 2009, p22). If there are some descriptions that are largely shared in common by all competent speakers such as ‘a civilization lost under the ocean’ then those descriptions express the concept associated with the name. The descriptions that are not shared across all competent users of the term are more like conceptions – they are additional specifications that particular speakers may associate with the term but they are not properly a part of the single shared concept of ‘Atlantis’. In addition speakers within a conversation who all share in a particular conception of ‘Atlantis’ may go on to speak as though that it the concept of ‘Atlantis’ regardless of whether it is shared by all speakers of the language (Oppy 2009, p23). Oppy claims that the omni-definition of ‘God’ and its various relatives is a conception in much the same way that descriptions associated with ‘Atlantis’ that are not shared across all competent users of the term are conceptions (2009, pp.22-24). Unlike myself, Oppy does not propose explanations of how we should view this conception (I myself made a case that it is best characterised as an engineered conception).

3.2.3 Against the Causal Theory of Reference in Application to ‘God’

Turning to Oppy’s negative case against option 3 - that ‘God’ as a name refers by virtue of a referential chain that goes back to a named being - this again has been explored at length in Chapter Two and there is no need to dedicate much time to it here. Simply put, Oppy thinks it is implausible that believers (or in fact non-believers) who use the name ‘God’ intend to refer by tying into a referential chain. He argues that, even if we accept that in many cases this is how proper names work, when using the term ‘God’ speakers appear to have more descriptive intentions. In particular, he thinks that many believers think that by using

the term ‘God’ they are merely intending to refer to ‘the one and only god’ (2009 p29). Here I find his case frankly unconvincing, but more importantly the distinction between his arguments and mine, unlike in the previous two sections, is not relevant to the wider development of my thesis.

3.2.4 ‘God’ as a Title Term

Of significantly more interest to me is Oppy’s rejection of the idea that ‘God’ is a title term. Unlike the previous three candidates this idea is not one we have explored yet. The thought that the term ‘God’ is something like a title term to refer to ‘an individual holding a special office’ (Leftow 1998) has a long history. Despite this, the arguments have largely been based on some of the grammatical peculiarities of the term ‘God’ – in particular that sometimes it is grammatically in order to say ‘the God of such-and-such’. Oppy’s case that ‘God’ is not a title term is very brief and exclusively depends on the claim that there is no compelling reason to think it is a title term. Furthermore, Oppy only writes about the title term view within the context of Leftow’s arguments which are also brief. Oppy focuses exclusively on Leftow’s grammatical arguments, which draw a parallel between the term ‘Bishop’ and the term ‘God’. Oppy argues that the parallel does not hold since it is grammatically in order to say:

I spoke to the Bishop last night

But not grammatically in order to say

I spoke to the God last night.

Furthermore, he points out that grammatical patterns of title terms appear to be relatively culturally bound e.g. in the UK we can say ‘Yes Minister’ but not ‘Yes, Mr Minister’ whereas in the US we can say ‘Yes Mr Secretary’ but not ‘Yes, Secretary’ (2009, p13). He concludes therefore that observation of grammatical similarities between the term ‘God’ and some title terms regardless of a suitable equivalent would not provide a particularly compelling case in favour of the term ‘God’ being a title term. Oppy thinks that the *only* reason to think of ‘God’ as a title term is the use of the expression ‘the God’ in certain contexts. He argues that this use is anomalous much as ‘the Paris of the North’ might be thought of as anomalous. That is, plenty of ordinary names sometimes take on this kind of grammatical form and so it is weak evidence that ‘God’ is a title term. This is the only argument that Oppy considers.

I do find the keenness to reject the title term here peculiar – not least because there is not much semantically in it. I imagine this rejection is in no small part due to the brevity of both Leftow’s and Oppy’s own considerations, and the narrow scope of their arguments. Additionally, although Oppy does not directly say this, I suspect his resistance to the title term view may be influenced by other elements of Leftow’s work which directly contradict Oppy’s own proposal. For instance, Leftow claims that his title term view is motivated by the belief that the concept of God allows for the possibility that there is more than one God (1998, sect 1). He writes:

We use the term ‘God’ in two main ways. We use ‘God’ to address God, as in prayer. So used, ‘God’ seems like a proper name. We also use ‘God’ like a general predicate. For we can and do ask whether there is more than one God: the concept of God allows this question a ‘yes’ answer. (1998, sect 1)

This is not an argument that Oppy addresses, but we can take it as given that he disagrees, since his proposal is that to be God is to be the one and only god. Leftow also ties the title term view to the idea that ‘the concept of God is a concept of an individual holding a special office’ (1998, sect 1). This is then used as grounds for developing more substantive metaphysical arguments about the nature of God. But little of what Leftow argues for directly falls out of the modest linguistic proposal that ‘God’ is a title term – there is no reason, for instance, to think ‘God’ couldn’t be a title term afforded to ‘the one and only god’. Perhaps Oppy is also motivated by the desire to maintain ‘God’ is an ordinary name. But again, this feels like a distinction that does not have much in it. This is something I will return to later in the thesis because not only do I think that the ambiguity cited by Leftow in the different ways ‘God’ may be used conforms well with the observation in Chapter Two that intuitively speakers often seem to use the term ‘God’ to directly refer, but additionally I think the categorisation of ‘God’ as a title term has some unexplored benefits. For now, we can keep the possibility in mind. I reject Oppy’s claim that ‘God’ is not a title term.

With our understanding of Oppy’s case for the ‘one and only god’ being the canonical reference fixer for the term ‘God’ whereby a ‘god’ is ‘a supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings or forces’ in hand. And the distinction between Oppy’s arguments and my own clear, it is time to move onto the shortcomings of this account. Much of what I say here will be applicable not only to Oppy’s own view but

also the proposals contained in both Chapter One and Chapter Two because they demonstrate the difficulty of coming up with a descriptively adequate definition in general within the context of a religiously diverse landscape.

3.3 Muddying the Waters

The above detailing of Oppy's arguments served an important function in setting up the broad issues to be addressed with this kind of approach. There are really three issues at stake here. Firstly, a methodological one – that, while the atheist formulation may appear *prima facie* to be more theologically neutral than those we looked at in chapters one and two, it is not as neutral as I require. In particular, Oppy's definition of 'god' is designed to slot into his arguments for atheistic naturalism. Secondly, there's an issue of the philosophical framework – Oppy's formulation of concepts vs conceptions requires conceptions to do some philosophical heavy lifting that, as Oppy has defined them, I take them to be ill-equipped to do. And finally there is a scope issue – neither I, nor Oppy, have yet delved into the detail of the relationship between different terms for divine entities, not just 'God', 'god' and 'gods' but also specific names for specific divine entities such as 'YHWH', 'Brahman', 'Vishnu' etc (henceforth god-terms).

The thrust of all these arguments has one theme in common: that so far we have been detailing specific accounts and their adequacy of semantic theories of the term 'God'. While for each I have argued that the definitions offered were designed to meet particular purposes (e.g. provide an explanation for philosophical theology, or capture speaker meaning and reference) little explicit examination of the range of methods, purposes, and types of definitions we may be interested in has occurred. Nor have we considered the limitations or constraints we may be facing in general when trying to provide a descriptively adequate definition. Furthermore, we have barely mentioned the range of conceptions, concepts, and names for divine entities. Or the relationship these hold with each other. In essence I have been operating in artificially clear waters. I now intend to muddy them. But first let's take stock of where we have got to.

I argued that the omni-definition of 'God' is closely related to 'the only proper object of worship' definition of 'God' in the sense that it performs a foundational role in the explication of the concept of 'God'. Oppy treats it as a separate proposal that is unsuccessful, and argues for viewing the omni-definition as a conception whereby conceptions are just term associated descriptions that are not shared by all competent users of a term. We both argued

against the suitability of any kind of application of a historical-cum-indexical account of reference in the context of the term ‘God’. However, in contrast I added that the motivations behind the historical-cum-indexical account of reference were driven by the distinction between speaker reference and semantic reference. This is not a topic Oppy covers. Oppy rejected an alternative I had not yet considered: that ‘God’ is a title term. I reject his argument against this position. In place of these alternatives we have been considering the proposal that ‘the one and only god’ is the canonical reference fixer for the term ‘God’ whereby ‘God’ is an ordinary name and ‘the one and only god’ expresses the concept associated with the term ‘God’.

3.3.1 The Definition of ‘god’

The semantic proposal Oppy provides is dependent on a suitable definition of the term ‘god’, and this is something that receives relatively less attention in his paper. We must keep in mind that even if we find the proposal of the meaning of the term ‘god’ to be unsatisfactory this does not necessarily undermine the central proposal that ‘God’ by linguistic convention names ‘the one and only god’. Nonetheless, the dependency of the definition of ‘God’ on ‘god’ suggests, at minimum, we should have some kind of approximate definition of ‘god’ available. What is of significant interest here is the contrast in methodology between Oppy’s proposal and those looked at in Chapter One and Chapter Two. The previous two chapters really approached the question of meaning and reference from the theists perspective. While their premises didn’t begin with ‘God exists’, it was obvious that pre-theoretic ideas they had about existence and theism were running in the background. In contrast, Oppy’s background is an atheistic one, and the foundations of Oppy’s proposal can clearly be found in literature on global atheism whereby the aim is to find that which all the proposed gods or god-concepts have in common in order to deny the existence of all of them at once.

3.3.2 The Atheist Methodology.

Let’s begin on a positive note. I think the approach of the atheistic method has things broadly the right way round for my purposes. When setting out the puzzles to be solved at the start I was largely concerned with an descriptively adequate semantic and pragmatic account of the term ‘God’ without presupposing the truth of any background religious metaphysical theory. The questions I set out with require an exploration of meaning and use of the term ‘God’ through the lens of philosophy of language applied to philosophy of language, not the

lens of philosophical theology. However, both the two proposals we explored in chapters one and two, which dominate the philosophical landscape, were largely developed with particular philosophical theological perspectives in mind. For instance, advocates of the “classic” definition of God largely come from those working in philosophical theology, and mostly belong to the Christian tradition. And while they do tend to consider such a definition to stand independently of Scripture, as well as be a definition which is broadly shared across the Abrahamic faiths, I do think it reasonable to have some scepticism in any definitions generated by methodologies which are founded upon theological assumptions rather than observed use. Similarly, Alston’s application of a historical-cum-indexical view of reference was originally designed to accompany his own account of religious experiences as perceptions set out in his work in ‘The Epistemology of Religious Experience’ (1991). And while I have made it clear that I find significant merit in aspects of his work for consideration of speaker’s reference, I nonetheless think it unsatisfactory to have this be grounded in an account of religious experiences – especially one focused on Christianity. Because attitudes towards religious experience vary wildly within the Christian faith, let alone within monotheistic faiths, or even just Abrahamic faiths, in general.

In contrast, the permissive descriptivist approach relies on no particular theological background assumptions. Its purpose is to find a definition that matches use and is neutral not only between faiths but also on existence. In this way, the exercise should be more observational in nature. If we imagine all the world’s faiths as having models of divine forces or beings, the task of the global atheist is to find a way to deny all at once – to do this they must either find a strand that all these models have in common and deny the existence of any beings or forces that possess that quality, or argue for a view that precludes, amongst other things, the existence of any god (Draper 2022). It is perhaps unsurprising then, that the account stands up better to semantic tests than the previous two.

3.3.3 Metaphysical Proposals vs Anthropological Proposals

Although there is much to admire about this methodological approach, I still think it falls short for my purposes in one particular way. As I’ve said, the aim of such an argument is to find a definition so that the existence of such a category of things can be denied. It therefore is metaphysical in its purpose. But this relies on an assumption that there is a shared metaphysical proposal between all the possible religious contexts. I do not think this is something that I can help myself to as an assumption. When looking for an analysis of the use

of the term ‘god’ there are many different perspectives we may take. We might be interested in the term ‘god’ within a particular religious context, or set of religious contexts. We may be interested in the term ‘god’ within philosophical theology. Or philosophy of religion. But when our purpose is simply to understand the conceptual ground on which we operate when using the term ‘god’, we have only a kind of anthropological perspective available to us. That is, I can only look at actual usage of the terms to try and elucidate how to understand the terms’ behaviour across these contexts. To be consistent with the aims of my thesis, in order to get myself to a philosophical claim about the shared metaphysical assumptions of all the world religions, I would have to actually study the metaphysical doctrines of all the world religions. This is, of course, unrealistic.

The problem isn’t fundamental for the global atheist – since they may take a view on what mediates an adequate god-concept for the purpose of endorsing global atheism (Diller 2016). A global atheist may be uninterested in religious beliefs and practices that do not entail certain metaphysical claims – they may argue that these beliefs are, or reframe them as, ‘fancy atheisms’ regardless of how their interlocutor characterises them as. We only need to look at responses to Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion, process theologians, and pantheists to see these kinds of arguments in action in application to ‘God’. And it follows that any world religion we find whereby the expression or characterisations of their beliefs employ the word ‘god’ – but that contradict a global atheist’s definition of ‘god’ – could be met with the same rejoinder. The philosophical aims of the global atheist are simply different to my own, even if their arguments include a stage that matches my own project.

3.3.4 A Naturalists Definition

We can easily find the metaphysical assumption underlying Oppy’s own strategy: naturalism. Oppy argues that the thing theists have in common is they depart from naturalism in some way by believing in something additional (2018, p.2). He argues:

In every case, theists differ from naturalists by believing in something additional: either believing in one or more additional intelligent agents, or believing in one or more additional forces or powers, or believing in one or more additional non-natural properties of the universe (2018, p.2)

However, there are a number of available theologies even within the largest monotheistic faiths that argue for a naturalist conception of ‘God’. In order to defend this position, Oppy has shifted the definitional burden from ‘god’ to naturalism. That is, in order to make sense of

the claim that all theisms assert ‘supernatural’ beings or forces he must: 1) define naturalism and thus what it is to be supernatural, and 2) show, at minimum, that the broad categories of different kinds of theistic beliefs all assert divinities that would fall under the category of supernatural rather than natural. This is no easy task. The details of this argument go well beyond the scope of my thesis – naturalism itself is relatively difficult to define and I do not propose to weigh in on that debate. My purpose here is merely to point out that there is a significant number of metaphysical assumptions running underneath Oppy’s definition. And furthermore, that these definitions are largely not based on a detailed observation about all the ways to be a theist, but rather a particular philosophical purpose (much like those who assert the omni-god definition). And finally, perhaps most importantly, this approach elevates the metaphysical doctrines of theistic religious practice above any others which may lie behind linguistic categorisation practices. That is, when looking for a common strand in our linguistic norms as to what we apply the term ‘god’ to and what we do not, we may find that other factors play the greater share of conceptual division. These may be cultural reasons, historical reasons, political reasons, and so forth. For example, denial of religious status to particular practices – which may include denial that that which they believe in is a god – has been used to further political aims. Interpreting unfamiliar world religions into a western context, for instance, may have led to an application of the term ‘god’ for beliefs which may not have been considered theisms should they have grown up in a familiar cultural context and vice versa. The assumption that our system of categorization is as neat as Oppy needs it to be is not one I can use if my aim is to understand how the term is actually used – especially in a context like discussing religious belief.

3.4 Conceptions of God

Putting that very sweeping problem aside, if we home in more narrowly on how Oppy’s proposal linguistically and conceptually fares, I think the biggest trouble we run into is we are either leaving a significant portion of the linguistic landscape out, or we are requiring conceptions to do some serious philosophical heavy lifting which I believe they are ill-equipped to do without additional theoretical background work being done.

Should we accept Oppy’s proposal it entails the following: it is a semantic fact that if the term ‘God’ refers then all uses of the term ‘God’ co-refer. Of course, speaker reference may deviate from semantic reference but, as of yet, we have no proposal on any systematic ways this may occur and, furthermore, as we already discussed in Chapter Two, we may have

scepticism of any theory of semantic reference that systematically deviates from speaker reference without an explanation on conventionalised rules that allow this to occur. Where there is disagreement about ‘God’ therefore, this disagreement is about which descriptions apply to the shared object of reference. There are no competing concepts of God, only competing conceptions. The reservations I have with this position are largely related to what this fails to explain – i.e. there is substantive philosophical work missing from this view – and the difficult prospects for clearly defining concepts and conceptions in a theoretically robust and constructive manner.

3.4.1 Conception versus Concepts

When asking if conceptions can do this kind of work, the first question we are faced with is what precisely is a conception? And how does it differ from a concept? Conceptions are relatively ill-defined in existing philosophical literature (especially given there is little consensus on what a concept even is). They tend to be deployed, and fare best, when talking about competing theories of a particular concept – e.g. different conceptions of Justice (Rawls; work on justice is where the distinction originates). There have been few detailed attempts to bring greater specificity to the distinction.

If Oppy’s account depends on a clear philosophical distinction between ‘conceptions’ and ‘concepts’ the burden is on him to clarify these terms. Given the enormous amount of philosophical literature dedicated to the question of what a concept is, that is no small undertaking, and even if it were done I am sceptical of the prospects for using such a distinction to perform any useful linguistic function. As it stands, I have only Oppy’s own minimal sketch to work with. This has already been set out in Section 3.2.2 which was explained by Oppy through his examination of the concept of ‘Atlantis’. In this example Oppy argued that the set of associated descriptions associated with the term ‘Atlantis’ by *all* competent users of the term ‘Atlantis’, express the concept associated with ‘Atlantis’. The additional descriptions that some speakers may hold to, but crucially not all, express conceptions of Atlantis (Oppy, 2009, pp.22-24). Thus on his view the concept associated with a term is expressed by the description (or descriptions) that all competent users of a term will associate with that term. Conceptions particular speakers may associate with a term are expressed by the description (or descriptions) that those speakers associate with the term but are not associated with the term by all other competent users of the term.

3.4.2 Individual versus Community Conceptions

To understand why I consider Oppy's sketch of the distinction between concepts and conceptions here inadequate for our intended purpose, let us start with the following observation: we disagree about God in different ways. A Christian Open-Theist who largely holds to the omni-view may disagree with other omni-view adherents about what is entailed by omniscience. A biblical literalist may disagree with a non-literalist about the truth of the statement 'God created the world in seven days'. These disagreements appear, at least *prima facie*, quite different in nature to the kind of disagreements we find between, say, adherents to Zoroastrianism and Judaism. A Muslim child from a Muslim family who, having heard at their Christian school that God is triune, goes home and asserts 'God is triune' appears to be making a mistake of some kind. Of course, that mistake can be characterised as being mistaken about what conception of God their community holds to, but in order to characterise it in this way we need some kind of foundational view about how shared conceptions operate. It is not sufficient to merely say, as Oppy does, that they are different ways of specifying a shared concept because now we need *shared competing conceptions* to make sense of the different kinds of disagreements about those concepts that can occur. And crucially these conceptions need to be held to at a community level – at which point depending on the philosophical view one holds on concepts the distinction risks collapsing. Because another way of categorising what is going on in the case of the Muslim who says 'God is triune' is that they are including within the potential extension of 'God' a hypothetical entity (The Christian God) which does not meet the linguistic standards of the term 'God' according to the linguistic standards of applicability of the Muslim community. And we then have the question – are 'The Muslim God' and 'The Christian God' concepts in their own rights or competing conceptions of 'God'? Is the concept 'the one and only god' really sufficient grounds to assume a shared concept of God across the monotheistic faiths? It feels like to get the concept/conceptions distinction off the ground to do the work that Oppy wishes it to do, we must presuppose the answers to these.

