

# Life-Orienting Stories

*“For human subjects the world is not experienced, at least in a rich or interesting way, apart from stories.” (John Haught<sup>1</sup>)*

*“It is by finding ourselves placed within a particular drama that we come to know our role, our part, our lines in life – how we are to act, why, and what meaning that has in a larger scheme of reality.” (Christian Smith<sup>2</sup>)*

Imagine that you wake up some morning in an unfamiliar house. You have no memory of arriving at the house and no idea of why you are there. A woman comes to the door of your room and tells you that the house is a clinic, and she is your doctor. She informs you that you have apparently experienced some kind of trauma, resulting in memory loss of events since early childhood. You were brought to the house the previous evening in a state of confusion. The head of the clinic examined you and assigned you to her. She says that she will be looking in on you regularly and gives you some medications and instructions, stressing the importance of following the instructions carefully. Despite your confusion, her manner gives you confidence that you are being well cared for. Accepting what she has said, you set about to follow your doctor's orders. On subsequent days you meet other residents of the clinic who speak highly of the place and with great respect for the clinic head. Some give personal testimonials of their own progress. Everyone gives you encouragement to be confident that the prescribed regimen will restore you to health.

A few weeks later, however, while you are walking on the grounds, a man whom you take to be an employee of the clinic pulls you aside and delivers a quiet, but insistent, warning that something ominous is going on. He

presents you with evidence that an imposter has replaced the true head of the clinic and put people with questionable backgrounds on the medical staff. He claims that your memory loss is very likely drug-induced and hints that people on the clinic staff are pursuing some nefarious purposes, perhaps working for your enemies. For the moment you are apparently being kept out of the way, but when they no longer need you, your life may be in danger. You should cease taking the prescribed medication and take an alternative medicine, which he slips into your hand, claiming it will bring you in a few weeks to a state of clarity. He stresses the importance of getting away from this place as soon as possible and offers to help you escape to a place of safety, where you will find a community to provide support.

While you are puzzling over this new development, you return to your room and fall into a dream-like state. In this state a figure, claiming to be yourself, appears and tells you that you are a professor of clinical psychology. According to this account, you have been engaged in a series of experiments, connected with producing deep hypnosis. In early experiments you have discovered ways of experiencing very vivid scenarios. The people you meet in these scenarios and the situations experienced are convincing enough that you have no trouble entering into and participating in them, but there is some danger that you may get permanently sucked into these hypnotic scenarios and be unable to return. So the vision messenger is a fail-safe device for helping you get out. You are to practice a series of meditative techniques that will remind you of your true situation and eventually allow you to withdraw from the quasi-reality produced by deep hypnosis.

Needless to say, this parade of conflicting messages leaves you thoroughly disoriented. You are not sure what to believe. Furthermore, you are faced with the immediate, possibly urgent, practical question of what to do next. Accepting the wrong account could lead to misguided action, and it might even prove disastrous, but waiting until you are sure which account is correct could also produce unfortunate consequences. You need some background story that will enable you to comprehend the nature of the situation you face and evaluate your options, but it is not immediately apparent what story to accept.

Now expand the house. You find yourself an inhabitant of planet earth. You have come to this place without any memory of how you arrived or why you are here. As you grow up, your parents teach you particular ways of thinking and behaving that enable you to navigate your world and regulate your activities. Included in their teaching is the claim that you are a creation of God and that God has put you here for a good purpose. They

tell you emphatically that obeying God's commands and finding your place in God's plan are vitally important. Others in the community to which you belong reinforce these teachings. As you grow older, however, you come to realize that not everyone has received the same lessons. Some people have been taught things about God and the human situation that differ subtly, or even markedly, from what you have been taught. Furthermore, you encounter a few people who reject the whole idea of being placed here by God. You have come to exist in this universe, they claim, as a byproduct of a physical process that has no purposes or plans. You need to accept this fact, they urge, and leave behind comforting fairy tales of a loving Creator in the sky.