Granted, Oppy only discusses conceptions of God in the context of his view of the omni-God definition, arguing that even if we accepted there was a conception of God as 'the greatest possible being' – since there is disagreement on this matter by thoughtful believers – then we shouldn't mistake this for being *the* concept of God, even if like-minded believers are inclined to discuss God as if that conception of God were the concept of God in each other's company (Oppy, 2009, p.23). But it is clearly a consequence of what he claims that this would apply to different sets of religious practices as well. Furthermore, as the canonical

reference fixer is found by finding the description which all competent speakers are inclined to associate with the term, and given a result like ‘the one and only god’ that indicates inclusivity across the monotheistic faiths, his view depends on presupposing that there is a shared concept of God across the monotheistic faiths in the first place.

What I am getting at here is that for Oppy’s proposed distinction as he has sketched it out to be sufficient for my aims we would need a theory of conceptions that: can account for the intuitive difference between individual conceptions, theoretical conceptions, and community conceptions, that can delineate the line between concepts and conceptions, and can do these things without presupposing agreement on the concept that is under investigation. As it stands Oppy has not done these things.

3.4.3 Other Divine Names

One potential fix, or further complication depending on your outlook, would be looking to identity statements that different religious practices make. The different descriptions users of the term ‘God’ may be inclined to associate with the term will be statements such as ‘Jesus is God’ ‘YHWH is God’ and so forth. If we thought there is a concept of ‘Jesus’ and a concept of ‘YHWH’ (which may itself turn out to be a contentious claim) but no concept of ‘the being that created the world in seven days’, this would give us a principled way to make the distinction between the kind of disagreement involved in a competing conception such as ‘the greatest possible being’ and ‘The Christian God’. Regardless of the perspective I take on conceptions, this is clearly work I must do even if Oppy’s job is done. Nevertheless, I prefer not to follow Oppy in relying on a the possibility of developing an account of what a conception is for a number of reasons – not least because I am sceptical of the success of finding a way through that web that does not presuppose things which I am investigating. Instead, I will leave this issue here with the conclusion that even if Oppy’s own bare bones account of the distinction were accepted it would be insufficient for answering the core puzzles I am interested in. I wish therefore to move on to my final issue with Oppy’s account – that as with the concept/conception distinction, Oppy requires a sharp line between monotheisms and polytheisms that is unsubstantiated.

3.5 Monotheism, Quasi-Monotheism, Pluriform Monotheism, Henotheism, Dualism, Polytheism, and Beyond

Terms that name divinities, and their associated descriptions, nest. To explain what I mean here let us begin with one broad stroke problem. We associate the term ‘God’ with

monotheism, and prima facie it does seem plausible that by linguistic convention the capitalised form is used to express a single God, in practice the line between monotheism and polytheism is rarely as clear cut as we may like. The term ‘God’ in its capitalised form is frequently used in characterisations of faiths where their status as monotheistic is disputed. The range from polytheism to monotheism is more like a spectrum than two entirely distinct categories. The existence of quasi-monotheisms, henotheisms, subordination monotheisms etc, might cast some doubt in Oppy’s formulation in the following way. It may be the case that within one of the faiths where we make use of the capitalised form ‘God’ in order to express their religious beliefs such that it expresses something of significance – perhaps the faith’s quasi-monotheistic hierarchy - there are more than one distinct powers/forces/beings that meet the proposed definition of ‘god’. But in Oppy’s proposal it is not merely the case that there cannot be two Gods, it is also the case that there cannot be a God and a god.

The fact is there is an enormous amount of diversity in the language we use to speak of various divinities and the structures or orders in which religions characterise the relationship between these divinities. Not only that but the god-terms we have can have varying levels of specificity and ambiguity. For instance, it seems perfectly in order to doubt that “YHWH is God”, while in a Christian context to use the terms ‘God’ and ‘YHWH’ interchangeably. One can also, in a Christian context, use the term ‘God’ to refer to the same thing as ‘Jesus’ while it is also frequently used to speak of something other than ‘Jesus’. And certainly ‘YHWH’ and ‘Jesus’ are not interchangeable. This isn’t just a trinity problem – although it is an interesting case study. It is a matter of observation that there are religious groups who reject the trinity (such as the Church of the Latter Day Saints) and assert the existence of three separate divinities, using the term ‘God’ largely exclusively for God the father. From all of this it looks not like ‘God’ is ‘the one and only god’, but rather ‘God’ is a special kind of god. ‘God’ might be the unique god, but God also might be the God that in some way stands behind the other gods, is in the other gods, begot the other gods or any other alternative. The linguistic practice of capitalising ‘God’ plausibly is tied to the development of monotheism but not in the way Oppy thinks.

Thus Oppy’s proposal, while faring better against counter examples than the proposals in chapters one and two did, still has significant shortcomings in terms of its descriptive adequacy.

3.6 Re-Characterising Oppy’s proposal

In sum, I do not think Oppy's definition is a descriptively adequate one. It fails to properly capture the range of uses of both the terms 'God' and 'god'. You will hopefully be familiar with the move I intend to make now: let us reconsider what kind of definition Oppy is offering us. Recall, in Chapter One I set out a number of different possible types of definition: descriptive, dictionary, stipulative, explicative, and ameliorative. While there is nothing in either his paper 'Gods' or the corresponding argument he makes in 'Describing Gods' that the definition is not intended to be a descriptive one – in fact his appeal to semantic terminology makes it sound like this is his intent – elsewhere he has both written and said things that contradict this interpretation. In 'Defining Religion' he expresses scepticism that such a task is even possible, he writes:

One of the lessons of the twentieth century analytic philosophy seems to be that it is extraordinarily difficult to settle on agreed definitions of any philosophically important terms: 'knowledge', 'causation', 'artwork', 'property', 'belief' and so forth. Perhaps this is because something like Wittgenstein's family resemblance view of our concepts is correct; or perhaps it is because, while there are precise delineations of the boundaries of our concepts, our use of our concepts does not rely on our making those precise delineations explicit. (2021, p520-521)

While in that paper he was defining Atheism, Agnosticism, Religion, and Theism, he expressly states that the definitions he offers are stipulative and that his stipulative definition cannot be used to make sense of all writings in which these terms are employed. And while he has not, to my knowledge, written this in a paper, I think we have every reason to interpret Oppy's definition in 'Gods' to be of the same nature. In fact, in a talk he gave on 'Logic and the Concept of God' in 2021 to the Logic and Realism Association he said explicitly that this is how his definition, of 'god' at least, should be interpreted:

"...its not altogether out of the question that you might think that really the word 'god' is a kind of family resemblance term in the same ballpark as Wittgenstein took the word 'game' to be. That is, our competence in being able to use this term really doesn't require us to have either a nominal definition or a real definition of what a god would be. However for the discussion that is going to come it's I think useful for me to have a stipulative definition of 'god' because I think that there's then an interesting nominal definition of God upper case g that you could make from it." (2021, transcription mine)

We can take from this, at least, that the definition of ‘god’ offered is not descriptive. And although Oppy does at first characterise ‘God’ as ‘the one and only god’ as nominal, in the same webinar when pushed on this definition he said:

Defining ‘God’ as ‘the one and only god’ is useful for fixing ideas for discussion.
(2021, transcription mine)

Further to this, Oppy does in fact address some of the issues I raised about the blurred distinction between monotheism and polytheism in ‘Describing Gods’ - where he merely pushes back on the idea that the things we call ‘god’ within quasi-monotheistic systems are not, in fact, gods or shouldn’t be characterised as such. Given well established linguistic usage of calling them ‘gods’ regardless of any theory as to whether they are “really” gods, this feels highly suggestive that Oppy was never aiming at a descriptive definition of ‘God’. Because we might consider it improbable that it is a mere semantic confusion to ascribe to a system of beliefs that include both a God and gods, I think a more plausible version of this defence is that it would be better for creating a clear taxonomy of god-terms if we did not put beings under the power of a God into the category of gods.

Regardless of speculation about Oppy’s intent, given the arguments I have made: that he has a particular argumentative purpose, that he has a set of metaphysical assumptions he is entitled to make in pursuit of this purpose, that his proposal does not capture all the facts about actual usage of the term, and that it leaves a significant part of the linguistic landscape out, it is better to think of the proposal both that ‘God’ is ‘the one and only god’ and that ‘gods’ are ‘supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world but are not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings or forces’ as stipulative definitions.

That said, I think we should accept Oppy’s proposal about the relationship between the term ‘God’ and ‘gods’. In fact, I consider the divorce of the analysis of ‘God’ from ‘gods’ that is commonplace in philosophy to be problematic. Not least because of the frequent observation of the apparent descriptive nature of the term ‘God’. I don’t think a complete analysis of ‘God’ can be done without examining its relationship to ‘god’. And this is what I wish to turn to next.

3.7 Concluding remarks

Thus, we can conclude that while the atheistic descriptivist approach came closest to providing us with a semantically adequate account of the term ‘God’, it still falls short largely due to the fact that it was intended to play a particular role in a debate about existence, rather than capture all linguistic usage. While it is well motivated and resolved, many of the problem cases examined in Chapter One and Chapter Two - when the artificial simplification of the religious and philosophical territory covered was removed - the descriptive definition interpretation of the proposal began to collapse. Given the arguments against it, and Oppy’s own statements about how to think of definitions in general, I think on this basis it is reasonable to leave the proposal aside as a stipulative definition not a descriptive one. However, what I believe the content covered in this chapter has provided is an insight into the more complex challenges I face, and a springboard for a positive proposal which will be the focus of my next chapter. I take this to be the lynchpin of my own argument.

4 ‘God’, ‘god’, ‘and Other Ways to Speak of Divinities

The prospects for each of the views I have looked at so far have not been promising. The proposals from the first two chapters which I take to represent the most dominant two approaches in philosophy were found to be subject to a huge number of counter examples and theoretical weaknesses. The atheistic approach examined in the third chapter exposed several foundational issues for the project of coming up with a descriptively adequate definition of the term ‘God’. The trouble is that the term ‘God’ is used across multiple cultural contexts

and with variable levels of specificity that are in need of disentanglement in existing literature. This is a significant part of what caused trouble for the previous ideas looked at – it is difficult to assimilate ‘God’ fully into any single sole semantic theory in a way that captures intuitive judgements about the meaning of religious statements.

In this chapter I argue that much of this difficulty is an inheritance from the term ‘god’. I argue firstly, with Oppy, that the linguistic use of the term ‘God’ is dependent on the use of the term ‘god’. I also concur with him that ‘god’ is a family resemblance term. I consider what it means to characterise ‘god’ as such, arguing that the use of the term ‘god’ is an essentially open semantic practice and, as such, what I call our most “linguistically basic units” are names for specific divinities. Those putatively referring expressions name entities, or hypothetical entities, that are subsumed under the category of ‘god’. I elucidate some things that gods have in common, as well as the different levels of specificity with which the term ‘god’ may be used. Finally I argue that on the basis of this I should reverse the order of analysis for resolving the puzzles I set out at the start of the thesis. Instead of beginning by looking at the reference, or cognitive significance of the term ‘God’, I start by trying to build a framework for how the different names for divinities relate to the term ‘god’ and thereby ‘God’.

4.1 Descriptive Definitions of ‘God’ or ‘god’

I have been, thus far, largely working from the assumption that to answer my questions we need to provide a descriptive definition of the term ‘God’, though I have not dictated the degree of strictness needed. What we were searching for in Chapter Three was a definition of these two terms that fit existing usage. Specifying what type of descriptive definition this should be in this context can get a little hairy considering the contentiousness of existence, the apparent mutual exclusivity of the existence of various divinities, and the frequency of modal claims within ‘God’ definitions. As I have shown however, we have reason to be sceptical of the likely success of giving a definition of ‘God’ first. So, let’s look at what it would mean to offer a descriptive definition of ‘God’.

Since my project is a linguistic one, not a metaphysical one, I propose the following re-structuring of the question for argumentative ease. Consider the question in terms of hypothecated objects of reference which we categorise as ‘God’, i.e. things that bear the name/title/are described as ‘God’. These hypothecated objects could be two types: objects which are the focus of existing sets of beliefs/practices by historical or present-day

communities, and objects which are, as you will, theoretically constructed in a philosophical thought experiment but, to the best of our knowledge, do not correspond to any object of an existing religious practice. On this view, the minimal degree of strictness we could require from a descriptive definition of these terms is one which is subject to no counter examples of the first type. That is, we would need a definition of ‘God’ which did not preclude divinities which have been antecedental linguistically established as properly falling under the category of ‘God’ from its extension.

4.1.1 The Relationship Between ‘God’ and ‘god’

Beyond the arguments provided already by Oppy, I think the clarification given above of what it would mean to offer a descriptive definition of ‘God’ also heavily implies a relationship between the terms ‘God’ and ‘god’, since all the hypothetical objects of reference called ‘God’ would, at minimum, need to be gods. That is, all current hypothetical entities that may or may not be the reference of the term ‘God’ are gods. We would think then, a definition of ‘God’ would, most likely, include ‘god’. Truthfully, I find the philosophical tendency to analyse the term ‘God’ in isolation from other religious terms somewhat of a curiosity. Especially given the fact that in common parlance the terms do not tend to be separated (phonetically they are not even distinguishable from one another). I take it therefore that we should accept the claim that the term ‘God’ is dependent on the term ‘god’ as an obvious fact. Oppy is right to search for a definition of ‘God’ through defining ‘god’.

4.2 Is ‘god’ a Family Resemblance Term?

Oppy also argued that we should treat ‘god’ as a family resemblance term. To call ‘god’ a family resemblance term is to claim that we can be competent users of the term ‘god’ without having a descriptive definition of ‘god’. In such a scenario, while we can strive to get closer in our understanding of the term ‘god’ we shouldn’t expect there to necessarily *be* any descriptive definition available. Because if, in order to use the term ‘god’, we do not need a descriptive definition, there is no reason to assume there is one. Thus the term ‘god’ may be one which lacks a single common thread between its uses. Instead, we might think that the members of the set of things we subsume under the category of ‘god’ often share a number of salient resemblances to one another such that we can rely on those resemblances in order to recognise them.

I think there are good reasons to think ‘god’ might be a term like this – for consider, we already argued in Chapter One that the concept of God may be in some way faulty or in

need of explication for philosophical theology. I have shown that all the dominant strategies of proper name analysis fail in important ways to capture existing usage. Additionally, each of these could better be characterised as offering a different kind of definition in lieu of an available descriptive definition. And furthermore, I have argued that the use of the term ‘God’ is dependent on the term ‘god’. Thus, the fact that most proposals on this topic have not been descriptive definitions, or in some cases even attempts at descriptive definitions, should give pause for thought on the promise of finding such a definition. So what would it mean for my project if we took this claim seriously? First, I want to bring as much specificity as possible to what would be entailed by ‘god’ being a family resemblance term.

4.2.1 Family Resemblance Terms

The idea of family resemblance terms comes from Wittgenstein and is one of the elements often adopted by those outside of the broader Wittgenstein tradition. The passage cited by Oppy is 66 in which Wittgenstein writes:

Don’t say: “They must have something in common, or they would not be called ‘games’”—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them, you won’t see something that is common to all, but similarities [Ähnlichkeiten], affinities [Verwandtschaften], and a whole series of them at that. (Wittgenstein 2009: §66)

You can see the parallels in this passage to the issue of methodology I was discussing in Chapter Three – namely that unlike Oppy, Alston, and PBT philosophers, my project is one that requires looking for the common thread between hypothecated entities which we categorise as ‘god’. The most basic way we can set this position out is this: the conditions necessary and sufficient to be a god will vary between the things that we call ‘gods’. I follow Ren Bambrough’s statement of this position set out in ‘Universals and Family Resemblances’ as a starting point. It will need clarification. I do not want to get too bogged down in the details of Wittgensteinian semantics and interpretation, but rather give a broad stroke understanding of how we may reconsider our approach to analysis if we find such a position in this context to be compelling. Bambrough writes:

We may classify a set of objects by reference to the presence or absence of features ABCDE. It may well happen that five objects *edcba* are such that each of them has four of these properties and lacks the fifth, and that the missing feature is different in each of the five cases. A simple diagram will illustrate this situation:

e	d	c	b	a
A B C D	A B C E	A B D E	A C D E	B C D E

Here we can already see how natural and proper it might be to apply the same word to a number of objects between which there is no common feature. And if we confine our attention to any arbitrarily selected four of these objects, say edca, then although they all happen to have B in common, it is clear that it is not in virtue of the presence of B that they are all rightly called by the same name. (1960, p209-10)

The idea is that while there isn't a description that applies to and unites each of the objects of reference, there are a series of interconnected resemblances between them. This is what has become the standard interpretation of family resemblances subject to a few modifications. I'll briefly sketch my preferred modifications here. Firstly, the Bambrough interpretation doesn't fully capture what is meant by 'family resemblances' if not given some further details. Part of what is intended in the 'family resemblance' claim is that there are no single necessary and sufficient conditions *or set* of necessary and sufficient conditions for the term in question. But the passage above would suggest that the following condition would meet that criteria:

ABCD v ABCE v ABDE v ACDE v BCDE (Grandy, 1979, p.12)

That is, while we wouldn't be able to lay out a single description we could set out a series of conjunctions that together formed a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. This is not what is meant by family resemblance either by Wittgenstein or on the standard interpretation of Wittgenstein. The usual way to modify this is that there is no end to the construction of conditions, such that they are to be listed as:

ABCD v ABCE v ABDE v ACDE v BCD... (Pelczar, 2000, p.485)

But on this version, we now need a way for the ellipsis to be understood, because we need a sense of what it is to claim that we can never stop legitimately adding objects of reference as falling under a particular term, while simultaneously maintaining that that term is rule governed such that any possible object of reference whatsoever cannot be added as falling under the term. I would like to follow Pelczar in formulating this as a kind of semantic openness (2000).

4.2.2 Open Ended Practices

To illuminate what is meant by semantic openness, Pelczar draws attention to things we might consider essentially open practices. Semantic openness is therefore a type of open ended practice – the claim that a term is semantically open amounts to the claim that the use of that term is an open practice (Pelczar 2000). Open practices display a number of features but the most fundamental thing to understand about them is that they are rule governed, while allowing for a huge amount of variation, discretion, and creativity in how those rules apply (Pelczar, 2000). In addition to that, many open practices display a kind of precedent setting: a creative choice in how the rules are applied in one scenario may restrict future choices in how to apply rules in future similar scenarios. To get a firm grasp on this I will follow his examples to demonstrate what is meant by essentially open practices and therefore semantic openness. He provides us with three: Common Law, Jazz, and Conversation.

Common Law

The practice of Common Law is essentially open ended. There exist some general rules governing legal decisions. But frequently cases are faced in which decisions cannot be made solely on the basis of those rules. Discretion must be exercised within certain limits in order to reach a verdict. These decisions over time form precedents which form part of the common law and may constrain future verdicts. This open-endedness contrasts to the closed statutory counterpart. (Pelczar 2000, p498).

Jazz

Music pieces also contain sets of rules. A fully scored piece is a closed practice – it involves no discretion. Jazz in contrast involves a significant degree of improvisation. This means that players exercise some discretion that may vary from situation to situation and piece to piece. The musicians are usually working within a structure but a structure that involves some freedom. The rules are often something mysterious (rules of tone, harmony, rhythm) that would be difficult to articulate. (Pelczar 2000, p499)

Conversation

Rules govern conversation. Norms of presupposition, justification, and so forth create a common ground. The rules governing conversational practice dictate what may be within the bounds of admissible locutions, but nonetheless speakers exercise significant discretion. These rules are not explicit but rather a form of a cooperative set of social norms. (Pelczar 2000, p499)

All of these examples are different kinds of open practices – while they are substantially dissimilar in many ways and the rules under consideration took different forms. The existence of those rules, or the kinds of rules in question, were not what dictated the openness of the practices in question. Additionally, each of the practices involved a kind of function between both the rules and the application of the rules though this is not what dictated it be an open practice either. What made them open practices as opposed to closed practices was simply that they allowed discretion in those engaging in the practice (Pelczar 2000).

4.2.3 Semantic Openness

There are a number of reasons we might think that at least some terms are open practice terms, and that they are a needed part of language. Firstly, they allow for a less limited range in conversational practice (Pelczar, 2000, pp.501-502). That is, were we limited to a strict enumerable set of rules in the application of language this would place a restriction and limit on what we could employ our words to do. Secondly, we can't anticipate our future linguistic needs. We frequently come across new objects/scenarios and the like that our best candidate formulaic rules of use would not be able to handle, but that in important ways look substantially like existing objects/scenarios (Pelczar, 2000, p.502). We may wish, in such a scenario, to employ one of those existing terms to describe the scenario/object we are faced with, rather than introduce a new term. And third, we may consider it to simply be a basic good in the same way that we find improvised music a basic good (Pelczar, 2000, p502). This is perhaps a more poetic point, but there's something to be said for finding value in the open-endedness and creativity of the use of language.

One thing I find really interesting here is that I think semantic openness is something philosophy actually makes great use of when debating 'the meaning of a word' – particularly in formulating thought experiments or discussing situations we might think of at the limit of language. Consider the following passage from J L Austin (in which he is arguing against the idea of 'the meaning of a word'):

Suppose that I live in harmony and friendship for four years with a cat: and then it delivers a philippic. We ask ourselves, perhaps, 'Is it a real cat? or is it *not* a real cat?' 'Either it *is*, or it *is not*, but we cannot be sure which.' Now actually, that is not so: *neither* 'It is a real cat' *nor* 'it is not a real cat' fits the facts semantically: each is designed for other situations than this one: you could not say the former of something

which delivers philippics, nor yet the latter of something which has behaved as this has for four years. (1989, p.67)

One thing that's notable is Austin has to make use of the word 'cat' in order to describe this scenario. And furthermore, it is quite sensible when describing this example to state it as:

J L Austin's cat delivered a philippic

Even though our descriptive definition of a cat may preclude philippic deliveries. Now, this is not an argument that 'cat' is a semantically open term (I do not intend to take a view on the pervasiveness of the phenomenon). Safe to say I do not think it likely that such a scenario would ever arise and not every instance of creative use of a word is within bounds or can be precedent setting. We might think natural kind terms are less likely to demonstrate semantic openness than more abstract terms. The point I am illustrating here is that a 'cat delivering a philippic' style scenario is quite plausible within the context of the term 'god' whereby we are interested in hypothecated entities that frequently do not conform to established rules and norms of the world. We may, for instance, discover a new set of religious practices in as of yet unstudied cultures that look radically different to our own, or alternatively invent a new set of religious beliefs and practices. This in fact is one of the reasons Pelczar argues that open practices are beneficial.

If we return to the statement of the family resemblance view:

ABCD v ABCE v ABDE v ACDE v BCDE...

On this version, the ellipses represent that the term's usage is an open practice. The idea in application to my purposes then, is that the term 'god' leaves speakers with some discretion as to what they can use it to express. The rules around how to use the term develop through the establishment of precedent which go some way to explaining why it is difficult to precisely spell out the rules of use because those rules are, at least partly, based on previous exercise of discretion.

4.3 'god' as Semantically Open

There are plenty of contextual reasons to think that this may be a fruitful way of looking at the term 'god'. Two issues I have hitherto skipped are the translation and the history of cross tradition dialogue, and development of novel religious practices. The use of

the term ‘god’ within all three of these contexts likely demands that the use of the term be in some way a semantically open practice.

4.3.1 Translation and Cross Tradition Dialogue

The terms ‘god’ and ‘God’ are English terms spoken in the English language. But they are used to describe many religious beliefs across cultural and linguistic barriers. Indeed, none of the religions we have so far looked at have their origins in the English language in the first place. And there is a strong case that translations between languages and traditions need some semantically open terms in order to facilitate this process because there are a number of terms in different languages that there is no easy way of rendering in the target language (Brakel & Ma, 2015). In order to translate terms that do not render easily into one another, interpreters must find a family resemblance between terms in different languages.

Although the statement that any two terms in two different languages bear a family resemblance would be ‘a statement in the metalanguage of the interpreter’ (Brakel & Ma, 2015, p.482), the ability to make use of either language in this way suggests a semantic openness. Furthermore, when dealing with a term that finds its primary application of use in putative reference to objects which are named within a large diversity of languages, we should expect that said term is a family resemblance term. That is, in our case because most examples of ‘gods’ or things we apply the term ‘god’ to are objects, or sets of objects, that find their linguistic home and origin in non-English languages, most of the things which we call ‘gods’ will be called ‘gods’ as a result of an interpretive process whereby a family resemblance between two terms in two different languages has been found.

To understand what I mean by this, let’s do a case study in one category of beings that have often been named ‘gods’ in the English language, and the term of the language from which they come. I take this example from one of Oppy’s arguments.

4.3.1.1 A Case Study: Deva

In ‘Describing Gods’ Oppy draws attention to the problem that both henotheism and Hinduism may present to his argument (2014, p.7). In discussing whether Hinduism is polytheistic, monotheistic, or henotheistic, Oppy makes reference to ‘Hindus who think it is perfectly appropriate to worship devas, avatars and the like [...] even though these beings are not gods’ (2014, p.7). ‘deva’ here is functioning as a loanword, partially because there is no easy rendering of the Sanskrit word ‘deva’ into English. This is often cited as part of the

source of confusion around claiming Hinduism to be polytheistic and some have gone as far to suggest that we should think of devas in the same way we think of angels (Watson-Kesarcodi, 1997, p467). However, the claim that devas are not gods is highly contentious. Frequently English publications do translate deva into ‘god’. It’s probably best to translate deva loosely into ‘divine being’ (Klostermaier, 2007, p110). But this terminology does not exclude ‘gods’ from the category of devas. In fact, precisely the opposite. I quote at length here a passage from ‘Survey of Hinduism’ which examines the use of the term ‘deva’ and its relationship with ‘gods’ and ‘God’.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad we read a dialogue in which Yājñavalkya is asked the crucial question: Kati devāḥ, how many are the devas? His first answer is a quotation from a Vedic text: “Three hundred and three and three thousand and three.” Pressed on, he reduces the number first to thirty-three, then to six, then to three, to two, to one-and-a-half and finally to One. “Which is the one deva?” And he answers: “The prāṇa (breath, life). The Brahman. He is called tyat (that).” Though devas still figure in sacrificial practice and religious debate, the question “Who is God?” is here answered in terms that have remained the Hindu answer ever since. Brahman, untranslatable, identified with the revealed word uttered by the Brahmins (Klostermaier, 2007, p108)

Thus, the rendering of ‘deva’ as a borrowed term which names a category which excludes the possibility of that class of beings as ‘gods’ is an invention. The concept of devas is clearly extremely closely tied to the concept of gods or godhoods in the source language.

The difficulty is that the categorisation of divine beings in a different religious conceptual scheme, and in a different language, does not map straightforwardly into a traditional western philosophy terminology. We are constantly looking for parallels – which beings are equivalent – between traditions and systems of divine structures and hierarchy. On the one hand, devas look a lot like things we are familiar with categorising as gods. Early interpreters of Indian culture thought that there were a substantial number of parallels between the Olympian gods and devas (which again may have played a role in the characterisation of Hinduism as polytheistic). Given our cultural historical familiarity with the Olympian gods it would perhaps feel natural to draw attention to the family resemblance between ‘deva’ and ‘god’ for the purpose of interpretation. In contrast the metaphysical structure, insofar as it can be called that, of Hinduism looks nothing like the kind of

polytheism we take to be implied by that interpretative decision. It is still an open question what distinguishes things we are inclined to categorise as gods from other divine beings and furthermore which divine entities from other cultures we should label as gods. This is what I mean by the need for family resemblances in translation. In the metalanguage in which ‘god’ and ‘deva’ is compared there is, to be certain, a family resemblance – but the word ‘god’ does not perform the same function in the English language as ‘deva’ performs in Sanskrit.

There are a couple of possible divides I can see here on what the best interpretation would be. A la Oppy, there is a tendency to think of whatever gods are as the highest possible beings – under no higher ranking power. What is involved in this however is itself contentious: if certain devas are aspects of the most supreme God, are they under a higher ranking power? Are they even gods or divine beings in themselves? I am myself rather sceptical of attempts at purely metaphysical definitions of the term ‘god’ not least because cross cultural religious metaphysics map incredibly badly onto each other. The alternative way of looking at gods, which is also live in our language, is the more anthropological approach to ‘gods’ that considers their relationship to worshippers. There are a set of religious practices and attitudes that we think of as surrounding beings we call ‘gods’ which don’t tend to be shared by all other kinds of divine entities. The reverence of Saints and Angels, for instance, in Christianity has a different quality and aesthetic nature to the reverence of gods across cultures. Regardless of the choices made by an interpreter in this case, when we consider the fact that nearly every instance of established application of the term ‘god’ in English is to categorise a type of being/object/force that is native to a different language, we can see the case for the proper application of that term needing to be an essentially open practice.

These renderings may or may not end up being precedent setting depending on a number of factors such as how widespread the rule has become, how long standing it is and so forth. Moreover, we may find some of these choices to be relatively arbitrary – having more to do with cultural and historical facts than the degree to which a family resemblance is found in the interpreters’ metalanguage. This is especially likely to be the case when we consider the ideological and political forces which may be at play when doing cross cultural interpretation of religious beliefs.

4.3.2 Development of Novel Religious Practices

A second reason to think that ‘god’ may be a family resemblance term is the frequency of the development or evolution of novel religious practices. This is a little more complicated. Much modern religious evolution seems to be based on re-imagining old gods — it’s much rarer for a wholly new divinity to be proposed. However, this still has consequences, because although those new religions (such as neo-paganism) often use the names for gods (which were once thought of as of the past, or myth) as well as take inspiration from their likeness and the previous mythology, they are also subject to much revision, especially in cases where little is known about the original practice of worship of that god. The new version of this divine entity that is adopted may bear little resemblance either to the original, or to the other things we categorise as gods, yet because it has already been established by precedent that that particular object is under the category of gods, we frequently ascribe the title of ‘god’ to objects of modern day practices which we may think fall short of the usual metaphysical standards we expect from gods.

4.4 Elucidating Features of ‘god’

If what I have said is right, then what follows is this: our linguistically basic units are the names for specific divinities. And when discussing the application of the term ‘god’ this will be determined not only by metaphysical proposal (as was the focus of the global atheist definition) but also a whole host of historical, ideological, political, and cultural facts. As I argued in Chapter Three, we are unlikely to develop a substantive proposal on even a framework of analysis of the term ‘god’ that does not investigate the linguistic practices of referring to those specific divinities. This is something I want to look at in the next chapter. For now I want to draw the following conclusions: the term ‘god’ is a family resemblance term for which the linguistic practice of application is semantically open. What family resemblances might we elucidate from its use? I want to discuss just a few we might have in mind – whilst remaining clear that this list is not a set of necessary or sufficient conditions for godhood, but rather a set of features that many things we call ‘god’ have in common.

4.4.1 Worship, Reverence, and Offering

Principally, most entities we call ‘gods’ are objects of worship, either historically (that is, they were worshipped in the past by a particular historical cultural group) or in the present day by a live religion. Worship is not sufficient to determine something is a ‘god’, though we may worship many things “as if they were gods”. But most of our paradigm cases of gods are objects of religious worship. Whether or not there are things we call ‘gods’ that have never

been worshipped I do not know – even proposed ‘bad gods’ have often found themselves worshippers. There are for example forms of spiritual or theistic satanist practises both historical and modern which recognise Satan as a deity; and prima facie in this context there is nothing linguistically out of order with the idea that Satan could be classed within the category of gods given these practises. In contrast, we do not tend to apply the word ‘god’ to entirely novel inventions that have not yet had the chance to be worshipped. So we may say for now that the concept of godhood and the concept of the religious practice of worship are inexplicably tied.

4.4.2 Power

Secondly, most entities we call ‘gods’ are believed to hold and exercise power over the world. It is for this reason that religious practices do things like petition and leave offerings. Again, the exercise of power is certainly not sufficient to determine something is a ‘god’ since plenty of ordinary people exercise power. Most of our paradigm cases of gods exercise extraordinary powers: power over the natural world, power over our health, power over our fortunes and so forth, though this is definitely not necessary to gods – there are plenty of examples of disinterested gods who leave the world be. Nonetheless, a significant number of the practices we consider a part of the practice of religion involve the assumption that gods hold power. Furthermore, often where we find disinterested gods they tend to be heterodox conceptions of gods traditionally viewed as exercising power, more philosophical and less practice based versions of gods, or gods who exist in a wider pantheon of gods whereby their offspring, creations, or aspects of themselves do exercise power. So we can say the exercise of power of the world is one of the many family resemblances of gods.

4.4.3 Relational Significance

Finally, one aspect of gods that I think tends to be undervalued in philosophy is a kind of relational significance between the god and the practisers of religion in which that god concept finds its home. Things that we call gods usually mean something to some cultural group (historical or present day). This is I suppose another way of saying gods usually are found within religious practices and those religious practices carry normative significance to cultural groups. In other words, there is an evaluative element to what can appropriately be called ‘god’ – there is a sense in which it is wrong to call something that does not play the right kind of role in the life of believers ‘god’.

With that sketch in hand, I want to reconsider my central purpose here: understanding the term ‘God’. As I have argued, I think we should consider the term ‘God’ to be dependent on the term ‘god’ in an important way. The above arguments about ‘god’ being a family resemblance term are therefore important in the construction of a framework for the term ‘God’ but they also shed light on why the proposals of chapters one through three did not meet the needs of my project.

4.5 Reconsidering the Approach

So let’s reconsider the puzzles I set out with at the beginning in the light of the arguments made in the preceding three chapters. I wanted to explore the semantics and pragmatics of the term ‘God’ for the purpose of resolving a specific set of questions about philosophy of religion and philosophical theology. These were largely framework questions which can roughly be separated into four broad stokes questions:

- 1) How to determine the semantic content, cognitive significance and/or reference of the term ‘God’,
- 2) How to categorise the different definitions offered for ‘God’ within philosophical theology and philosophy of religion,
- 3) How to characterise religious diversity and religious disagreement,
- 4) How the different names and terms for divinities relate to one another.

Thus far we have mostly been focused on the first part of question one. Our best candidate is that to be ‘God’ is to be ‘the one and only god’ collapsed when faced with questions two and three. And none of the methodologies found in each of the three explored proposals have been suitable for answering those questions. The only success I have found is in answering question four. Given the case that ‘god’ is a family resemblance term, and ‘God’ is, in some important way, based on the term ‘god’, this is not surprising. In fact, the proceeding argument can be seen as a case that starting with question one is a mistake, because if what I have said is accepted, we are approaching the questions in precisely the wrong order. Not only is it the case that we won’t be able to devise a complete, closed, semantically adequate account of the term ‘God’, but moreover the only way to begin to shed light on question one is by answering question four. Because our basic linguistic units are the names for specific divinities.

So what if I reverse the order? Instead of trying to immediately propose a view of the semantic content, cognitive significance, or reference of the term ‘God’ I focus first on trying to get the semantic relations between terms used for ‘God’ in religious practice right, and on accurately characterising what is going on in religious disagreements. This is because what I need in order to answer questions two and three is an account that, at minimum, gets the semantic and pragmatic relationship between the ways in which the term ‘God’ is used, as well as other terms used to name divinities. Thus as I see it, my aims will be satisfied by a view that brings clarity to the semantic and pragmatic relations between the terms. To begin this however, I need to understand our most linguistic basic units: the names for gods. How do we refer to gods? How do we build practices around a shared conception of a single god? It is this that I turn to next.

4.6 Concluding Remarks

I hope I have shown why we should think of the term ‘god’ as a family resemblance term, what it means to think of ‘god’ as a family resemblance term, and why this matters for answering questions about religious diversity and disagreement, as well as our characterisation of philosophical theology and philosophy of religion. Furthermore, I hope I have shown why this therefore entails the need for a linguistic account of talking about specific divinities.

5. Proper Names for Divinities, Narrative, and Imaginings

The arguments in the previous chapter rely on the assumption that speakers can deploy the terms for divinities in order to putatively refer. We have gone through a series of problems – we cannot give a linguistic account of the term ‘God’ without a linguistic account of the term ‘god’ and the view of the term ‘god’ developed appealed to names for specific divinities as our linguistically basic units. So how should we model those terms? Are they proper names as they appear to be? If so, how do we use those terms to putatively refer? We

are faced with the same kinds of problems we saw in Chapters One through Three. If we remodel them as descriptions we will run into problems with heterodox believers. If we model them as proper names we are faced with a number of classic philosophical problems relating to singular thought and reference when it comes to potentially vacuous terms. That is, how can we make use of putative direct reference without presupposing existence or acquaintance?

In this chapter I argue that we can think about talk of gods (without existence assumptions) by using similar arguments given for reference in fiction. There are two prongs to this account – firstly, on the individual speaker side, we need to make use of theories of how speakers entertain thoughts about fictional entities. Secondly, on the community side, we need to make use of theories about putative co-reference in this context. The hope is to facilitate the “proper name intuition” discussed in Chapter Two. As with previous chapters I will try to do this with as minimal pre theoretical commitments as possible. I do not intend to go through each term for a divinity on its own but rather outline a general mechanism. Much of what I say will need adjustments depending on the specific religious practice in question. The aim is to develop a view of theories of reference and thought about divinities that can yield the right linguistic result.

The chapter structure is as follows. On the first prong – I argue singular thought about these divinities be modelled as a kind of imagining. On the second prong – how to account for community reference – I follow the usual direct referentialist model. That co-reference is secured by the history of the network of the term. I model storytelling as a kind of extended speech act in which we offer a definition. In a loose sense we can think of this as analogous to ostensive definition. I show how this deviates from Alston’s view presented in Chapter Two. The account developed provides a story telling and practice based view of reference to and thought about these divinities. It allows for the pragmatics of context bound speech acts involved in religious activities (such as address, prayer, and worship) to roughly track the intuitions I wished to accommodate in Chapter Two. I argue that this account is well placed not only to capture our intuitions about our linguistic practices but also points to solutions on delineation of traditions. In particular the emphasis on shared stories and presuppositions matches well to our ideas about shared religious practices and stories.