At first you dismiss these alternative stories and cling to your own. But as you mature, you find yourself somewhat confused and disoriented by the conflicting accounts. It seems to make an important difference what account you accept. Different ways of understanding your situation lead to different conclusions about what is valuable and what kind of life to live. But reflecting on the diverse beliefs that people hold makes you wonder whether there is any way of reaching the truth. Other people, you realize, seem just as attached to their own background stories as you have been to yours, and when you are challenged to prove that the teachings you have been relying on are correct, you find yourself at a loss. You are faced with the very practical problem of acting on the best understanding you can attain, and settling on such an understanding is not something you can put off indefinitely, for what kind of life will you live while you are waiting for the truth to become apparent?

### **Life-Orienting Beliefs**

It is not merely simple curiosity or the urge for intellectual mastery that propels you to look for a frame of reference that will enable you to comprehend the meaning of your situation. It is rather the need to orient yourself so that you can order your life. It would be nice to have a kind of roadmap and tour guide to help you make sense of what you are doing and give you some understanding of what to expect. Or if you cannot obtain such detailed instructions, it would at least be helpful to have some sort of general explanatory account of the human condition. Without some plausible way of construing the nature of your situation, you are likely to be lost as you try to find your way through life.

Most people have had the experience of getting lost. When we get lost, we need some way to find our bearings: a familiar landmark, a path that we think leads to the river, directions from a local, a map that shows our location. By such devices we attempt to alleviate our confusion with regard to where we are and attain the means to get to where we want to go. When we realize that we are lost, the belief that a certain direction is north could function as an *orienting belief*, a belief that enables us to get our bearings and formulate a course of action. To be disoriented in such a situation is to be left without sufficient understanding to develop a coherent plan for reaching more familiar territory. Of course, a particular orienting belief might turn out to be incorrect, but when we need to act, there may be few viable options but to rely on some understanding of our situation, even if it is adopted only provisionally.

Losing our sense of where we are spatially is only one kind of disorientation. A person might wake up from a coma, having lost a sense of what day, or even what year it is, unable to orient herself with regard to time. Someone might develop a disease such as Alzheimer's and become confused about the identity of close friends and relatives, losing a kind of social orientation. An individual in an alien cultural situation might become disoriented because of the absence of a shared understanding of the meaning of common practices or gestures.

Some of the beliefs we rely on for orientation transcend the needs of particular situations. We utilize them to find our way around in life. These *life-orienting beliefs* include some understanding of the human situation and of the ethical norms we should live by. An important source for such beliefs is found in teachings deriving from various religious traditions. These traditions propose answers to such questions as, "Who am I?" "How does human life fit in some larger scheme of things?" "What is important in life?" "How should I treat other people?" "How can I deal with suffering?" Such answers become understandable within the context of the particular tradition's *life-orienting story*, which links an account of what is ultimately real with a particular way of living.<sup>3</sup>

There are other sources for life-orienting stories besides religious traditions. In subsequent chapters I will be discussing some nonreligious orienting narratives that function as alternative ways of integrating a fundamental picture of reality with an account of what is worth doing and worth aspiring to. But for most of humanity, religious traditions have been the primary source of the orienting dramas in terms of which people understand their lives. The orienting stories of developed religious traditions typically contain

a diagnosis of a problem that keeps human beings from achieving harmony with the nature of things. Religions offer prescriptions for dealing with the problem that involve following a designated path conducive to achieving a superior mode of life. Explaining the problem and the ideal typically involves some account of a reality beyond the reach of ordinary sense experience. Traditions develop particular ways of conceiving this reality and describing how to orient one's life in relation to it.

It is possible for a life-orienting story to be relatively bare in terms of specific guidance; however, the stories of developed religious traditions tend to provide a good deal of instruction about how to live. In both explicit and implicit ways, these traditions define for adherents the standards that ought to govern their choices, the priorities that should claim their attention, and the attitudes and character traits that they need to develop. Furthermore, they stimulate a range of motivations to live out the way of life that the story presents as an object of aspiration.

A life-orienting story is like a lens through which one looks to find a particular way of living intelligible and attractive. Events looked at through the lens of different orienting stories can have very different meanings. (Think of the difference involved in understanding what is happening through the lens of the therapeutic story or the paranoid story or the hypnotic adventure story at the beginning of the chapter.) While some may say that different stories are just different ways of looking at the same facts, the story a person accepts helps to determine what will be taken as a fact. Furthermore, an action that seems reasonable and obvious from the point of view of someone utilizing one story might seem bizarre and unintelligible from the point of view of someone with an alternative story.

If we think of the orienting story as like a lens, the lens is not to be imagined as a pair of glasses that can easily be taken off and put on, but more like a semi-permanent implant. Someone who habitually uses the categories of a particular religious tradition to order experience may find it easy or natural to construe the meanings of events in terms conducive to that tradition's story, while finding it difficult even to imagine how things might seem from the viewpoint of an alternative story. Even when we are able to imagine a very different understanding of life, we may not be able to entertain it as a real possibility for us.

While it is possible to move from one life-orienting story to a different one, these stories would not achieve their function if we were frequently able to switch. We need ways to conceive our identity and order our life that are relatively stable. We can within limits modify our understanding of the

orienting story we are using, but losing the story altogether is like a major trauma. Hence, as we use a life-orienting story, it typically remains unquestioned unless it becomes unwieldy as we attempt to live out the kind of life it supports or is destabilized by encounters with competitive stories that weaken our confidence in it. Even then, the story that has shaped our understanding may not be easily abandoned, since the prospect of changing from one fundamental orienting story to another calls for a major shift both in how we think and in how we live.

## **Belief in God**

Some people's story about life makes use of the idea of God. In fact some people have difficulty telling their own story without referring to God. Their theological vocabulary is crucial to explaining their identity and the deeper meaning of their everyday activities. For these people belief in God is a life-orienting belief that is connected with a structured way of understanding who they are, what they are doing, and what is worth doing. To lose their belief in God would not be a minor modification in their thinking. It would be more like an upheaval in the way they perceive ordinary events and construe the meaning of their activities.

Obviously not everyone who claims to believe in God has the kind of belief that means this much. It is possible to hold a belief in a supernatural reality that has little relevance for our thought or behavior. David Hume compared belief in God to the belief that an elderly relative, whom you have never met, has left you an estate.<sup>4</sup> If you think that you have such a benefactor, Hume claimed, this remote sort of being could not be the object of genuine emotional responses. Nor is the existence or nonexistence of such a being particularly relevant to the question of how to live your life. For many people the idea of God is a hypothetical creator, who set the universe with its law-like structures in motion, but has no real involvement in it. They could decide that there is no such deity, and not much of practical importance would have to change.

By way of contrast, consider the belief of Socrates. One of the charges against Socrates at his trial in ancient Athens was not believing in the gods, or perhaps not believing in the right gods. Part of Socrates' defense involved telling the story of how he began the kind of behavior that made people want to get rid of him. He describes how he came to view his activities as

expressions of a mission that had been assigned to him by God, one that he carried on at considerable personal cost. Given this understanding, if the authorities of the city should offer to drop the charges against him in exchange for a promise not to continue his mission to examine people for their pretense of wisdom and virtue and to challenge them for exhibiting concerns for money and reputation that crowded out more important values, he would have to decline. His orders come from a higher authority, and he must continue his god-given calling.<sup>5</sup>

Toward the end of Socrates' defense, he replies directly to the charge of not believing in the gods with the assertion that he does believe – and in a deeper sense than any of his accusers believe.<sup>6</sup> The kind of belief Socrates affirms has resulted in an extraordinarily demanding quest to fulfill his divinely given mission, wherever it may lead. He has adopted a way of understanding his situation that occupies his time and shapes his identity. In contrast to orthodox believers who assent to the standard doctrines of the city, but treat those doctrines like a theory with only peripheral connections to their central concerns, Socrates lives out his belief. It is a vital part of a story that provides an orientation, structuring his understanding of who he is and what he needs to be doing.

## **Religious Belief and Its Counterfeits**

Sometimes people confuse the kind of belief that functions to orient an individual in life with the kind of belief that can be held at arm's length. This confusion is common with regard to belief in God. Instead of discussing belief in God in the religiously significant sense, we substitute unwittingly the question of whether to accept God as a metaphysical hypothesis. But the question of whether a being called God is needed to explain the physical universe is not the same as the question of whether to accept an orienting story in which the concept of God plays a fundamental role. One question is basically theoretical in nature; we can consider it as thinkers who are dealing with a kind of intellectual puzzle. The other question is practical; we approach it as active agents who need an orienting story to order our lives.