5.1 Storytelling, Fiction, and Reference

I want to start with a brief qualifier on what I will not be doing here. Philosophical discussion about possibly empty reference and fiction has tended to focus on how to evaluate the truth of sentences that contain empty/fictional reference terms, and whether for truth evaluative purposes we need fictional objects. I do not want to weigh in on this debate as much as it can be avoided. What I require is a theory of reference for names for divinities which can, in theory, secure intentional identity, and can capture the linguistic practice of using those terms. Whether or not sentences containing those terms, in the case of non-existence, refer to some ontological category of fictional entities, are gappy, or any alternative is not my concern. How to think about the truth conditions of sentences containing those terms is certainly a closely related topic, but it goes well beyond the scope of my thesis, especially since ‘myth’ terms present a special kind of dilemma in this area. I prefer to frame my account through a pragmatic lens, leaving the precise semantics to be filled in by one’s preferred view on empty terms versus fictional objects and so forth. That is, I am interested in what speakers take themselves to be talking about, how speakers hold themselves to share an object of reference and so forth. As such, I will try to devise a non-committal account. The philosophical burden is to find a mechanism for this process. Whether that mechanism is then construed as contributing to the propositional content, semantic content, cognitive significance or so forth is a secondary question I do not need to answer. The determination of this will almost certainly depend on pre-existing philosophical commitments unlikely to be swayed by an analysis of a very specific set of terms. Regardless, my account of ‘god’ or ‘God’ does not need such analysis to get off the ground. The only theoretical frameworks I need to introduce are ones that are pre-theoretically required in order to explain phenomena observed in pre-existing linguistic practices. The purpose of discussing divine names is to build a framework of relation between god-terms so that I may give a linguistic account of the term ‘God’. For that, all I need is a theory of reference or intentional identity for divine names (which fall under the category of ‘god’). Whether that theory of reference is considered the whole semantic contribution of those names to a sentence containing them is not something I necessarily have to answer.

5.1.1 Divine Names are Problem Cases

The task here of drawing parallels to fiction is no easy one. Names for divinities sit precisely in the space that nearly all accounts of potentially empty terms have trouble with. Empty terms are often assimilated differently in proposals according to their type. For instance, empty names like ‘Vulcan’ – ones which are intended to be in some way about the

real world – get assimilated into descriptions such as ‘the planet responsible for the observed perturbations in Mercury’. This allows us to easily account both for the possibility that the term turned out to be empty, or the term turned out to be non-empty. In contrast, characters in fiction like ‘Sherlock Holmes’ get assimilated into theories about fiction: whereby linguistic analysis, and characterisation of speaker behaviour, begins at the presumption of emptiness. Thus, one is modelled as a hypothecated metaphysical object the putative reference of which is fixed descriptively, the other is subject to a number of complex strategies but they usually start from the assumption that the topic at hand is a fiction. Divine entities sit precisely in the middle. On the one hand there are few easy descriptive candidates available for defining them since they are rarely merely theories about the world, but stories we imaginatively engage in. On the other hand they are not merely pretences – we cannot model them with a theory that requires speakers to pretend that they exist since many, if not most, uses of divine names involve precisely the assumption that they do, in fact, exist. Thus divinities sit at the centre of *both* metaphysical theories about the world, and imaginative stories – and they do so simultaneously. In essence, divinities are classic problem cases that cannot be dealt with by a “divide and conquer strategy”.

5.1.2 What Do We Need?

The existing philosophical literature on possibly empty terms is generally focused on three phenomena (Sawyer 2012):

- a) Sentences containing such names can be understood and appear to be meaningful.
How do we account for this?
- b) Sentences containing such names seem to be able to be used to name the same thing across occasions of utterances. How do we account for this?
- c) Sentences containing empty names often appear to be true. How do we account for this?

I will not be answering (c). I need answers to (a) and (b). As with analysis of ‘God’ we are faced with the same set of questions. Are terms like ‘YHWH’, ‘Vishnu’ or ‘El’ Millian style ordinary proper names or definite descriptions? This ground is familiar; we trod in it looking for a definition for ‘God’, especially since the accounts proposed in one and two were largely from the Christian perspective.

5.2 Rejecting the Descriptivist Route

As before, I think there will be theoretical trouble for any traditional descriptivist trying to offer adequate descriptions that capture the use of terms like ‘Ahura Mazda’, ‘YHWH’, ‘Vishnu’. While they may seek to offer explications, stipulations, and the like, when trying to account for rules of linguistic use that are actually engaged in by communities of believers the opportunity for counter examples will be ripe. Unlike the term ‘god’ I do not think proper divine names are suitable for a family resemblance analysis – given they are putative singular referring expressions/definite referring expressions it quite simply wouldn’t make a lot of sense. But I think there’s a more important reason for thinking descriptivism won’t work when brought down to the more specified level of particular divinities. In Chapter One when we looked at the term ‘God’ we were able to take a more detached analytic philosophical view – discussion of the term was focused on the concept of God, rather than ‘God’ as an individual entity. When brought down to the more specified conversation of particular divinities such as El, I think we find one crucial difference and that is the role of storytelling in defining gods and the kind of information storytelling imparts. Like fictional names, the names for divinities largely come from religious stories. And I think that the stories we tell about divinities contain significant philosophical and religious characterizations of those divinities that are difficult, perhaps even impossible, to express outside of the context of storytelling.

5.2.1 Knowledge Through Narrative

My position here follows Eleonore Stump’s in ‘Wandering in Darkness’. While Stump’s project is one of Christian apologetics (she does not take the kind of pluralistic orientation I am interested in) her work nonetheless serves as a useful start point. This is because I will be defending a position that aligns more closely to the strategy for purely fictional terms, rather than empty metaphysical terms. So if we understand how such a position functions on the assumption of existence the harder half of the task is complete.

Stump distinguishes between two types of knowledge: Franciscan knowledge and Dominican knowledge (2012, pp.39-63). Dominican knowledge is essentially knowledge-that. It is the kind of knowledge involved in most analytic philosophy (Stump, 2012, pp.39-63). In contrast, Franciscan knowledge is a little harder to define. It tracks closest perhaps with knowledge by acquaintance. According to Stump it is direct, intuitive, non-propositional and can be transmitted by stories (2012, pp.39-63). One aspect of Franciscan knowledge that Stump at great length emphasises is second-person knowledge – as she sees it, narrative

biblical stories provide the reader with this kind of knowledge about God (whereby in this context God is used to refer specifically to the Christian God).

Stump uses a revised version of the Mary thought experiment to explain what she has in mind here. In this version Mary is imprisoned in a room where she has had access to all information about persons in the form of third-person accounts (2012). She has information about faces, communication, speech, body language, emotional states and so forth. But she has never herself communicated with another person. Mary has had no second-person experiences. ‘And then suppose that Mary is finally rescued from her imprisonment and united for the first time with her mother, who loves her deeply’ (Stump, 2012, p53). As with its colour counterpart, Stump thinks that Mary will come to know something in this experience she did not know before. What it is like to converse, what it is like to see somebody's mood, what it is like to hear their voice, what it is like to have a conversation, what it is like to be loved and so forth (2012, pp.52-53). But most importantly, Mary will know her mother in a way she did not know before. Because Mary will learn about her mother through a second-person experience (2012, p.53).

Stump further argues that this knowledge does not depend on the direct acquaintance modelled here – that of a kind of ‘special causal contact’ (2012, p.53). She argues that this same kind of knowledge can be experienced through stories. To argue this, Stump imagines Mary’s mother teaches Mary about her dead brother through pictures and stories and the like (2012, p.53). That Mary could also come to know her brother. She compares this to the way we know characters in fictional stories. The idea is that while Franciscan knowledge involves some kind of experience, this experience need not be one of direct causal contact. This is not to say that there is no distinction between the kinds of experiences under discussions (ones that are direct versus one that is indirect) but rather the distinction is not found in a difference of situational ability to impart Franciscan knowledge.

Now, there is a little trouble afoot here. Because Stump is doing Christian apologetics, and a type of Christian apologetics whereby the Christian God is modelled as personal, the analogy doesn’t fully work for me. Because plenty of religious beliefs do not formulate gods as personal. But Stump is also quite clear that second-person knowledge is only one particular type of Franciscan knowledge. For instance, she uses the example of knowing music. Consider the following:

“She knew the music immediately,” for example, is not equivalent to “she knew immediately that the music she was hearing was ——” (where the blank is to be filled in by the name of the music and/or the name of its composer in the genitive case). It is possible to know the music one is hearing without knowing the identity of the music, as one does when one hears something one knows well but without being able to recall the title of the work or the name of its composer. And, conversely, it is possible to know the identity of the music one is listening to—because, say, the radio announcer has just given it—without knowing the music. So knowing music (as distinct from knowing something about music) is another example of Franciscan knowledge. (Stump 2012, p.52)

If the thought experiment above works for people, then I think it works for others. Thus I prefer myself not to use this particular formulation of second-person knowledge largely because this makes the God-as-personal central to the functioning of the account. I think it better for my pluralistic purposes to stick to the formulation of Franciscan knowledge (knowledge by acquaintance but not necessarily direct causal contact) of divinities, rather than ‘second-person knowledge of God’. The core assertion is that religious narratives impart a kind of knowledge, like knowledge by acquaintance, of the divinities which those stories are about, that is non-propositional.

If we accept these arguments then it should be clear why I prefer not to go in on wholly descriptivist views about names for divinities. Such definitions will be inadequate precisely because those definitions will fail to capture Franciscan information communicated about specific deities within religious stories. If we consider this information to be central/shared amongst the users of the term such that it is plausibly relevant to conditions of reference (and I contend that this is the case) then a descriptivist account will not work. We need an account of reference that properly captures the religious orientation.

5.2.2 Existence Assumptions

Something of significance for me, is that Stump’s argument trades on the presumption that the stories involved are, in some important way, true and about the Christian God. This obviously won’t do for me. That said, her perspective on how the terms are used by religious believers, given the assumption of existence, still has a place in my framework. That is, I need to have a framework that captures both what religious believers take the terms to be doing, and what that means from the outside perspective. And it’s also of significance to me

that Stump makes use of fiction narratives to explain the kind of things she has in mind in setting out Franciscan knowledge. I think a benefit of Stump's account is it allows for a proposal that can model these terms in the same way in which we model fictional characters, while remaining silent on the existence question. In other words – modelling terms for divinities in the same way as terms for fictional characters is usually the position those who assume non-existence take. I tend to be of the view that such accounts better capture the reality of religious practices. Thus finding a defence of such a view within an apologetics context is incredibly useful. It shows me how I can deploy a linguistic framework that normally isn't used under the condition of assumption of existence, without starting from the presumption of non-existence. So now let's look at the other end of the spectrum. What are we doing when we employ names of fictional characters? We have the view from assumed existence, what is the view from assumed non-existence?

Let's reconsider Stump's story about the long dead brother. Suppose now, the long dead brother is a deliberate fabrication by the mother – a lie she is telling using false stories and false photographs. Or that the long dead brother is a delusion of the mother – she tells the story of her lost child not knowing that she never had such a child. Does any of this make a difference to the beliefs that the daughter is now in possession of other than in the first scenario that information is true, and in the second two scenarios it is misinformation? On the counter side to this, consider somebody who reads an autobiography believing it to be a fiction, and somebody who reads an autobiography knowing it to be an autobiography. What should we say about their knowledge of the person described? Is the difference more significant in kind that one person knows it to be true and the other has compartmentalised it as a fiction? The imaginative process through which they know the person written is mediated in the same way – and contains the same knowledge.

The point I am getting at here is regardless of whether we take the biblical stories to be true or false, and regardless of whether we read them from the perspective of believing them to be true or false, when we are concerned with the information we glean from them, the position remains the same. There is information we learn from those stories that we cannot express descriptively.

5.2.3 Knowing and Imagining

This leads me into my wider point. Stump framed her proposal in terms of knowing – and it's understandable given the apologetics purpose why she did so. But I much prefer to

talk of engagement in religious narratives as imaginings. Imaginings are often contrasted with knowledge – as necessarily involving pretence or make-believe. I think this is a mistaken distinction. Here I follow Derek Matravers’ work in ‘Fiction and Narrative’ in setting out why I think this is the case.

Much like my argument about Mary’s brother, in ‘Fiction and Narrative’ Matravers asks us to consider the following testimony.

Somebody runs into my cave and tells me that there are a dozen wolves, about a mile away, which are heading in my direction. (2014, p.46)

In this case, we think that the only relevant psychological resources we need is the ability to understand what is being told – one hears the sentence and forms a belief (Matravers, 2014, p.45). Imagination is not relevant. Now imagine that years later we are telling the story of a wolf that came into our grandfather’s cave. We may tell this in order to teach the family what to do if a wolf comes:

Grandfather engaged the wolf at the mouth of the cave, which meant that Johnny could not run out to get help. So if a wolf comes into the cave in future, we should let it come all the way in before trying to hit it with the axe, so somebody can slip out behind it. (Matravers 2014, p.46)

We may tell the story simply to entertain the family:

Once, when Grandfather was a lad, he was just settling down for the evening when he heard a noise. . . (Matravers 2014, p.46)

Matravers calls the first a ‘thin representation’; these are representations that typically provide thin experiences (2014, p.46). And the second a ‘thick representation’; these are representations that typically provide thick experiences (Matravers, 2014, p.47). Note that the distinction here roughly appears to track Stumps Franciscan/Dominican distinction, although in contrast, Matravers takes his distinction to be one of degree not kind. Nonetheless Matravers is looking for the distinction in the story told, whereas Stump in the kind of “knowledge” or information gained. For my goals, we might think of it this way. A ‘thick representation’ involves a significant degree of Franciscan information. A ‘thin representation’ involves largely Dominican information.

Matravers argues that these different kinds of representations can be put to use for a number of purposes. We can use them for counterfactual representations:

Suppose a wolf came into your cave... (2014, p47)

Or for persuasion:

The village meeting is deciding on what to spend their meagre resources: decorations to the village cave or defences against wolves. One of the villagers, in favour of the latter proposal, gets up and spins a terrifying tale of the consequences of a pack of wolves getting to the heart of the village: men and women savaged, children chewed to pieces, the streets running with blood. (2014, p47)

None of these purposes rely on the story being that of fact rather than fiction. The representations that are fiction and the representations that are non-fiction are equally well equipped for these purposes and the representations they invoke, whether thick or thin, are not determined by the truthfulness of the story. The point here is that there is ‘no mental state peculiar to our engagement with fiction’ (Matravers 2014, p.6). Imaginings are not synonymous with play pretence or ‘make-believe’.

If we have this right then I would like to state my own Stump – Matravers combination position in the following way. Religious narratives are like ‘thick representations’. They produce thick experiences by inviting us to engage in imaginings of a number of things, but one among them, is the divinities themselves. The purposes of religious stories are multifaceted; they may include teaching us about a divinity, encouraging a moral position, motivating a course of action and so forth. This is one of the many reasons religious stories need to be thick representations not thin ones. The imaginings produced via engagement with the narrative will contain within them information (or misinformation) that is non-propositional (i.e. that is Franciscan) as a result of this. Whether the divinity does or does not exist is irrelevant to this process.

This is important for a couple of reasons. As I have said, philosophical tradition has tended towards a ‘divide and conquer’ approach when it comes to categorising intentional reference in the case of potentially vacuous names. The relationship between thought and language here – or mental representation and language is no small element. It is often suggested that fictional entities present a special problem for direct reference theories. And certainly, they may still for those trying to make sense of truth values about entities we know

to be fictional. But in terms of meaningfulness and intentional identity, if our mental states do not turn on the existence or non-existence of the object at hand, then it seems implausible that the mechanism which underwrites our referential practice could either. Like the Matravas, I take the problem to be one of confrontation versus non-confrontation. Which largely tracks with the availability of ostensive definition. If this is accepted, then I have no special case to answer. I can follow the usual direct referentialist story with some modifications.

5.3 Narratives as Definitions

We already explored some elements of this in Chapter Two. But this time the landscape is quite different. I am no longer interested in the reference of the term ‘God’ but the mechanism by which (pragmatic or semantic) religious believers may think of themselves as thinking about, and thereby putatively referring to, a specific divinity. And, unlike in Chapter Two, we are no longer looking at this through the context of religious experiences as it was framed by Miller and Alston, but through the context of religious storytelling. The outline of Franciscan knowledge provides a clue here since it already involved talk of acquaintance. And this time the acquaintance is not unbound but wholly tied to particular narratives dependent on the religious context.

My proposal is this – there are many things we do with narratives. Many things we can learn from them and truths that can be expressed. But one of the things I think narratives are is a kind of extended definition. They are analogous to ostensive definitions where the object in question is taken by the composer of the story to be existent, and a creative act of inaugural naming in context where they are not. Both are prescriptions to imagine or simulate. Either way, the mechanism of reference remains the same. So how does this mechanism work?

5.4 Co-Identification & Notions Networks

Let us briefly revisit the direct referentialist view. The use of a name putatively refers to an object not because that object satisfies a particular description but because the use is historically linked to that object via a network of co-referential intentions. Given my previous discussion, I would like to add the following adjustment. These linguistic practices can both secure co-reference and transmit information (or misinformation) about the referent. But this practice may also involve non-linguistic elements such as representations. These kinds of practices are sometimes called representation networks or Notions networks (Friend 2014) . It is these networks which secure reference. There are a number of different ways in which

practices are often deployed to explain talk about potentially vacuous names. These can be separated into two types: info-centric and name-centric (Friend, 2014).

5.4.1 Name-Centric Approaches

The most prominent developed version of the name-centric account is Sainsbury's. In 'Reference without Referents' he argues that understanding and using a name involves participation in a linguistic practice (2005). This follows the standard Kripkean picture as outlined in Chapter Two. The practices are initiated by a baptism and can be done with object-related intentions or descriptive intentions. Object-related intentions are the classic case involving ostensive definition (I hereby name this child...). Descriptive intentions are ones like the naming of 'Vulcan' to mean 'whatever planet causes such and such perturbations in Mercury's orbit'. Subsequent users of the name have to intend to use the name in the same way as those they have learned the term from, thus initiating them into the practice and so forth. On Sainsbury's account, fictional names are thus introduced with descriptive intentions and co-identification is secured by co-membership of a linguistic practice (2015). The use of a name for a fictional character is traced back to a baptism in a fiction. So long as two utterances of a name can be traced back to the same event, those two uses can be said to be talking about the same thing (fictional, empty, or existent). I will call this co-identification to distinguish from reference, since vacuous terms plausibly may not refer.

5.4.1.1 Reference Shift

Name-centric accounts have famously been subjected to an objection about reference-shift. The objection comes from Evans who gives us the example of 'Madagascar' originally it was used to name a part of the African mainland (1973, p.196). But its use was misunderstood by Marco Polo who, hearing the term, mistakenly believed it was used to name the great island off the coast of Africa. Marco Polo, we are told, had the right kind of intention – to use the name in the same way as those he heard it from and was thus initiated in the proper way to a naming practice. His mistake however led to the name being used to refer to the island. Sainsbury's explanation of the Madagascar case needs to be that Marco Polo's mistake led to an unwitting baptism (Friend, 2014, p314). Thus it is not part of the old naming practice but actually initiated a new one.