It is sometimes thought that while there may be more to belief in God than acceptance of a theoretical hypothesis, we can examine this belief by thinking of the metaphysical hypothesis as a kind of pared down core. But

if the idea of God arises fundamentally in the context of seeking a life orientation, the most compelling sources of belief may be considerations whose significance is apparent from a practical point of view, but drop out when we focus on the theoretical question of what is needed to explain natural phenomena. One who has accepted the idea of God, as part of a life-orienting story, need not have an opinion about the value of the idea for metaphysical theorizing. Conversely, someone who finds the idea useful for constructing a metaphysical account may have little use for the idea as part of an orientation for a way of life.

People who come to believe in God in a religiously significant way ordinarily do so as the result of being exposed to teachings from religious communities that convey to them a fundamental orienting story that elaborates a particular understanding of what is real, what is important, and what is meaningful. Sometimes such a story is accepted on the basis of confidence in those who relate it. But for the story to take root, people need to find a kind of resonance between the religious account and their own experience. Making a religious story your own involves more than intellectual assent to its truth; it means coming to understand the events of your life in the light of the orienting story and aspiring to live the kind of life that understanding renders fitting. When the life-orienting story is a theistic one, the person who has his or her life-world shaped by the story believes in God.

Acquiring this kind of belief is not a matter of adopting the hypothesis of God to explain the natural world and then considering some god-story. Response to a story that provides practical orientation is the primary source of belief in God, and any theorizing about the idea of God or reflecting on whether accepting the existence of God would be justified by reasoning from observations of the natural world is secondary. A believer whose experience has been shaped by a theistic life-orienting story may find reflection about order in the world or the contingent nature of physical things to lead to satisfying ways of thinking about the god encountered through the story, but that is very different from viewing these lines of thought to be the basis for belief in God. If we speak of a basis at all, it will be in the lived experience of a normative order that is structured by a theistic life-orienting story.

To speak of how people acquire belief in God and find it confirmed in their experience is not to deny the possibility of rational reflection on that belief. However, I will be arguing throughout this book that the most central form of reflection about a religiously significant belief in God is reflection about how to live. Genuine belief in God is something that we display through involvement in a particular orienting drama, and to consider that belief is to



consider whether we can enter into or sustain such an involvement. This sort of reflection is different from evaluating a purely theoretical hypothesis. For one thing we approach a potential life-orienting story from the perspective of someone who already lives on the basis of some understanding of our life situation. The issue is not whether to accept a particular story or go without one, but whether to stick with the story we are using or to try to restructure our lives in terms of a different story. Furthermore, we confront this kind of issue as interested parties who are vitally concerned with understanding our lives in a way that makes sense. This intimate connection between believing and our way of life tends to be obscured when we disconnect the idea of God from the practical context in which belief in God arises.

### **Alternative Stories**

If we lived in a world where only one ultimate orienting story had any plausibility, the question of whether to accept it would not arise. But in our world whatever stories we have been taught or come to accept, we are aware of alternative stories. While we may rule out many of these religious and nonreligious options on various grounds, more than one viable competitor are likely to remain. Our position is analogous to that of the person at the beginning of this chapter who is presented with multiple ways of understanding the puzzling situation, but with no obvious procedure for determining which to accept.

In such a situation many people follow the strategy of holding to the story they have been taught, abandoning it only if it is found to be unworkable in practice. But unlike other eras in which you could simply take your own story for granted because everyone around you was taking it for granted, the modern era presents us with a pluralistic world in which it is difficult to avoid coming into contact with people who have significantly different understandings. While these encounters may or may not result in doubt, they make it more difficult to regard one's own views with the same sense of certainty. Reflective people, even if they do hold fast to a familiar story or retain their story with some modifications, find it hard to avoid considering why they should accept this story rather than another.