5.4.1.2 Identification Shift

Friend has argued that this presents a problem for co-identification on Sainsbury's account. Because by tying the linguistic practices to the baptism event itself allows for some co-identification of fictional names, identification shift must be handled in the same way as reference shift (Friend, 2014, p.315). Consider now, two orthographically different names such as 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus'. When the object in question is real, two distinct baptisms with distinct name using practices still can be said to co-refer since they can be baptisms of the same real object. This does not carry for empty names. Friend invites us to consider the example of 'Santa Claus' and 'Father Christmas':

When Ethan uses 'Santa Claus', his intentions guarantee that he uses it to identify the same thing as the person from whom he learned the name, who in turn must identify the same thing as the person from whom she learned the name, and so on, all the way back to the original introduction of the name—apparently in an 1821 book published in the US, *Children's Friend*, about an imaginary version of the fourth-century bishop Saint Nicholas (Saint Nicholas Center 2011). The name 'Father Christmas' seems to have first appeared in English poetry in the fifteenth century to label a personification of Christmas who presided over adult feasting and revelries (Simpson and Roud 2000, 119–20). So intentions to use the name 'Father Christmas' will take one back to a different baptism altogether, and we have no explanation of how the two names co-identify. (2014, p.135)

Not all orthographically distinct names present a challenge for Sainsbury since such names can still be causally connected by the right kind of intentions. For instance translated names can still be considered to be part of the same linguistic practices assuming the intent of the translator is to use the translated name in the same way as the name which is being translated. However, it is a problem where such practices have independent origins as in the case of 'Santa Claus' and 'Father Christmas'. Similarly, just as the theory fails to capture cases of co-identification, it also gives the result that names co-identify when we intuitively think they do not. Again, consider the following case:

Thomas Kyd based his Hamlet on a Norse legend about the (possibly real) Prince Amleth of Denmark. Suppose that Amleth was real, and that Kyd intended to use 'Hamlet' to identify the same individual, if any, represented in the Norse legend; perhaps the English name is just a variation on the Norse one. And suppose (just for the sake of argument) that Shakespeare, mistakenly assuming Hamlet to be invented

or perhaps not caring one way or the other, intended to use the name ‘Hamlet’ to identify the same character as Kyd. Then it turns out that all this time we who talk about Hamlet are referring to a real individual. (2014, p.136)

Now for somebody proposing a general theory of reference these may seem like minor problems, but in the case of divinities this could become a very real problem. I already raised a problem like this in Chapter Two in reference to Alston’s proposal. The actual history of religion involves a significant amount of practice merging and diverging with innumerable orthographically distinct names. If our account of co-intentional identity is tied to a baptism event and cannot account for identity shifts, that is a serious problem in the context of religion. In fact *most* of the terms we currently use are those that would be subject to the kinds of problems explored here. I simply do not think a version of the historical-cum-indexical reference view that puts language ahead of the world is going to work for characterising religious terms. I won’t reiterate the issues here - we have covered them already. Instead let us move on to the alternative which I think is much better equipped to deal with religious language.

5.4.2 Info-Centric Approaches

The alternative, the info-centric approach, is mostly associated with Evans in order to handle issues of reference shift, and therefore on my version identification shift. In Evan's version of the story, the object which is the dominant source of information associated with a name is the one which the name refers to (1973). That is, the object that is the causal source of information associated with a name in a particular linguistic practice is what we trace back to following the link of co-intentional reference. In this way Evans is able to solve the Madagascar case. While it may be that the original name using practice had part of the mainland at its head, over time most of the information associated with the term ‘Madagascar’ originated from the Island. That is, the Island came to be the dominant source of information associated with the term ‘Madagascar’ and thus ‘Madagascar’ came to refer to the Island.

5.4.2.1 Notions

Friend has extended this analysis further, borrowing from Perry’s idea of notions networks. I will rely mostly on Friend’s and Perry’s work here, showing how their ideas can be deployed in my context. The view begins with the overall standpoint that

Referring to things is not something that words do, but something that people do using words, and sometimes even without using words (Korta ,2012, p34)

Thus, we should not be looking for our theory of reference in terms of the relationship between words and objects, but the relationship between speakers' intentions and objects. Reference determination is an action that is performed by the speaker (Korta, 2012, p.37). This move is the reason I have been reticent on offering any particular semantics in this chapter. Generally referential intentions are seen as the realm of pragmatics, and I am perfectly content for the semantics to be resolved with any preferred assimilation strategy. In our most straightforward cases where referential intentions are indexical, the sketch of how these intentions work is fairly simple. A speaker may use an expression to designate an object (referential intention) by exploiting their own cognitive fix on the object (Korta, 2012, p.39). They do so with the intent of directing the listener's intention to the same object. In the case of proper names Perry introduces the idea of notions-networks in order to explain how to generalise this analysis:

We learn about objects through perceptions. When we perceive things, we have ideas of them (notions), that we associate with ideas for the properties we perceive them to have, creating a sort of internal file (a notion associated with ideas). Thus the first link in our networks: perceptions of objects give rise to notions, and information flows from perception to notion. We retain these files when we are no longer perceiving the objects -the detach and recognize information game. We use language to share information that we gain in this way. Hence, the networks are intersubjective, involving notions and files that different people have of the same object. When we share information, the person doing the sharing constructs a statement with a reference in it, which is guided by the internal file he has of the object. This is the second kind of connection between nodes of the network: from notion to utterance. The person receiving the information has a perception of the utterance. On the basis of it, he starts a new file or adds to one he already has. This is the third sort of connection, from perception of an utterance to notion. (Perry 2001, pp. 128-129)

Thus, we can think of a notion as a mental representation of an object by an individual. Notions network form as the information associated with those mental representations flow between individuals. They are associated with information about that individual but, as with Evans, they do not refer in virtue of an object satisfying that information. Rather, they refer to

the object from whom the information is derived. This view is often framed within the mental-file view of singular thoughts – how precisely the idea of mental files is cashed out is beyond the scope of my thesis. Some take it as a metaphor, some think they are causal-functional entities, some as mental particulars, no matter I need only a minimal commitment that there is such a thing as mental filing however this is categorised. In this way we can say notions are representations associated to bundles of information, however we categorise the nature of that association. We can equally deploy earlier terminology such as dossiers to the same effect. I take this to be a relatively weak commitment.

As with naming practices, notions-networks can originate through perception, through errors, or through creation (Friend, 2014, p.322). Notions can be part of an existing network, or initiate networks. The introduction of notions is where the work done on imaginings and narrative comes into play. Our ability to engage in imaginings about fictional characters can be characterised in terms of notions. And our use of proper names depends on the notions networks they form. That is, notions networks support naming practices and they can support more than one naming practice. Friend writes:

in this sense, our notion *guides* our use of the name. The referent of a name (if any) will then be the referent of the relevant notion. (2014, p.323)

The story works something like this. Somebody perceives an object (veridically or in error) and forms a new notion with an associated file or dossier of information about that object. This person may utter a sentence containing a referring term. The use of that referring term is guided by the notion formed. Somebody hearing that utterance may form a new notion with the associated information communicated to them by the sentence utterer. It is the relationship between the notions and the object of reference which secures the reference of the term. Names associated with notions are thus assigned by permissive conventions:

Names *exploit* conventions, and naming conventions are *supported* by networks (Perry 2012, p.36)

We can use this picture to develop what Perry calls conditional intentional co-reference (2012). Two utterances of the same term conditionally intentionally co refer if the successful reference of the later utterance of a term depends on the successful reference of the earlier one. A relationship between utterances is formed such that it ensures that if one refers, both refer. The relation of intentional conditional co-reference induces notions networks (Perry, 2012)

5.4.3 Existence, Causation, and Blocks

We can then combine the above sketch to talk about existence with Donnellan's blocks. We are on familiar territory here, recall the definition of blocks:

When the historical explanation of the use of a name (with the intention to refer) ends ... with events that preclude any referent being identified, I will call it a "block" in the history. (1974, p.23)

On this version the history of the term is instead identified with the notions network that supports the naming convention and an empty name is one which is supported by a notion-network that ends in a block – that is, there is no object that is the origin of the notions. We can separate blocks into three kinds:

1. Those created by non-veridical perceptual experiences whereby the experiences are wrongly believed to have been caused by an object,
2. Those created by mistakenly believing there has been a referring act when there has been none,
3. Blocks that are freely created (de Ponte, Korta, & Perry, 2020, p.395).

Notice that the intentions and attention directedness of the producer are important in this context – in the same way on Sainsbury's model speakers' referential intentions matter, so too on this model do producers' object attention. Similarly, we need to be careful to distinguish between the source of information, and the representation that carries that information.

Notions networks supporting names for divinities may well be subject to blocks of any of these kinds, though most would likely be of the first type. That is, cases where it was wrongly believed that perceptual experiences/observed events were caused by some mythical entity where they were not. If the notion-network does originate with a block then we can say while none of the utterances in the network refer, they do intentionally conditionally co-refer. In this context what we mean by intentional identity – talking about the same thing – is that utterances supported by the notions network intentionally conditionally co-refer. These networks support not just reference, but also the flow of information (Perry, 2012). Thus when we say people are talking about the same thing, in this context, 'is to say no more than

that their beliefs, doubts, desires, and pretences are supported by the same network' (Perry 2012, p.14)

5.4.4 Producers and Consumers

To expand on this, let's borrow again from Friend and Evans. We may distinguish between producers and consumers. Producers are the 'core group of speakers who regularly and reliably recognise an individual, x, as NN' (Evans 1982, p.338). The consumers are those who are introduced into the network by producers such that they can refer to x insofar as their notions use information transmitted to them by producers. Thus we can take the defining feature of producers to be their capacity to 'legitimately introduce new information into the network' (Friend, 2014, p.21).

We can apply the idea of consumers and producers even in cases where a network does not have a referent. For instance, consumers who learn about YHWH by reading the Torah can derive information from the Torah to be associated with their YHWH-notion. Friend distinguishes between two types of consumers: participating consumers and parasitic consumers (2014, p.324). Parasitic consumers refer or identify whatever others in the practice refer or identify by deference. They have little or no information about the putative object of reference and simply use a name with the intention of using it in the same way as others in the practice (Dickie, 2011, p.52). Participating consumers in contrast have a significant amount of information about the putative object of reference.

The notion of producers however is a little harder in religious contexts. If it is the case that there is an object causing the notions in the notions network, then we can apply Evan's definition straightforwardly enough. However, not only should we not be relying on such assumptions, but additionally, in the context of religion there is something wrong with allowing all people who can reliably recognise a divinity as being producers, because there is no method of independent verification of reliable recognition. The problem with Evan's idea of producers also extends to fiction. Friend suggests we extend the idea of the producer role to include those who have capacity to 'legitimately' introduce new information into the network.

In the context of fiction, Friend suggests that producers are 'those who are in authoritative position, for example, with respect to a literary practice'. For example the inventors of a character might be considered to be authoritative. For icons such as Santa

Clause ‘the only constraint on legitimacy may be what catches on with the public’ (2014, p.325). The story can get complex. We may find overlapping notions networks and practices. And we may have to ‘rely on shared representations conveying shared bodies of information’ (Friend 2014, p.328). Ultimately overlap between notions networks, and the information they convey is a matter of degree, as well as how much we weigh certain sets of information in their importance. We may find that in fictional cases there is no clear cut answer. Debate about what is ‘canon’ for fictional characters is a common discourse in popular culture. When a character ceases to be ‘the same’ as another, and becomes ‘inspired by’, may not have a sharp line of distinction. We should not take this as a weakness of the info-centric approach, but a strength. Where our own judgements are fuzzy, it is a strength of any descriptive theory if it does not produce a clear cut result.

What would constitute ‘legitimacy’ in the religious context? This is an incredibly complicated question. Religious practices often have their own norms of authority. For instance, in Catholicism the Pope could be described as a legitimate ‘producer’. We might say religious authority translates into being a notions network producer and thereby having linguistic authority. There isn’t scope to elucidate the norms of every religious practice of interest in the thesis. But let’s talk about a few common ones. Firstly, I think it obvious that the authors of any religious text, accepted as authoritative for a religion, were producers. Secondly, those present at historical councils (for instance when the Nicene creed was set) would be producers. Perhaps some modern day religious governing bodies may act as producers. Thirdly, any historical prophet of a religious practice (such as Mohammad) would likely be categorised as a producer. Each of these is highly contextual to the religious practice at hand and will be determined by the norms of religious authority found within that practice.

One result of this, is that in this context authorities are not universally accepted. That has some interesting implications. Intentional co-identity, for instance, may not be reflexive. That is, whether notions of two divinities are intentionally co-identified may not be the same from practice to practice. Christianity may co-identify the divinity in the New Testament with the divinity in the old testament, while Judaism does not. Islam may identify the divinity in the Qur’an with the divinity in the Torah and the Bible, whereas Christianity and Judaism may not. We may, in the end, find that these are matters that cannot be settled independent of appeal to a particular religious norm of notions-network authority. Or we may think that this is something for those outside of those traditions to judge on the basis of how closely the

shared body of information across these contexts match. In this way, the info-centric approach is silent on whether different divinities should be co-identified.

5.5 Tracing ‘YHWH’

Let’s put this all together. Suppose a believer asserts ‘YHWH is powerful’. We want to know about the putative reference, intentional identity, and cognitive significance of this believer's utterance. We trace back their use of the term ‘YHWH’ to biblical stories in which YHWH sends a flood, speaks to Moses and so forth. We think of those narratives as thick representations, bringing about in the speaker a notion of ‘YHWH’ that is detailed in the set of information (both propositional and non-propositional) it contains through an imagining. There is a natural sense in which to think of this dossier of information as providing us with the cognitive significance of the term. This notion is connected to many other believers’ notions of ‘YHWH’ through a long and detailed notions-network, that supports a naming convention, used by many speakers to conditionally intentionally co-refer. We also find that the same notion network appears to support a number of other naming conventions such as ‘El’. At the head of that particular notion network are a number of producers. These may be the biblical authors, or they may predate them, or we may find a mix. What we think from then on, depends on the state of affairs that hold. Let's consider the possibilities.

- (1) The first possibility is that there is an object that is the dominant cause of the notions within the network with something like divine inspiration, religious experiences, true prophecy and so forth.
- (2) The second possibility is we run into blocks. The biblical authors were all labouring either under a similar delusion of religious experiences, or did not have any actual referential intentions.

What should we say in each of these cases? The second is a straightforward case of non-existence. If we find that the origin of all the producers’ notions which lead to the transfer information into the notions network were blocks, then we find that the divinity in question does not exist.

The first scenario is our case of existence. This is a little more complex. Because whether or not an object is the origin of the notions-network, or the origin of a sufficient number of the notions within the network is not entirely cut and dry if our ‘legitimate producers’ are not necessarily tied to reference recognition. That is, a significant amount of

misinformation can enter the network. The question is a matter of dominance – both in terms of quantity and importance. There are plenty of religious claims that if they turned out to be true would, in essence, hijack the notions network: particularly claims like ‘the bible exclusively is divinely inspired’. In this way successful reference is easy to identify if broadly speaking a single religious practice turned out to have “got things right” so to speak. But the theory also allows for looser ways in which we might think speakers successfully refer to a particular divinity. In this way the two possibilities considered aren’t two neat distinct scenarios but represent different ends of a spectrum of possible scenarios.

5.6 The Full Picture and it’s Advantages

Let’s set out where we have got to. When considering ordinary proper names for divinities like ‘YHWH’, we are interested in the religious stories told about them. This is because the notions-networks that support those name using practices are largely sustained by those religious stories. Those stories are thick representations which impart on the reader/listener information about those divinities that is both propositional and Franciscan. It is these stories that allow the religious practitioner to imaginatively engage in thought about those divinities. In this way the object directedness of thought about divinities is treated as more basic than the name using practice. Existence becomes a question of the object of thought and reference standing in a causal relation with the flow of information about that entity. How we identify and determine this is complex – those with linguistic authority are those with religious authority, and some judgement is required in terms of dominance. The downside is this gives us few clear answers to questions about intentional identity, and reference. The upside is this downside largely tracks with reality: it would be surprising if we found answers to complicated questions about divinities by way of a theory of reference.

If we cast our minds back to the problems I raised for a historical-cum-indexical account in Chapter Two for Alston, we find many of the problems raised answered here. Firstly, as this is in application to names for specific divinities, rather than the term ‘God’, issues of the informative nature of categorising specific divinities like ‘Brahma’ as ‘gods’ or ‘God’. Additionally, this also deals with issues of monotheisms independent of the Abrahamic faiths since, again, we are now in a context of specific ordinary proper names for divinities, rather than ‘God’ in general. Finally, the issue of orthographically distinct names has been dealt with since a notions network can sustain multiple name using practices.

Beyond the more basic problems I listed for Alston there are wider considerations. The key advantage of the info-centric approach is it gives a ready made account of the cognitive significance of terms for divinities, one that ties in well with the story about fictional imaginings and thick representations that has been told here. There is a pre-theoretic sense in which I think any good account of religious terms needs to be one that captures the orientation of religious thoughts about the things we use those terms to talk about. A large reason I find myself sceptical of so many previous philosophical attempts to define ‘God’ is there is this feeling that they aren’t *really* addressing the core of so many faiths. The benefit that looking at Stump’s narrative apologetics imparted was an account of *how* Christians think about the divinity that they worship. Approaching divinities from the direction of treating them as more analogous to thought and reference to fictional characters, rather than scientific hypotheses, is more grounded in the way religion is practised.

There were substantive happy consequences of this account too: it’s ability to explain difficulty in disentangling and delineating between divine entities and faiths, an explanation of the role of religious authority in determining the name using practices and the flow of information about divinities, explaining how and why it may not be possible to ‘define’ any particular divinity by listing the propositions that apply it, and with this an explanation as to why two religious believers who share in the same stories but who have wildly different propositional beliefs about an entity may still consider themselves as talking about the same, without relying on narrow contingent historical facts.

5.7 Concluding Remarks

All of the above does depend, to a degree, on the promise of a fully fleshed out theory of intentional identity within Friend and Perry’s framework. This is the subject of substantial philosophical debate. I will say this – I think broadly speaking something like Perry and Friend’s framework is on the right track. The specifics of how I fleshed it out need not constrain the proposal though they may shift the picture of the advantages and disadvantages. It is the biggest theoretical commitment I have made, largely due to the fact I think there is little way to make sense of the richness of religious beliefs, practices, and storytelling without a commitment to some way to capture the flow of information about divinities and intentional identity. Perhaps something more modest may be achieved by teasing apart these questions from a linguistic framework, but I suspect if we are pre-theoretically committed to a certain perspective on what people are doing when they are thinking about divinities, there

is little to be gained from not tying this to name using practices. And I do think that any theory that is suitably equipped to capture religious beliefs and practices is committed to this. Otherwise analysis of religious claims and belief will remain piecemeal and impoverished.

Thus, I have shown a version of info-centric direct references, combined with an account of thick imaginings, can work for names for divinities. The consequences of such a view are interesting. We find in it an explanation in the difficulty of delineating religious traditions, a role for religious authority, and most importantly a view of the significance of names for divinities that is placed in religious storytelling and imaginative engagement in the text. I consider one of the major benefits of this account is it tracks, far better than anything else we have considered, with pre-theoretic observations about religious practices.

6 The Pragmatics and Semantics of the Term ‘God’ in The Philosophy of Religion

We now have all the relevant pieces for a linguistic framework of the term ‘God’. In this chapter I argue that ‘God’ is best modelled as a title term. This can bring clarity to the

semantic and pragmatic relations between ‘God’, ‘god’, and other names for divinities, and that clarifies the relationship between my different offered ways of interpreting and using the term ‘God’ and the context in which they may be deployed. The result is a holistic framework for the variation we may find in the different ways in which the term ‘God’ is used. I argue that there is very little that is semantically entailed by the title term view that is not already required by the majority of proper name views we have looked at. Thus there is little cost associated with the title term view. There are, however, significant upsides. Not only does this track well with comparator terms, but it better captures the linguistic behaviour of the term ‘God’ while explaining confusions and inconsistencies in use. It performs better against counter examples than Oppy’s proposal. And most importantly, it gives a unified theory for ‘god’ and ‘God’.