We can ask this question at different levels. One level is whether to accept a particular story, such as the Christian story or a particular version of the Christian story. But it is also possible to raise the question at a more general

level. For example, “Why accept a religious story, as opposed to a naturalistic one?” While it is next to impossible to give an uncontroversial definition of religion and religious ways of life, I would suggest generally that religious orienting stories tend to appeal to a reality that is beyond what is typically accessible through ordinary sensory experience, and naturalistic accounts reflect the view that our descriptions of reality should stay close to the empirically observable.<sup>7</sup>

The naturalistic intuition is that there is something excessive and unreliable about appeals that posit something out of the reach of ordinary sensory observation. Is there a corresponding religious intuition? Perhaps it is the idea that getting a deep understanding requires us to go beyond what we find on the surface. Plato’s story of the cave compares the world given in ordinary sense experience to a realm of shadows in relation to a deeper reality. Hindu thought characterizes ordinary experience as having the illusory status of *maya*. We live in a dreamlike sort of realm that hides something more fundamental. In each case the suggestion is that we can be led astray if we take a kind of surface presentation as ultimately real. We need to look beyond the appearances to a more basic level of reality.

From a naturalistic perspective this way of thinking sounds like an open door to endless flights of fancy. If we license claims to realities inaccessible to empirical testability, we lose the prospect of being able objectively to distinguish between truth and speculation. However, someone who has felt the attraction of a religious vision of reality may be equally convinced that adopting naturalistic modes of thought is like putting on blinders that keep us from awareness of deeper meanings. Such a person might suspect that limiting reality to what we can verify empirically is likely to result in missing whatever does not conform to our testing procedures.

But why should anyone think that there is something mysterious or hidden or beyond the purview of ordinary sense experience? Perhaps it is not so much thinking it in the abstract as it is encountering stories referring to the transcendent that seem to provide a kind of intelligibility to the human situation. Many kinds of experience can suggest a transcendent dimension. When a story of the transcendent is available, it can provide a satisfying way of making sense of these experiences. Additionally, religious stories satisfy a persistent human urge to make sense of our lives in terms of our value aspirations. When a story tells us how ultimate justice will be done or how human fulfillment is possible, it is speaking to matters that concern us. If it takes something transcendent to fit our value aspirations with reality, our concerns give us motivation to entertain such a possibility.

The kinds of experiences that might suggest transcendence are numerous. They include such things as visionary experiences, meditative experiences of a unity behind diversity, moments of fearful awe at something majestic, a sudden insight that has a transforming effect, the sense of being guided in a time of crisis, an overwhelming awareness of beauty. It is not that these experiences cannot be explained in some way compatible with naturalistic intuitions. It is rather that they can strongly suggest that there is more going on than what appears on the surface. When an orienting story with transcendent categories is available, it can seem compelling as a way to understand such experiences. Sociologist Peter Berger tells of a psychoanalyst friend who had orthodox Freudian views of religion. Berger asked him if he ever had doubts about his account of religion. After some hesitation he replied that he had doubts whenever he listened to the choral portion of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the prospect of ordering these intimations of a transcendent dimension, some religious stories appeal to a persistent human longing to find our lives intelligible in a way that satisfies our value aspirations. We can think that human suffering has neither rationale nor remedy. But a well-known religious story tells us that it is a product of distorted craving that can be overcome by a path leading to the egoless state of Nirvana. We can regard the events of our lives as lacking in meaning or significance, but in a certain kind of religious story they are portrayed as part of a process by which a benevolent creator seeks to transform us from egocentric beings, trapped in our own follies, to persons who are fully free to love. In each case the background story appeals to a deep longing for finding orientation in terms of an order we can regard as worthy. In other words what is sought is a kind of union between our understanding of the facts and our valuing nature.

Of course, such a longing is not a reason for thinking the story that satisfies it is true. Reality may be out of tune with human longings for this kind of intelligibility. But what is the appropriate attitude toward this sort of longing? We could distrust it, thinking that anything other than our ability to assess evidence is irrelevant to the question of truth. However, in a famous discussion William James suggests that the concern to eliminate the influence of what he calls our passionate nature from our quest for truth seems to derive itself from the passion for a kind of certainty that is free from the risk of error.<sup>9</sup> That passion, he argues, as it manifests itself in the demand that we should suspend judgment on any matter that is not confirmed by evidential considerations, endorses a procedure that is neither

accurate as an account of how any of us think, nor of how we should think. We justifiably rely on aspects of our nature other than our ability to consider evidence in our pursuit of truth.

One of the examples James cites has to do with belief in moral truths. All of us are taught that there are ways we ought to behave and ways we should not behave. We learn, for example, that telling lies is generally forbidden and that showing compassion is generally a good thing. At some point we may reflect on our moral beliefs with a skeptical eye, wondering whether our ideas of goodness or obligation are only “odd biological phenomena” or whether there is real moral truth that we need to recognize as authoritative. It is well known that a person can be a moral skeptic, reducing apparent truth claims about the moral realm to something that lacks a compelling authority over us, and it is difficult to see how someone who assumes a distrustful attitude toward the capacity for recognizing moral truths can be shown undeniable evidence to the contrary. If there are moral realities, it may take a kind of trusting attitude to bring us in touch with them. As James puts it, “If your heart does not *want* a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one.”<sup>10</sup>

The point is not that receptiveness to moral reality creates that reality, but that a kind of receptiveness is needed for recognizing it. Similarly, James posits that our recognition of religious truth could depend on a receptive attitude toward it. Religious stories present to us visions of life in which human values are brought into a kind of harmony with our understanding of the nature of things. The question of whether or not there is a transcendent order that makes such a harmony possible is something we are unlikely to be able to decide on the basis of publicly accessible evidence. Yet whether we believe in such a reality and orient our lives in accordance with that belief could make a major difference in how we live.

So if someone is presented with a religious life-orienting story that satisfies the urge to make sense of the world in value terms and finds that she has a strong inclination to believe the story, should she veto that inclination on the grounds that the evidence doesn't settle the matter? While such a choice is an apt response to the fear of error, that fear cannot be assuaged without risking the loss of truth and the loss of the kind of life that may be in the truth. If there is something about the nature of reality with the potential to fulfill the longings for the kind of intelligible order that religious stories describe, giving veto power to the fear of being wrong or the fear that it may be “too good to be true” could keep us from a way of life that might constitute our deepest fulfillment.

If we consider whether there is a dimension of reality beyond the empirical order as a theoretical question, we may think that the appropriate response is, "Who knows?" But the claims about transempirical realities come to us in the context of stories that purport to provide orientation for a way of life. In that context we cannot simply shrug off the question. We will either live as if we believed in some kind of transcendent order, or we will live as if we do not. So when we encounter a religious story that offers orientation in terms of an appeal to the transcendent, the central question is not whether we have a foolproof way to establish the existence of such transempirical realities. It is whether we have found a way of living that does a better job of orienting us so as to render our experiential reality intelligible and motivate us to live in accordance with the values we find compelling.

### **Orienting Stories and Truth**

Of course, not every orienting story is one that we can or should entertain. Starting from background beliefs that we assume to be well established, we will find some stories too implausible or unlikely to be considered. Even people who accept a religious orienting story may find many other religious stories to be outlandish. Someone whose thinking is shaped by a naturalistic point of view may find no religious life-orienting stories worthy of serious consideration. On the other hand, someone whose imagination has been captured by a religious vision may have difficulty finding any plausibility in a naturalistic account.

Trying to evaluate someone else's orienting story is difficult for a variety of reasons. One is that it is difficult to achieve a genuine understanding of a point of view that is alien to your own. It takes effort to try to imagine how someone could think so differently, and often we are content to reject alien ideas on the basis of a superficial understanding that relies on relatively uncharitable interpretations. Another reason is that we are apt to take for granted a great many things that would be regarded as questionable or false by someone with a different orienting story. We absorb from our communal context a variety of ideas that become *de facto* starting points of our thinking. If we come to question some of these ideas, there will always be others that it does not occur to us to question. Even if we become aware that a particular starting point is contestable, we may be unable to take an alternative seriously.

Despite these difficulties we sometimes do make an effort to listen to others' stories and examine our own. Sometimes we even abandon an orienting story that has been fundamental to our own understanding and adopt an alternative one. But the process of trying to get at the truth is not nearly as neat as in areas where there are more or less agreed upon ways to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Noting the difficulty of getting decisive verification or falsification, some philosophers have concluded that when we get to the point of talking about ultimate orienting stories, we are no longer talking about truth.<sup>11</sup> But such a conclusion is often connected with an overly idealized notion of what truth-seeking involves or a privileging of truths that are easy to come by over those that we struggle to acquire.