6.1 All the parts in place

In Chapter Three I argued that the term ‘God’ is, in some important way, dependent on the term ‘god’, though I did not settle the matter of in what way. In Chapter Four I argued that ‘god’ is a family resemblance term applied to a category of religious entities. In the last chapter (Chapter Five) I developed an account of terms for specific divinities such as ‘YHWH’, ‘Ahura Mazdā’, and El. This account placed at the centre of it the role of imaginings and narrative to underpin our notions of divinities. These notions formed the network with which we could speak of the same divinities. We can picture these narratives as forming kinds of models of these specific divinities. So with all this in place, I think we finally have all the parts needed to provide an account of the term ‘God’ that conforms with the methodology I am interested in. What I have been building to here is a complete framework that treats ‘God’ as a title term.

6.2 ‘God’ as a title term revisited

Proper nouns (names) uniquely and rigidly designate specific individuals. Common nouns denote classes of things. Most of the views we have looked at model ‘God’ as a proper noun, with ‘god’ being a common noun. The various conflicting strategies for analysing the semantics of it looked at in Chapter One and Chapter Two which represent the two dominant strands of thought in philosophy of religion were focused either on assimilating ‘God’ to a definite description, or assimilating it to an Millian ordinary name with investigation into how the reference of such a term is fixed. How are we to define title terms? Little work has been done specifically on the semantics of title terms although there are a few working in a

similar context to myself that have made the following suggestions. In ‘Calling God “Father” A Theolinguistic Analysis’ Donald D Hook and Alvin F Kimel, Jr define title terms as:

a title is a formal descriptive term given to a person or being setting him or her apart in some distinctive way. It may be used either as a noun phrase in the third person or as a vocative. (1995, p.210)

Similarly in ‘God and Timelessness’ Nelson Pike describes title terms in the following way:

Grammatically, title-phrases are descriptive expressions that often do the work of proper names [i.e. function like a proper name] and that often appear in linguistic environments similar to those associated with proper names. ' (1970, p.29)

What they are agreed on therefore is that title terms are, by nature, descriptive but frequently linguistically behave like proper names dependent on both context and the speech act in which they are used. Additionally, both works take a special interest in the vocative emotive role of title terms considering this to be, while not unique to title phrases, a common feature that is important in this context.

6.2.1 The Descriptive Nature of Title Terms

The associated descriptive content, or rules of use, of title terms need not be substantial. While many title terms might be vocational (like ‘Bishop’), they may also be titles of attainment (like ‘Doctor’), or they may simply be titles of respect (like ‘your Honour’) (Hook & Kimmel 1995). The descriptive content I have in mind here is a far lesser requirement on the term ‘God’ than the proposal by Leftow whereby we were concerned with what metaphysical position would be involved in holding ‘the special office of God’. On the other side of things, the descriptive content I have in mind might be a greater requirement on the term ‘God’ than Oppy’s proposal whereby we were only concerned with descriptions insofar as they served as reference fixers and need only be, in some manner, associated with the term ‘God’.

It is uncontroversial that ‘god’ is a common noun – denoting a particular class of beings or forces. It is this relationship that allows us to reconsider the title view without creating an excessive burden of descriptivism: that is, if ‘God’ and ‘god’ are closely related, and ‘god’ is a common noun, we have ready made a way in which we can model ‘God’ as something other than a proper noun without importing extra philosophical burdens about the

“meaning” of the term ‘God’ that we do not already have to deal with for the purpose of analysing the term ‘god’.

6.2.2 An Oppy Inspired Version of the Title Term View

Consequently, on the title term view we can begin with the simple proposal that anything which we ascribe the title ‘God’ is a god. In fact, we need not go any farther than that if we do not wish to. Compare ‘God’ to ‘King’. In the uncapitalised form ‘king’ the descriptive content is something along the lines of ‘ruler of a state’. The capitalised form ‘King’ is one which is used as a vocative for speech acts (such as address), used with a modifier to denote a specific King such as ‘The King of England’, used in order to talk about the office in general such as ‘The King has the power to declare war’, or used without a modifier to refer to a unique individual in a context whereby the object of reference is already clearly identified.

It was previously suggested that the term ‘God’ is used for a special type of ‘god’. For instance, if we wanted to restate Oppy’s position in the language of the title term view, we might say of the term ‘God’, in the uncapitalised form ‘god’ the descriptive content is ‘a supernatural being or force that has and exercises power over the natural world but that is not, in turn, under the power of any higher ranking or more powerful category of beings or forces’. The capitalised form ‘God’ is the title form used in a context whereby the user takes there to be only one god – thus securing its widespread use to refer to a specific individual. However, as I already argued, I don’t think the monotheist/polytheist isn’t clear enough to sustain this kind of view. The point is that Oppy’s view *could* be adapted into a title term version.

6.3 Speech Acts & Presupposition

The key here is that title phrase *can* be used in order to function like a proper name, but this does not require the semantic content to uniquely refer. We do not need a special semantics for title terms. If we wish to develop a minimally committal version of the title term view it is easy to couch much of what I say under pragmatics rather than semantics. We may say that at minimum there is a conventionalised pragmatic practice associated with these terms.

The development of the term ‘God’ is strongly associated with the Abrahamic faiths, later being extended towards other types of monotheism. Where it is used outside of

Abrahamic context however we often find it in modified forms such as ‘The One God’, ‘The Supreme God’, ‘The Ultimate God’ and so forth. What these look like are attempts at disambiguation. In the Abrahamic faiths there are well established linguistic conventions that the use of the term ‘God’ within the relevant religious context (e.g. Judaism) can only be picking out one divinity. Outside of those contexts where multiple things answer to the term ‘god’, but there is one God that is in some way higher than the others, the term ‘God’ may nonetheless carry some ambiguity. If for example one were a practitioner of a kind of henotheistic belief system whereby there is a pantheon of gods, one god that the practitioner centres their faith around, petitions, makes offerings to, reveres and so forth, but that god is distinct from the highest ranking god in that pantheon the term ‘God’ in expressed by that practitioner may, outside of other context determining factors, be ambiguous between ‘The Supreme God’ and ‘The god they worship’ (this is perhaps confused by the fact that verbally spoken there is no way to determine if the utterance is ‘God’ or ‘god’). In this way we might think that the term ‘God’ can be used as a title to singularly refer where presuppositions, context, and other relevant features can be used in a particular speech act in order to pragmatically uniquely refer to a particular ‘god’.

I think there are two elements to the linguistic convention of the capitalised form of ‘God’. The first is that the term has conventionalised usage as a proper name to uniquely refer (speakers’ reference) to a particular divinity. When we talk of ‘God’ as a title term, we are essentially claiming it is a term with conventionalised rules for speakers to use it with referential intent rather than descriptive intent. This can be done in two ways. The first is a relational way – you stand in the right relation (this is the god you worship) to that divinity for your use of the title to pick out that god. The second is a presuppositional way. It trades on the assumptions either that there is in fact only one god and therefore God can be used to uniquely refer, or that the god in question is already determined by presuppositions (for instance conversational score keeping may determine that the ‘God’ under discussion is ‘YHWH’). The second is a little more complicated.

Due to strongly developed linguistic conventions around capitalisation – and the long tradition of the use of the term ‘God’ within Abrahamic faiths which then got extended to other monotheisms – conventional linguistic restrictions on ‘God’ (expressed in writing) came to be associated with both particular type of gods, and with expressing belief about particularly types of gods. While spoken ‘god’ and ‘God’ are not distinguishable from each other, there are several different capitalisation conventions in play. For instance, reverential

capitalisation is used within multiple religious contexts (not just for reference to divinities). Similarly, ‘The God of’ varies in its appearance as capitalised in application to the same divinity. Often, we find it in its uncapitalised form when appearing in texts describing a particular belief from the outside perspective – i.e. the god of is intended as a description. And capitalised when described from within a religious context – i.e. The God of is intended as a status/title. But these are not firm rules. And turns of phrase that include ‘supreme’, ‘ultimate’, and ‘creator’, are more often that not capitalised regardless of context. The idea then, that there is a hard line between ‘God’ and ‘god’ in terms of what they can be used to semantically express feels like a non-starter. Instead, we can say that ‘God’ is used as a title that carries the following three features – it can be used uniquely to refer whether via presupposition or verbally expressed disambiguation, – it can be used to express reverence, and – it can be used to express a relation between the user and the object named. This multifaceted function isn’t unusual for title terms.

6.3.1 Kinship Terms

Consider terms like ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘aunt’ etc. It can be argued that, under the definition of title terms we have looked at, kinship terms meet these criteria (Hook & Kimmel 1995). They are descriptive terms that may be used in a particular context bound sentence either as a noun phrase, or to do the work of a proper noun (Hook & Kimmel 1995). One can address their mother by ‘Mother’, or refer to one's mother as ‘Mother’. The term can also be modified by ‘my mother’ or ‘the mother of...’ and so forth. These terms *can* be used as uniquely referring titles. This example has a particular feature that, while I think is not unique to kinship terms, is most prominent in their use – that they communicate in their utterance not only something about that which is being described/addressed/referred to, but also something about the user of the term (Hook & Kimmel, 1995, pp. 210-211). That is, they are relational. When I utter the sentence ‘Mother is away on business’, I communicate the relationship which I stand to the object of reference (Hook & Kimmel, 1995, p.213).

Now not all titles are precisely like this although I think many display aspects of this. For instance, titles may be applicable by force of authority (linguistic or otherwise) – i.e. by nature of residing in England and/or being a British citizen I have a King. While standing in that relation to that King is not a requirement of using the title King – as using titles such as ‘King’ regardless of the relation held to the King is often considered a matter of propriety (i.e. this is analogous to reverential capitalisations) – the range of ways in which the title term

can be used by somebody living under the protectorate of a King is different to that in which it will be employed by somebody who stands outside of it. Most obviously I can conjoin Kings with possessive terms to refer to King Charles, whereas a US citizen in the US could not. Instead, they would need the formulation ‘The King of the United Kingdom’. This is something the term ‘God’ plainly has in common with title terms – turns of phrases such as ‘my God’ are common for those within a practice and the use of the term ‘God’ outside of a specific religious context frequently requires disambiguation through phrases like ‘The Christian God’ etc.

6.3.2 Not Wholly A Matter of Occupation

Leftow only talked of ‘God’ as a title term in relation to the ‘occupation’ it may signify. In contrast, I think that ‘God’ as a title term lies somewhere between kinship terms and occupation terms. If what I have said about needing to methodologically approach our definition of ‘god’ from an anthropological view is right, whereby the uniting threads of what we consider ‘god’ to be applicable to will have more to do with the historical practice of religious belief and our categorisation of religious practices (and less to do with any particular metaphysical proposal), then it follows that in large part our understandings of these terms will be based on a relation between religious believers and the objects/persons/forces their practices are built around. Concurrently, there are clearly some conventional restrictions on what qualifies as a ‘God’.

So we have three questions for the formulation of a title view: what is the relation that underwrites the use of the term ‘God’? What is the occupation that underwrites the use of the term ‘God’? And what is the relationship between the terms ‘God’ and ‘god’? I will keep my answers to these brief. As I have tried to emphasise, my greatest interest is in developing a better mapping of the conceptual ground for methodologies in philosophy of religion. Understanding the linguistic behaviour of the term ‘God’ may well be at odds with a clear and concise definition of ‘the meaning of the term ‘God’ and one wonderful feature of title terms is that they tend towards arbitrariness through being culturally and contextually bound to the practices in which their use is grounded.

6.4 Relational

To determine the relational aspect of the term ‘God’ we would need to gain a view of what is involved in religious practices and membership of religious groups. One of the most common suggestions (which we have already explored) is that of worship – to use the title

‘God’ for a divinity is in part to make that god an object of worship. But there may be other suggestions here – to make offerings to, to make requests of, and so forth. The possibilities go beyond the scope of this thesis. If there is concern at leaving this vague, I can only offer a comparison between ‘god’ and ‘father’. What is it to be a father to somebody? What is sufficient for them to be called ‘Father’ by their child? We could answer that it is to have the right biological relation, and many would prefer this as the ‘literal meaning’ elevating the scientific definition. However, does this trump the legal definition? Because there is certainly a legal underwriting of fatherhood that does not come with this requirement. But most importantly, we might say that people can, and frequently are, legitimately addressed as, called, referred to, by the term ‘Father’ by a child without bearing either of these more concrete statuses. Somebody can raise a child and perform the role of fatherhood in a household without either being the biological father, or the legal father. Of course, philosophical investigations into the features and practice of fatherhood are quite possible. But I suspect any attempt to precisely philosophically outline all the necessary and sufficient conditions for fatherhood of this type would be ill-fated. Just like ‘god’ we may think of ‘father’ as a family resemblance term. And in that context the rules governing the use of the word as a form of address could become equally flexible. We can talk about what kind of features are demonstrated by practices we consider to be god-centred religious practice. But we are unlikely to come up with anything as neat as something like Oppy’s proposed definition. Determining to call somebody ‘Father’ is, ultimately, a choice made by the child. And for those standing outside of that relationship whether they can be described as ‘The Father of x’ seems to depend both on the descriptive features of the term ‘father’ and on the choice of the child whether to call that person ‘Father’ – i.e. for what purpose are they being described as that person’s father? In the same way the family resemblance term ‘god’ and the religious practices of those who believe in a specific divine force, will jointly come to bear relevance on the use of the title term ‘God’ to refer to that divinity. Suffice to say I think it will do for now to say that one feature of the use of the title ‘God’ is it is usually reserved by religious believers for entities/persons/forces that are the centre of their religious practices which involve things such as worship, prayer, offerings and so forth.

The distinction here between the capitalised form and the non-capitalised form is a little confused. The terms ‘God’ and ‘god’ are generally used by English speaking religious believers in the context of religious practice. Religious texts do not tend to use ‘God’ unless it is disambiguated in the context of that text – i.e. it’s a monotheistic faith. Other elements of

religious practice tend to be verbally spoken. If somebody were to write their personal petition to any divinity down, I do not think there would be any linguistic rule or convention in the language that would preclude them using the term ‘God’ (‘Oh God, show me the Way’) in the same way that the capitalised form ‘Lord’ may be used (‘Oh Lord, show me the Way’), if the right kind of relation held – i.e. they believe that divinity to be a god and that god was a god they worship. Now, the rules of use around ‘God’ and ‘god’ both are exclusionary – i.e. there is a tendency not to employ them on their own as terms of address unless that is the only god the practitioner worships (though neither ‘god of...’ nor ‘God of’ follow this convention). However, I don’t think this rule is prescriptive. For instance, it historically might have been unusual to address two different individuals both as ‘Father’ – but there was nothing in the rules of use of the word Father that required it only to be used to address one person. Rather the tendency was the result of contingent facts (most people only had one individual who they might be inclined to call father), the need for disambiguation (even today in family scenarios with multiple fathers it is common to use different kinship terms for different individuals e.g. ‘Dad’, ‘Father’ etc), and the general implications those rules carry. But there are, I think, two other reasons for this tendency: normative constraints on the application of the term ‘God’, and the fact that gods are gods of things.

6.4.1 Occupation & Normative Constraints

Where the title term view has been proposed before it is usually characterised as a claim that to be ‘God’ is to hold a particular office. This is the point at which I think some of our theological restrictions come into play. Because ‘God’ tends to be reserved as a title for a particular kind of ‘god’. To use Oppy’s phraseology if a god ‘is merely a leader among peers’ (Oppy 2014, p.3) then we tend not to apply the term ‘God’. However, if a god is the ‘all important and supreme deity’ then we often do. This I think is strongly tied up with the monotheistic *implications* of the term ‘God’ (I say implications because if I am right this implication largely is a result of the fact that titles are, as a matter of fact, *used* as proper names and thus require contextual factors to identify the god in question, the main candidate possibility for this contextual factor being monotheism). If our relationship between ‘God’ and ‘god’ is to a degree an arbitrary result of linguistic conventions, then I do not think constraints on the application of the term ‘God’ to any particular gods are semantic. That is, it is not a conceptual requirement that ‘God’ only be used to refer to the most supreme god – but it is a convention. And I think that convention has a normative element. Namely, that the title term ‘God’ should not be given to any god that is not in some significant way elevated

above the others, such that any other thing (be that divine or earthly) is under the power of, and dependent on that divinity. The title ‘God’ has a special element of reverence to it that should not be granted to a divinity that is ‘merely a leader among peers’.

This isn’t peculiar to the term ‘God’, plenty of title terms demonstrate normative restrictions on who it is appropriate to grant that title to. An obvious case is ‘Saint’. The practice of applying ‘Saint’ varies across religious contexts involving different degrees of official recognition. But in order to be called ‘Saint’ or become a saint one must have lived a life of exceptional holiness, worthy of honour. Many would think it wrong to apply the word ‘Saint’ to those who do not meet this standard. We may think of ‘God’ as having a particularly restrictive normative constraint. But unlike Saint, this is not a restriction of having-been-earned, but a restriction of having-a-role. The question of what is entailed by the office of ‘God’ then, is largely one interested in the special kinds of roles that must be performed by a god which would make the application of the title ‘God’ appropriate. This is the kind of ‘special office’ that Leftow is interested in. Perhaps the title is for a god that has providence over all, that deserves a particular kind of worship, that is the ultimate source of everything and so on (Oppy, 2009, p.11-12). But crucially those are not conceptual or semantic restrictions, they are normative rules for linguistic conventions – ones that may change depending on the religious context in which the term is employed, and the religious orientation of those employing it. That said, there is one more substantive way in which we may think of the term ‘God’ having role based restrictions on its use that are, largely linguistic.

6.4.2 ‘God’ and ‘god’

Recall the things I outline as features of ‘god’ when analysing ‘god’ as a family resemblance term – I separated this into three parts relationality, object of worship and reverence, and power. So far my discussion of ‘God’ has not yet touched on power, and I think this is the last relevant element for consideration in the conventions governing its use as a title. Gods have power over things – they are gods of things. We can have gods of love, gods of war, gods of preservations and so forth. When ‘God’ appears on its own, without ‘of’ after it, in a context outside of certain speech acts such as address, one way of interpreting this is just ‘God’ in general, i.e. God of *everything*. This, I think, is a much better explanation than ‘the one and only god’. It not only avoids the problems Oppy was having with distinguishing between monotheisms and polytheisms, better tracking when we apply ‘God’

and when we do not in these faiths, but it also explains the inconsistent practices around capitalisation of ‘The God of’. In this way ‘God’ and ‘god’ are essentially the same term. Where we find god lowercase it is being used as a common noun, descriptively. Where we find God uppercase it is being used as a title. Where it is used as a title usually this is accompanied by clarification of what that divinity is God of, except in the case where they are God of everything, in which case no modification is needed.

This also tracks closely with comparator terms. Consider for example, the term ‘King’. We may use the term ‘King’ as an address (depending on cultural convention), we may use the term ‘The King’ in scenarios where the king in question is contextually determined – i.e. if I say ‘The King’ whilst being British in Britain, we might take the ‘of Britain’ part as a presupposition, or King as expressing a relationship between myself and the object of reference – i.e. King on its own could mean my king as in kingship I am under. (There are other options here such as treating it as an indexical and so forth but the specifics of that don’t really matter for my purposes). Or we may be specific as in ‘King of the United Kingdom’. There is no king of everything. Now when discussing divinities, it is harder for this process of disambiguation to take place without express clarification in the language. For I can be under many different divine jurisdictions. Kings are kings of territories and people. Gods can be gods of a specific people (as in some forms of Henotheism – i.e. ‘God of the Israelites’) or they may be gods of domains (as in god of preservation). In some contexts, we may think of the use of ‘God’ as being equivalent to a British person in Britain using ‘King’. It expresses the relationship of my-god. But the term ‘God’ on its own frequently gets used outside of such contexts – whereby there are no contextual factors that give a clear answer to ‘God of what?’. In these cases, it is equivalent to expressing ‘God’ unrestricted by a particular people, domain, or territory – ‘God of everything’.

What’s interesting is that which divinity actually is ‘God’ unrestricted by domain, people, or territory (if any) is contentious. This is why answers to questions like ‘Do you believe in God?’ often are followed by answers which clarify which religious practice one belongs to. It is comparable to living in a contested Kingship. If I say ‘I believe in God’ outside of any context I have most likely asserted that I believe there is a-god-of-everything but I have not clarified which of our candidate divinities I believe to be god-of-everything. Part of the reason this can cause confusion is the fact that if there is a-god-of-everything, then by default the metaphysical relation element holds they are my-god (in actuality), in virtue of the fact they are everyone’s-god. But this does not necessarily make them my-god in the

sense of being the god I believe in. ‘The Christian God’ for instance is, according to Christianity, god-of-everything, but only god-of-Christians in relational terms. We don’t usually get this kind of variance outside of religious contexts. To try and clarify all this, let us separate it all into variables.

6.4.3 The Varieties of Gods

At one level of analysis, we have specific divinities: ‘El’ etc. They have intentional identity in virtue of being connected by a notions network which supports the name using practice. At another level of analysis we have speakers. They may make use of a number of terms including names for divinities, common nouns like ‘god’, and title terms like ‘God’. Any use of a title term may be bound or unbound within the context of its utterance. If it is unbound then it must be being used to talk about the actual god-of-everything whoever they may be, if they exist. If it is bound it can either be explicit on the linguistic level i.e. ‘the God of’ or via presupposition. There are two ways in which it may be bound, either to a particular religious practice, or to a particular domain. For example, Vishnu (Proper Name) is the Hindu (practice binding) God (title) of preservation (domain binding). We might also have specific divinities that cross different practices whereby intentional identity is a matter of debate or indeterminate. For example, YHWH (Proper Name) is the Christian (practice binding) and the Jewish (practice binding) God (unbound domain). The fact that there are so many variables that contribute to the intended reference of ‘God’ and the intended meaning of utterances containing the term ‘God’ which frequently go presupposed is part of why discussion about ‘God’ can get so confused. It is hard to imagine a comparable term in any familiar contexts.

6.5 Between Oppy and Leftow

So where does my view stand in relation to Oppy’s and Leftow’s? The framing of ‘God’ as a title retains some of the benefit argued for by Leftow: most crucially his observation that we use the term ‘God’ in different ways and that this ambiguity points toward the title term view. In nearly all other respects I have diverged substantially from his account. As I have specified Leftow was particularly interested in thinking of God in occupational terms. He argues that the concept of God is one of being ‘an individual holding a special office’ and that this office ‘is that of ultimate reality’ (1998, sect 2). There is no discussion in Leftow’s work about the relationship between this title term and other terms used to talk of divinities. What Leftow is interested in is a linguistic proposal that can support

his metaphysical arguments within a particular theological context. There is no equivalent to this on my account; I have only sought to find a linguistic proposal that matches existing usage of the term ‘God’ across contexts. Moreover, Leftow offers no expansion on what is involved in the distinction between the uses of the term ‘God’ other than intended speech acts; in contrast the work I have done in Chapter Five clearly sets out the ways in which we might characterize a kind of direct reference to any number of proposed divinities that we call ‘God’. In sum, Leftow’s short proposal simply is not designed to do the same work as mine. However, I can accommodate him in the following way: to put Leftow’s work in my language – Leftow is interested in what would be involved in being ‘God’ unbound by domain. That is, he is interested in the god-of-everything (in actuality), not the hypothetical entities we may or may not call ‘God’ and the semantic and pragmatic rules governing the applicability of the term ‘God’ to those entities. Thus we can put Leftow’s work into my framework but my framework cannot be put into Leftow’s.

In many ways, my proposal has far more in common with Oppy’s. This is despite having an obvious point of contradiction in that I endorse the title term view and Oppy does not. Crucially we both significantly rely on the relationship between the term ‘God’ and ‘gods’ in order to develop our linguistic proposals. However, as argued in Chapter Three Oppy’s account was ill-equipped to deal with a number of things: it relied on an under-clarified distinction between conceptions and concepts, and it relied on too sharp a distinction between monotheism and polytheism. Due to this, I argued in Chapter Three that it failed to capture several cases of existing usage that I am interested in, particularly in cases of religious disagreement and cross practice dialogue.

My own proposal does not suffer these shortcomings. Firstly, I have developed significantly on Oppy’s remarks that perhaps ‘god’ is a family resemblance term in Chapter Four. Secondly, I have done away with the requirement that ‘God’ be ‘the one and only god’, and rather provided an alternative that ‘God’ (unbound by domain) be ‘the god of everything’. This change eliminates the need to argue for a sharp and, in my view unsubstantiated, distinction between monotheisms and polytheisms. Thirdly, the contribution of a mode of reference to specific divinities in Chapter Five facilitates the necessary alternative to relying on a distinction between conceptions and concepts by allowing for the shift to the title term view to do the substantive philosophical work in explaining both speaker’s reference and the relationship between speaker’s reference and religious practice. In this way, my proposal contains much more work on the pragmatics of ‘God’ than Oppy’s

does. The sum effect of this is that my own proposal has substantially more explanatory power than Oppy's.

6.6 The Benefits of the Title Term View

Having seen how my version of the title term view works, how it differs from both Leftow's and Oppy's, and the ways in which it builds upon some of Oppy's suggestions, I want to turn now to the identified reasons for ascribing to such a view. Here is where I hope to show its explanatory power, why it is preferable, and how it helps in the conceptual mapping of debates both in philosophy of religion and philosophical theology.

I think there are many things such an approach has going for it. I list them as follows:

- a) It gives a unified theory for 'god' and 'God'
- b) It explains the relationship between names for divine entities, which are ordinary proper names, and the term 'God'
- c) It captures the linguistic behaviour of the term 'God'
- d) It explains confused and inconsistent conventions
- e) It allows for a hierarchy of supernatural or divine entities

I will take each of these points one by one and hopefully as I do so you will start to see how the various pieces of the puzzle I have set out fall into place.

6.6.1 Unified Theory

The first part of what I want to say here is very straightforward. My title term view, like Oppy's, presents an analysis of the term 'God' that can unite all the different ways in which 'God' and 'god' are used. Since title terms are just common nouns that can be used as a proper name then there is no semantic distinction between 'god' and 'God'. This the starting point of departure from Oppy because on my title term view we can frame 'god' as merely the common noun form of 'God'. I have my analysis of 'god' as a family resemblance term that elucidated the following features: objects of worship, that exercise power, and are relational. Those three features mean to be a god, one must be a god of something, and some people (in the same way to be a king, one must be a king of something or some people).

6.6.2 The Relationship between 'God', 'god', and Divine Entities

We also now have a complete picture on the relationship between all of these terms. Names for divine entities are ordinary proper names. We may categorise those entities which hold the right relation, exercise power, and are objects of worship as ‘gods’. And in some cases, address them, or refer to them, *using* the title of ‘God’ or a bound title-description such as ‘God of’. The way in which we may do this exploits the same notions network as specific names for divinities do. If it is the case that I may use the term ‘YHWH’ to putatively refer to a specific divinity, then we can say the employment of the term ‘God’ as a putative referring term depends on the same mechanism of reference as ‘YHWH’ does, as well as a mode of indicating which divinity is in question, either by presupposition, modifiers to make the description definite, or a combination of the two.

6.6.3 Linguistic Behaviour

This is the area that receives most attention in debate over whether ‘God’ is a title term and I think the key focal point is frequently missed: usually the literature focuses on the grammatical space that ‘God’ occupies in a statement. And while modelling ‘God’ as a title term captures much of its grammatical behaviour, what often gets missed is what is being said with the phrases that demonstrate unusual grammatical structures is hard to parse under a proper name analysis. For instance, the question ‘which God’ can also be framed as ‘whose God’. Explaining away the formulation of ‘The God of the Israelites’, as Oppy does, as akin to ‘The Paris of the North’ feels cheap. God can be referred to using a possessive ‘my God’, something that we don’t *usually* think of being something we can do with proper names except in non-standard linguistic turns of phrases.

It explains the grammatical placement of the modifiers in the sentence, and the frequent use of the definite article in combination with ‘God’, especially in places where it feels like the role the modifiers is performing the task of disambiguation. In particular, consider the tendency to use ‘The Supreme God’ or ‘The Ultimate God’ to refer to divinities in henotheistic faiths. No theory we have looked at can really make sense of the redundancy of ‘Supreme’. Saying ‘The Supreme God’ or ‘The Ultimate God’ looks akin to saying ‘The Paris of France’. On my account it is simple to explain what the modifier is doing. Firstly, ‘God’ is just a title for gods, in the same way ‘Lord’ might be a title (or term of address) for lords. The use of the term ‘God’ as a proper name is dependent on it being contextually clear which ‘god’ is at question. Just as the use of ‘Lord’ as a referring term is dependent on it being clear which lord is in question. In a setting with multiple gods, with one god higher

than the other, adding ‘Supreme’ is a straightforward exercise in clarification whereby it may be in question which divinity is being referenced. Just as if there were multiple lords in a room one might add clarifiers which lord was being referenced. If there was a hierarchical Lord system one could easily use phraseology like ‘The Supreme Lord’.

6.6.4 Inconsistent Conventions

One possible worry here is the disanalogy between the term ‘God’ and other title terms I have compared it to. However, as I have already argued elsewhere, the grammatical rules surrounding the use of these terms as modes of reference are highly culturally variable. ‘King’ for instance, usually is followed by the proper name of the relevant king. Kinship terms tend to be combined with possessives where they are not used as terms of address (although strictly speaking this is not quite right either given they are used as terms of address between people who share in that kinship – e.g. siblings discussing their ‘mother’ may simply use ‘Mother’ as a referring term). We may say ‘Mr President’ but not ‘Mr Prime Minister’ and so forth.

One thing that is frequently raised is the definite article drops in and out of use when talking about ‘God’. Nelson Pike, one of the most notable proponents of something like the title term view, uses ‘Caesar’ as a paradigm comparator for the grammatical behaviour of the term ‘God’ (1970, p.30). ‘Caesar’ for some time functioned as a title for whoever was Emperor of Rome after Julius Caesar. Caesar was used ‘in the grammatical slot that would normally be occupied by a proper name’ (Pike 1970, p.30). It also looks like a proper name in that it is a singular referring expression without an article. We could say things like ‘Caesar, be merciful’ and ‘Caesar went riding in the afternoon’ (Pike 1970, p.30). But also use phrases like ‘Hadrian is Caesar’. The first two demonstrate the same grammatical form as ‘God’. But as with the term ‘God’, the last example shows why we can’t simply model ‘Caesar’ as a proper name. The comparator syntactically speaking is a little closer to the analysis of God than ‘King’, ‘Mother’, ‘Lord’ and so forth are.

I would like to emphasise that I think the syntactical arguments are largely overstated in the title term debate, especially given that many types of nouns and clauses can be occupied by the same grammatical spaces, and especially in the context of vocatives. What I think is the more interesting point is analysis of *what we are saying* when using ‘God’ in these kinds of places. For instance, consider the following:

Tallest man in the world, have patience with me (Brouw 1994, p.25)

The definite description ‘tallest man in the world’ is occupying the same grammatical space as ‘God’, in ‘God have mercy on me’. But the point is that the vocative is hard to make sense of without thinking the speaker has somebody *specific* in mind. That is, our speaker's intentions are what is at question here. Consider for instance somebody who, having belonged to no faith, prays in a moment of crisis to ‘God’: ‘God, Universe, whoever is out there, help me!’. In this case the speaker has descriptive intent. It is not their concern who holds the title of ‘God’, but that they hold that title. In other words the thing that determines ‘God’s ability to function as a proper name is not the grammatical place that it holds in a vocative or statement, but the referential intentions with which it is used. Because that is not the ordinary kind of prayer we find in most religious practices. Most religious practices involve having something more specific in mind when praying to ‘God’, i.e. having referential intentions. That being said, I do think that the title term view helps explain the inconsistent conventions that surround the use of ‘God’, such as questions about inconsistent capitalisation, inconsistent application of modifying terms, and the like.

6.6.5 Hierarchy

It also makes sense of the frequently observed dual nature of the term ‘God’ whereby it is often able to function both descriptively and referentially. When we say something like ‘Brahman is the supreme God’ we are saying something informative, and not in the same way as saying something like ‘Hesperus is Phosphorus’ whereby two independently known objects of reference are being co-identified. When we say ‘Brahman is the supreme God’ we are identifying the kind of thing Brahman is, fitting Brahman into a hierarchical system of divinities, identifying his place, and his *role* within that system. This trades on the fact that ‘god’ is a common noun.

The benefits of this view over, say, Oppy’s is that if it is the case that within a religious practice there can be both ‘God’ and ‘gods’, we need an alternative formulation to ‘the one and only god’. Conceiving of ‘God’ as a title term we use without specification of a domain is a neater explanation. It captures both the monotheistic intuition – that ‘God’ on its own feels closely tied to our idea of the one and only god, without being subject to the same kind of counter examples. So long as within the pantheon of gods, there is a god of everything, we can apply the title term ‘God’, although frequently to avoid possible confusion or ambiguity we still use clarifying terms such as ‘The Supreme’.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

A lot of territory has been covered in this chapter. I hope I have shown that the behaviour of term 'God' tracks closely with comparator terms that we can call title terms. Additionally, I have shown how this interpretation does not require a special semantics, but rather involves conventionalised pragmatic rules governing the use of the term 'God' to singularly refer. The benefits of such a view are numerous - explaining why our conventions around when we use 'God' and 'god' are inconsistent and why the grammatical behaviour of the term 'God' is peculiar. Furthermore, this has given us a unified theory of god-terms that is able to well account for counter examples to our best alternative. There is one task left to do, and that is to show how this account answers the puzzles I set out with, as well as those that developed along the way.

7 'God' and Philosophy of Religion

In this chapter I return to the beginning. I put all the components of the work I have done together, and show how my view can be deployed in order to answer the questions we set out with in the very beginning. I start by setting out all the details of the final account. I then demonstrate how the position developed in the last chapter can be deployed as a lens through which we can understand the different definitions and varied uses of the term 'God' that we have already surveyed. I argue the title-term framework can fruitfully be deployed to understand and interpret both religious disagreement and the confoundment that can occur in inter-religious dialogue. And I reflect on what this means for interpreting the existing philosophical landscape. My hope is that through this lens we can understand the use of 'God' across both the philosophical landscape, and more generally religious dialogue.

7.1 'God's Many Variables

The first thing I want to do is explicitly lay out the mechanisms that I put to work in the last chapter. There are a huge number of variables in play here.

A Names for divinities are singular putatively referring terms, the name using practice of which is supported by a corresponding notions-network.

B 'god' is a title term. When used as a common noun it is not usually capitalised. It is a family resemblance term. It is the category under which the divinities are subsumed. We apply it to objects that *are* worshipped, that *are* believed by some to hold power, and that *do* hold relational significance to those people.

C 'god' is usually capitalised to 'God' when it is used: as a proper name, as short form for the description 'the god of everything', and when it is used reverentially. It is also sometimes capitalised when it is used in a definite description.

D 'God' may be bound in two ways: to practice, and to domain

E This may be done explicitly on the linguistic level making the description more definite, or contextually by presupposition

F When God is linguistically practice bound it may take the form either 'The X(practice) God' or 'The God of X(practice)

G When God is linguistically domain bound it may take the form The 'X(domain) God' or 'The God of X(domain)

H When God is both linguistically practice and domain bound it may take the form 'The X(practice) God of X(domain)

I When 'God' is both practice and domain bound it is used as a proper name, otherwise it is a description

J 'God' is not usually domain bound by presupposition

K When 'God' is practice bound by presupposition this is usually because: either the speaker stands in a relation to a particular divinity in virtue of belonging to a particular practice, or the presupposition is determined by pre-established conversational/situational factors

L Believing a divinity to be a god ordinarily involves believing it to be worthy of/appropriate to worship (or to have some other religious orientation towards it) *and* believing it to hold power

From this we can see that argument about 'God' can happen on many levels: argument about whether an entity holds power, argument about whether an entity is worthy of worship, argument about whether an entity exists, argument about whether an entity would be worthy of worship *if* it existed and so forth. If we see Chapter Three as the launch point for my proposal, Chapter Four and Chapter Five as setting out necessary philosophical territory for my proposal, and Chapter One and Chapter Two as characterising dominant existing philosophical positions, then the first thing I need to do is place Chapter One and Chapter Two into my framework.

7.1.1 One Last Stop with the Omni-Definition

Consider my perspective on the omni-definition in contrast to Oppy's characterization of the omni-god definition. While Oppy merely stated this is a particular conception – I have a more detailed prospect. We can reframe the process of conceptual explication I described in Chapter One as based neither on the semantics of the term 'God', or even really the concept of 'God' as it is realised in any particular faith at all, but rather what its advocates would take to be to be a *true* 'God', for the title 'God' to be appropriately applied. This runs parallel to my argument about the normative constraint on the application of title terms. If I were to ask the question: what is it to be a king? I might get different kinds of answers. The first might be a mere observation of the things we have called kings have in common 'they control territory, armies etc'. This would be equivalent to the global atheists' project of attempting to

find the metaphysical feature all things we actually call ‘God’ or ‘god’ have in common. Or I might get answers of what it is to be a ‘rightful’ king – they have a particular blood lineage, they are chosen by God etc. I believe the project of PBT is involved in this latter task. Casting our minds back to when the title term view was first considered in Chapter Three, recall Oppy’s rejection of Sobel’s definition of ‘God’ as being the one and only *true* God; this is the same distinction. One is engaging in a descriptive task aimed at capturing the features the things we actually title ‘God’ have in common. The other is a prescriptive task aimed at investigating the features something would need in order to be rightfully titled ‘God’. This fits incredibly neatly with my case in Chapter One that PBT philosophers are deeply concerned with the question of what we *should* call ‘God’. We can state this in another way. Those engaging in the PBT project generally hold to a worship relation with that which they call ‘God’. The project of PBT is investigating what is involved in the office of holding the title of ‘God’ on the assumption that that relation they hold of worship is justified/ well founded.

To illustrate this, I want to return to an example that we looked at in Chapter One given by Morris:

Suppose we somehow discovered that a less than Anselmian being, an individual who was very powerful but not strictly omnipotent, very knowledgeable but not literally omniscient, and very dependable but not altogether immutable, etc., had created our universe and was responsible for the existence of intelligent life on earth. Suppose we found that he had been the one to call Abraham out of Ur, to speak to Moses, and to send the prophets. Suppose he had somehow become incarnate in the man Jesus, and that he will be the one responsible for giving eternal bliss to all who are properly related to him. Let him even sustain directly the very existence of the universe moment to moment. Would we rightly on a-priorist grounds refuse to call him ‘God’, just because he did not satisfy St. Anselm’s precise requirements. (1984, p.182-183)

I used this example in Chapter One to argue against the omni-definition. However, Morris in fact argues that if the existence of the omni-god is shown to be possible by PBT then the omni-god must exist in some world but given the fact that if the omnigod exists then the omni-god exists necessarily, he must exist in this scenario world too. Which means even where we discover the existence of ‘El’ it would still not be the thing which we should call ‘God’, since if it exists we should call ‘God’ and ‘El’ would be essentially a demiurge (1984).