When people reject particular orienting stories, they often do so on grounds that sound very much like evaluations of truth claims. A story is judged implausible because it flies in the face of obvious facts. For example, suppose it posits an account of creation of the world that conflicts with overwhelming scientific evidence. Often such criticisms turn out not to be the last word. A defender of the story might suggest that the version that contradicts science contains elements that are not essential to the religious view. All of this sounds very much as if the question of truth is being taken seriously. Reformulating an account that does not square with agreed-upon facts is often a reasonable way of proceeding.

It is easy to underestimate the capacity of religious traditions to reflect on and adjust their stories. While some religious communities have exhibited relatively little interest in revising their accounts to deal with the range of human experience or to cohere with new understandings, developed religious traditions are often remarkably resilient in reinterpreting their stories to adapt to changing circumstances or knowledge. A theistic tradition, expounded in terms of an overly simplistic idea that obedience to God means prosperity and disobedience means punishment, faces obvious pressure to rethink the idea in the light of the observation that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. A long-lasting tradition may come to view some of its earlier beliefs and practices as primitive and superstitious. It may, for example, reject portrayals of God that are clearly present in its own sacred texts as anthropomorphisms that need to be understood in less literal ways. Religions that show themselves incapable of this kind of reflection risk ceasing to exist, and those that do survive often acquire intellectual resources for responding to potential objections.

Some might see this tendency to revise an orienting story to accommodate recalcitrant facts as a determined effort to hang onto the story without

being willing to consider whether it is true. Undoubtedly it is often just that, but on the other hand, recognizing the need to reformulate beliefs in the light of problematic data can be an expression of a concern for truth. If you are convinced of the correctness of a view, it is often an intellectual virtue not to discard it too quickly, but to explore the possibility that objections arise from simplistic understandings of what the view means. The need for some degree of tenacity is particularly understandable when we are dealing with orienting beliefs that structure our practical life. Holding on to a basic orienting story is often inseparable from holding on to a stable identity.

Furthermore, in practical terms rejecting a life-orienting story makes sense only when we are aware of a superior alternative. A person might be very aware of difficulties in a particular story, but find no alternative to be as believable. Additionally, we sometimes find ourselves in a position, like that portrayed at the beginning of the chapter, of needing to commit ourselves to some story and act on the basis of the understanding it provides. In the process we may find the perspective we have adopted increasingly compelling or we may discover that it has become increasingly cumbersome and implausible. Only rarely, however, is either experience like encountering evidence that makes it clear, once and for all, that the story is correct (or incorrect). Our pursuit of the kind of truth that matters most to us is not typically so simple.

With regard to many of the beliefs that matter most to us, we proceed by forming interpretations that seem plausible and adjusting our interpretations in the light of experience and reflection. In the realm of interpersonal experience we are constantly forming interpretations of the meanings of others' actions or intentions that furnish a basis for our own response. I may, for example, believe that someone I work with is rigid and uncooperative and regulate my own behavior accordingly. Sometimes we revise our interpretations and come to an understanding we regard as superior. What I took to be rigidity is actually a function of having certain core convictions – on many matters there is ample flexibility. This sort of reinterpretation in pursuit of deeper understanding is a feature of our practical beliefs that may be missed if we think of seeking truth only in terms of gaining indisputable verifications or falsifications. In the interpersonal realm the truth that we act on is rarely so indisputable that an alternative interpretation could not be defended. Yet we are obliged to act on the basis of judgments we find plausible.

As we seek fuller insight, we are understandably reluctant to abandon beliefs that have served to orient us. Consider the case of a wife who has

adopted the orienting belief that her husband loves her. It might be a belief around which much of her life is organized. Presumably she has some evidence in his behavior to confirm the belief. But insofar as the belief provides a kind of orientation that structures her understanding of events, she will not continually treat the belief as an object of examination. But suppose questions arise from some things the husband does or fails to do. There are situations in which the evidence against his love may be overwhelming enough that the belief, and the orientation that goes with it, ought to be abandoned. But it is also possible in some circumstances to imagine the wife revising her paradigm of love as too limited, perhaps even learning to recognize in her husband a deeper and unexpected kind of love. Similarly, someone who has gained some confidence in the orienting story of a particular religious tradition may expect that within the tradition are deeper understandings than the particular ones she has mastered. Past experiences of working through puzzlement might strengthen this kind of confidence.