Morris thinks that this would be ‘fully in accord with the proper religious usage’ (1984, p.184). In other words, some philosophers who endorse the omni-god view are quite explicit in expressing the idea that the omni-god is about the normative demand on what we should call ‘God’, what it would be to be the true God. This idea fits precisely into what I have said about the title term view.

7.1.2 One Last Visit with Alston

Recall I characterised Alston as really being concerned not with the application of a causal theory of reference, but in fact direct reference. He took direct reference to be more ‘fundamental’ to religious practices in that the performance of religious activities largely involved acts of worship, acts of address, acts of prayer, acts of reverence and so forth. One of the issues at stake here is that religious believers are not just worshipping ‘God’, whoever that may be. They have somebody or something much more specific in mind. On his account he based this ability to directly refer to religious experience. In my account in Chapter Five I developed a view, not dissimilar in spirit to his, of putative reference of specific divinities such as ‘YHWH’ and ‘Vishnu’ through name using conventions. These name using conventions I said are notions networks that provided the flow of information about those gods. One of the primary ways in which this is done is religious story telling (but there might be other ways such as ceremony). Now when this is placed within the title framework, I hope the reason I took the direction I did becomes clear. I argued that in relation to the term ‘God’, direct reference looked more like a matter of speaker’s reference, a job for pragmatics, not necessarily semantics (although again this depends on one's preferred semantic framework). The title term view provides us with exactly that. Because that is precisely what title terms are common nouns that *can be used* as proper names. Moreover, we have a conventionalised framework for how this mechanism works. In a religious context – for instance community prayer at church – I think it is quite fair to assume that presupposes the title ‘God’ is contextually bound on the religious practice variable. That is, the speakers using that term stand in a particular relation to a particular god, such that they believe the title term ‘God’ is applied to a specific god. This *is* an account of the speaker’s reference. The title term ‘God’ is being used pragmatically to directly putatively refer to a specific entity.

7.1.3 The God of Alston versus The Omni-God

The title term view can be used to wonderfully capture an ongoing debate about a distinction in Christian Theological Philosophy between The God of the Philosophers, and

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Permit me to quote at length a wonderful anecdote from Wierenga that illustrates this distinction;

In the late 1960s O.K. Bouwsma gave a public lecture on faith and reason at a college near Chicago. In this talk he extolled the virtues of faith and disparaged the role of reason in religion. His text, literally, was Hebrews 11, a passage which lauds as heroes of the faith such figures as Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others. The audience was left unclear about exactly what distinction Bouwsma was drawing between faith and reason and about exactly why reason was to be so disparaged. When pressed for further details, he merely repeated the examples, “Abraham left the land of his father; that’s faith”. Exasperated, one questioner asked about the Ontological Argument. At first Bouwsma feigned ignorance. The interlocutor persisted, “you know, that than which nothing greater can be conceived”. Bouwsma merely replied that the argument was unsound. The interlocutor continued, “What if someone were to discover a sound Ontological Argument? Wouldn’t reason then coincide with faith?” Bouwsma did not agree. “That still wouldn’t be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” he said. The questioner made one final attempt, “what if someone produced a sound version of the Ontological Argument and then a voice boomed from the sky, ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and I am that than which nothing greater can be conceived.’ What would you say then?” ““Congratulations”” Bouwsma replied. (2011, p. 139-140)

What’s going on here? If we cast our minds back to Chapter One, I argued that the PBT God is an explicated concept. In this chapter I have argued that we can think of this explicated concept as based not on a particular religious practice, but rather the normative constraint on the term ‘God’, namely that the term conveys a certain status, closely tied with worthiness of worship. On the title term view, it is most comparable to asking about what we would rightfully call ‘King’ (not what we actually call ‘king’ since there may be many people who hold that title whom we do not think are worthy of it). This was one of the features I laid out of titles – they are often used reverentially. Similarly it was one of the features often found in godhood – they are beings believed by some to be worthy of worship. On the pure explication view (within the Christian context) there would only be a one gap to be closed – sufficient similarity. That is, how close is the God of PBT to the God described in the Christian faith. On the explication, title term view there are now two. There is the normative question of what we *should* call ‘God’ and sufficient similarity,

Consider the stages of Bouwsma's responses. The first: 'the argument is unsound' is the simplest thing to do: engage with PBT on its own terms. If one could show that none of the methods of PBT work, or show that is somehow incoherent, then the project is deemed a failure and advocates must surrender it. This doesn't require us to assess the explication itself, though it may be a roundabout way of calling it unfruitful in that it is philosophically defective, but simply to conduct philosophical business as usual. The second response: "that still wouldn't be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". On the pure explication view this is a claim that the two concepts are not sufficiently similar. On the title term view it gets a little more interesting. We may say that the explication was based on a normative constraint imposed from outside of the moral framework of a particular religious practice. This could mean that even if the Anselmian conception were correct, within the Christian faith there is a normative demand against thinking of speaking of the Christian God in these terms: perhaps there is a morally obligation to see the Christian God through the lens of religious narratives over the lens of what we believe should rightfully be called 'God'. That is, we *should* think of God referentially, not descriptively. The reason the title term makes such an interpretation available to us, is precisely because there is a neat line drawn now between the descriptive features of the term 'God' and the referential uses of the term 'God'. The PBT philosophers *are* descriptivists, but the use of the term 'God' that is most common outside of the philosophy classroom is referential, not descriptive.

7.2 The Traditional Topics

With that understanding of the existing philosophical landscape in place, what does that mean for the Traditional Topics of existence debates and rationality of belief? I outlined in the introduction how, given these two topics are concerned with religious epistemology, they could benefit from the development of an account of the linguistic behaviour of the term 'God' that fits actual usage. I argued this because if the definitions we are using are not grounded in a kind of anthropological perspective whereby the aim is to do justice to religious beliefs we find in religious practices (rather than philosophical abstractions) then debates are likely to miss the real target of analysis.

7.2.1 Existence Debates

Let us reconsider the two possible directions we discussed taking on debates about existence. The first, outlined by Miller as the classic approach:

Philosophy is in general understood as define-your-terms-and-deduce-the-consequences, and philosophy of religion becomes in large measure the definition of “God” as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, Creator of the world and the critical examination of the traditional arguments for His existence (1986, p.4)

And the second, whereby instead of asking the question ‘does God exist?’, we ask ‘does ‘God’ refer?’ (Miller 1986, p.4). In this version we trace the ancestry of the term ‘God’ to find if its use ends in a Donnellian block. What can I say now about these two possibilities?

Well, unlike Miller, on the title term view there is in a way, a case for both of them – though each plays a substantially different role. Debate about the PBT ‘God’ and the traditionally associated targets are, in many ways, substantially missing their mark. What is at stake in those arguments is a particular conception of God as Oppy puts it, but it is more substantial than that. The arguments are about whether there could be an entity that holds the ‘Special Office’ of being God, when that Special Office is imagined in the most restrictive way – i.e. the normative constraints on proper application of the term ‘God’ are strict. Returning once more to the king analogy. If we believed that the only people who should be called ‘King’ (and correspondingly treated as kings) are people whom are chosen by God (and that is what makes them *rightful* Kings) – one way to argue against the existence of *rightful* Kings would be to argue that nobody is chosen by God. This would do very little to cast doubt on the existence of *rightful* Kings for people who believed to be a *rightful* king would be to have the right blood lineage, or the existence or nonexistence of any particular person who is called ‘King’. There is of course some disanalogy here since the individuals we call king’s existence doesn’t normally come up for debate, nor are we inclined to think there is any relationship between the *rightfulness* of Kings and their existence as individuals as we might with gods. However, at minimum it shows the traditional debates about the existence of any God to be extremely indirect.

There is a second type of general philosophical argument that likely gets closer to the mark. While the omni-definition is an explication that makes use of the evaluative stance, there is nothing precluding one that make use of the metaphysical stance. That is, a definition of ‘God’ that focuses more on the ability to exercise power. This perhaps gets closer to debates I haven’t covered about gods and causality. The basic idea is to focus on the ‘exercise power’ element we commonly find as a component of ‘God’ and ‘god’. The assertion of naturalism to argue for atheism may be reframed within these terms. And it perhaps goes

some way to explain why these are often the most successful and commonly used strategies for arguing for a form of global atheism. While it won't capture all conceptions of gods (namely naturalistic ones) it would cover a significant number, and certainly most of the versions with which atheists are concerned.

The second strategy of asking 'does 'God' refer' is better targeted at actual religious practices. But there is some ambiguity here now – since 'God' could refer to many different entities. The things within its scope of reference are those gods which are gods of everything. We already set out the reference conditions for particular gods in Chapter Five: do we find Donnellan blocks when looking for the entities that stand in the right relation to our notions networks? For this purpose – when arguing against the existence of specific divinities found within religious faiths we could be interested in a number of things. Yes, arguments against religious experience, but perhaps more importantly arguments against religious narratives. Not just in terms of accuracy but perhaps in showing those stories to be merely collective exercises in attempted sense-making.

To understand what I mean by this consider the shift from thinking of 'direct reference' in terms of religious experiences (which stand at the head of causal chains of reference) to thinking in terms of narratives and notions networks. Recall in the former framework of thinking we were interested in the critiques of religions (such as those offered by Feuerbach, Freud, or Nietzsche) that called into question the veridicality of religious experiences. Now in the latter we should find ourselves more interested in critiques of religious narratives that call into question their accuracy or truthfulness. One way to do this is to make the case that the intention or purpose of the narratives was not descriptive. That the stories told in religious practises played another function; they were intended to bring about a particular result that does not rely on them being factive. For instance, we might think that in the same way the last of Matravers' wolf stories (told in Chapter Five) was a fiction told to warn the villagers of the dangers of wolves, so too might religious stories be told for some specific purpose other than to communicate a religious truth (such as to warn, to control, to reassure, to promote charity and so forth). An example of the kind of argument that could be adapted for this context can be found in the paper "Storytelling as Adaptive Collective Sensemaking" by Bietti, Tilston & Bangerter in which they argue that:

The specific adaptive value of storytelling lies in making sense of non-routine, uncertain, or novel situations, thereby enabling the collaborative development of

previously acquired skills and knowledge, but also promoting social cohesion by strengthening intra-group identity and clarifying intergroup relations. In this function, story-telling acts as social glue... (2019, p.711)

Arguments such as could work in the same way that the psychological arguments discussed in Chapter Two might: they could be used to provide a compelling alternative picture of why religious stories are told, and perhaps go even further than this by critiquing those reasons altogether. I find it interesting that while such arguments are not common in the Philosophy of Religion canon, they are quite frequently deployed in debates about God in other contexts. My analysis lends credence to this instinct, since it places greater philosophical importance on narratives and notions networks, and points to this as a promising possible direction for debates over existence within the context of this framework.

7.2.2 The Rationality of Belief

What does all the above mean for debates about the rationality of belief? We can separate this into two parts. The first relates to the existence debates. If what I have said above is right, then Miller was right - “critique” style arguments have a much larger role in debates both over existence and over rationality of belief that they are often given credit for. Because the strand of thought that is more concerned with the history of religion and the psychological desire to believe is much more likely to target the kind of processes that are involved in religious orientation towards divinities. That is, given the role of narrative, imagining, and storytelling in determining what religious belief is about, critiques that call into question both those processes and the results of those processes (including ethical results) give rise to more doubt about the existence of divinities and principally our reasons for believing in those divinities. The second relates to religious diversity and the delineation of religious traditions. Recall the 2015 debate that set the ground for this thesis. One thing that was at question was how far does religious diversity undermine rational belief in God. If it is the case that there are a multitude of different divinities whose existence is mutually exclusive with one another then we may think this gives us greater reason to doubt the existence of any one of them than radical disagreement about the nature of a single divinity would. What my account has to say on this is complex - there is no clear answer. Perhaps though, it might give us reason to be, at minimum, not religious exclusivists. But to delve into this further what we really need to cover is the implications of my semantic and pragmatic account of the term ‘God’ for the topic of religious diversity. It is this I turn to now.

7.2.3 Religious Diversity

The first question I asked in relation to religious diversity was: how can we parse talk of God across religious contexts that appears to assume the term is being used in the same way with the common talk about believing in different Gods? How to understand talk phrases like ‘MY God’ and the radical variation that comes with that even within the same religious practise. And how to do this without meaning proliferation? This was perhaps my greatest concern throughout the thesis – making sense of god-talk in a way that actually makes sense. It is no coincidence then that this is the thing my thesis is best placed to do.

Firstly, when we consider intra-religious dialogue we have a simple answer, albeit with a great deal of complexity in the underlying system. Participation in the same notions-network supports the name using practice. The information associated with divinities often comes from shared stories and practices. It is therefore, at minimum usually a presupposition that the uses of the term ‘God’ between two participants of the same practise intentionally conditionally co-refer in virtue of being supported by the same notions network. This does require that the divinity referred to be the dominant source of the information within that network – though it does not require that information be largely true of the object. Additionally when comparing beliefs about that divinity we may find that two believers with wildly different looking conceptions of that divinity in terms of propositional claims, share in a way the same kind of relationship with that divinity, potentially implying similar Franciscan imaginings or knowledge. When the term ‘God’ appears in this context is being used by speakers in place of a proper name in order to putatively pragmatically refer to a particular divinity. None of this requires the slightest degree of meaning variation. The term ‘God’ means the same thing to both speakers, though the significance of the term may deviate between the two, and is being used with the same referential intentions.

When it comes to inter-religious dialogue, there is a sense in which the term ‘God’ can be used in the same way – namely for the god with domain over everything, whoever that may be. When the term is used with descriptive intentions, there is no question to the matter, if it refers then speakers using the term with descriptive intentions will necessarily co-refer. Now, where it is used with referential intentions things are a bit more challenging. There is a sense in which we could simply be paying pretence at co-intentional identity. But alternatively, given what I have said about the fuzziness involved in being ‘the dominant source of information’ for a notions network, and potential differences in beliefs about who

‘legitimate producers’ may be – there is also a very real sense in which people belonging to different practises are likely to consider it an open question as to whether they do, or not, co-refer (if they refer) when using the term ‘God’. In such circumstances, people may prefer to talk as if they do co-refer.

7.2.4 Religious Disagreement

If we reconsider the questions I started with about the Abrahamic faiths:

- 1 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews refer to the same God?
- 2 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews mean the same thing by the term ‘God’?
- 3 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews believe in the same God?
- 4 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews worship the same God?
- 5 Do Muslims, Christians, and Jews pray to the same God?(de Ridder & van Woudenberg, 2014)

We have answered the first two. The answer to question one is ‘maybe’ – it depends on two things. Firstly, if the term ‘God’ is being used with descriptive intentions then yes, co-reference is secured. But this is not what was really implied by the question, which was about whether those using the terms with referential intentions co-refer. The answer to this is maybe – it largely depends on how we characterise and weight ‘dominant source of information’. Though this may be a disappointing answer I also think it is a correct one. I don’t think that is the kind of thing we should be looking to philosophy of language to answer. The answer to question two on my view is a resounding yes. This is, again, a happy result. It explains how radical religious disagreement is substantive (we are not just talking past each other) without entailing a set of reasonably implausible additional linguistic conclusions.

What about the last three? In the introduction I called them paradigmatically illocutionary acts. In this chapter I have outlined how terms like ‘God’ are used like proper names in the vocative. I think the answers to three to five depend mostly on the second part of the answer to one. That is, it depends. It depends on whether the referential use of the term

‘God’ by those belonging to different practises do in fact, co-refer. If there is nothing that answers to ‘God’ then I think there’s simply no clear answer. If there is something that answers to ‘God’ then its an open question – it depends on whether that thing is the dominant source of information across multiple notions networks. We may however want to add a little extra here, especially on question four. Because particularly when it comes to *worship* we may think that successful worship isn’t just about successfully thinking of an entity, but also believing the right things of that entity. Even if it were the case, for instance, that we were inclined to place more weighted dominance on those things that Abrahamic faiths share in common, and given the historical connection, think that it is possible that an entity exists who is the dominant source of information in the notions network that supports the name using practices in each, it would still surely be the case that some, or all, of those notions networks contained a significant amount of information. We might think that worship involves not only directedness at that entity, but also directedness at that entity *for the right reasons*. For imagine, if it turned out that such an entity did exist but they were not, say, particularly forgiving, then believers inclined to worship that entity for forgiving them, may nonetheless fail. In the case of non-existence I suppose all of these questions are, in a way, matters of inclination and judgement. Ultimately these considerations go beyond the scope of my thesis. But it’s interesting to see how the specifics play out in relation to my proposal. Which brings me onto the final puzzle I considered at the start of the thesis. Does this work have implications for the more novel areas of philosophy focused on pluralism and toleration?

7.2.5 Pluralism & toleration

Recall the brief discussion of pluralists works such as Hick’s. One thing that was raised was the feeling that Hick’s proposals are a kind of invention that cannot truly capture existing religious practices. One thing I had in mind was a concern that subscription to views like Hick’s required abandonment of belief in the content of many ordinary religious statements. Now this remains the case of course, nothing I could have written here would have changed that. But we might think my picture rather undermines the importance of that if the aim is to think about, refer to, and worship a particular entity. There are a couple of reasons for that. For one, we might consider the Franciscan information associated with our notion-networks of more importance than the Dominican. For another, we might be persuaded that accounts such as Hicks still belong to pre-existing notions network. But most importantly, we might think of Hick’s proposal as an ameliorative definition. That is, a good thing to mean by ‘God’. Good according to our pre-existing views about worship, good

according to the things religious narratives have taught us, and the like. And if there is no worry that those who subscribe to the omni-definition of God, assuming one accepts my argument it is an explication, that they fail somehow to talk of the divinity they antecedently believed in, then I see no more no more reason to worry the same thing about an ameliorative definition.

7.3 Thesis Conclusion

I hope to have given a broad understanding of how the framework I have developed can be used in characterising the landscape of philosophical theology. The benefit of such a view is its substantive explanatory power. While competing theories have often tried to explain away other uses of the term ‘God’, in my view none of these are conceptually or linguistically confused, though many may not have a grasp on where their use of the term ‘God’ stands in relation to other religious concepts. The holistic account I have given can make sense of the inconsistencies, the variation, and the breadth of literature on ‘God’. We can use it to solve puzzles about inter and intra religious dialogue: or to show what argument for or against religious belief is applicable in what context.

Beyond this, one thing I sincerely hope is that I have presented a compelling case, not just for my own preferred semantic and pragmatic framework for the term ‘God’ but, more importantly, the importance of such an investigation, undergone from the right methodological stance, to Philosophy of Religion. Philosophy of Religion has long been dominated by a particular tradition, focused on metaphysical investigations and the consequences of those for debates about existence. Open a philosophy text book on debates about God and you’ll often find the first things you learn to be the Cosmological Argument, The Ontological Argument, and The Problem of Evil. But so much of the conceptual framework used in those debates is derived from a particular strand of Philosophical Theology. When we take a step back, this represents a tiny fraction of the ways in which we may approach topics about God. Through study of the term itself many of the possibilities have been uncovered. Perhaps we should be giving more attention to narrative philosophy of religion. Perhaps we should be giving more attention to cross-cultural comparative philosophy of religion. Perhaps we should be giving more attention to ameliorative projects within philosophy of religion. Exploring the possibilities of ameliorative definitions of ‘gods’ and ‘God’ is, I think, perhaps one of the most exciting directions my thesis points in. But regardless, the conclusion of this thesis is that all of these areas of study stand to improve our

understanding of where the traditional debates in philosophy of religion about 'God' fit into the broader picture. Most importantly, we need to understand how we are using a term like 'God' and what can be done with it if we want to argue about the thing it names.

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