We are not in a position to construct our life-orienting stories from the ground up. When we try to consider fundamental components of our story, we inevitably do so from a standpoint constituted by assumptions that might be questioned. Someone using a theistic story may consider whether God exists, just as someone using a naturalistic story may consider whether physical categories are genuinely ultimate. But in either case the question will be considered from the point of view of what seems plausible, and our judgments of plausibility are shaped both by assumptions we find difficult to question as well as assumptions that we are not even aware of using. The aspiration to certify our starting points from a point of view that is beyond question can never quite be satisfied.

Nevertheless, we come to trust the stories that orient us. As we habitually adopt the patterns of thought a particular story calls for, we either develop confidence in those patterns or we lose confidence, sometimes even to the extent that our capacity to use the story is compromised. But the question of when it is reasonable to hold onto a story and when we ought to abandon it for an alternative is not one for which a clear-cut and indisputable decision procedure is available. Dealing with doubts about a story that has structured our way of life is often intensely personal, and the perspective from which we think about such matters is not one we can expect everyone to share.

Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote a journal of his thoughts following the tragic death of his son in a mountain-climbing accident. In the journal he reveals a struggle in trying to come to terms with the death and to reconcile it with his belief in a loving God. In the midst of his questioning,



some of his friends suggested that he scrap the idea of God, which seemed to be contributing to his turmoil. Wolterstorff's reply to the suggestion was that he was unable to stop believing. The belief, he reported, springs up irresistibly.<sup>12</sup>

We cannot simply turn on or turn off the confidence we develop in life-orienting stories. For these stories to perform their orienting function, the patterns of interpretation they call for need to penetrate deeply, forming cognitive and emotional habits. There are, of course, people who profess to live by a story that is only loosely connected with the life they are actually living. Tolstoy tells of an incident in his teenaged years when he dropped his religious practice because of the realization that he no longer believed what he had assumed he believed. The collapse of his faith was more like the realization that there was only a pretense of faith that was unconnected with the rest of his life.<sup>13</sup> But for someone who has relied on a story to shape his or her life, puzzling life experiences are often insufficient to override a confidence that arises from finding in a story the key to understanding what is significant and what is valuable.

### **Fallibilism**

You may be convinced that your life-orienting story is true. You may have overwhelming confidence in it. You have, so to speak, bet your life on it. But could you be wrong? If orienting stories are neither true nor false and anybody's story is as good as anyone else's, we don't need to worry about the possibility of being mistaken. But if we regard these stories as matters of truth and start to make judgments about which stories are closer to the truth and which should be rejected as false, we have to face up to the risk of getting it wrong. With regard to life-orienting stories, whether religious or nonreligious, human beings are limited and prone to error.

Even if you believe that you have attached yourself to a religious tradition that is an infallible source of truth, this tradition will have to be explained and understood by fallible interpreters. With regard to any major religion, we find not just one account of what the religion means, but many. So if some version of Buddhism or Judaism is true, which one is it? Even if we can reach agreement about some of the basics of any authoritative tradition, there are still disputes about how these understandings should be put into practice. Some Muslims understand their sacred texts to authorize

suicide bombs against civilians, and some Muslims judge the activity to be a repudiation of their religion. Some Jews find biblical authorization for Israelite territorial claims extending from Egypt to Syria, and other Jews reject such claims. Even the clearest teachings have to be applied by fallible human beings.

The recognition “I could be wrong” about some of the basics around which I have organized my life need not keep anyone from seeking truth and gaining confidence in the truth we believe we have found. It doesn’t need to keep us from making judgments about views we think are in error. But especially when we are talking about fundamental orienting stories, the realization of our fallibility might suggest the appropriateness of caution about condescending attitudes toward others who may also be seeking truth. I may be absolutely convinced that the Christian story provides the key to understanding the human condition and committed to helping others see things this way. But that does not justify me in regarding those I cannot convince as unworthy of my respect.

On the other hand, some people think that the way to show respect for others who have very different fundamental beliefs is to treat all such beliefs as equally legitimate. None are more true or false than any others. However, this position results in a kind of pseudo tolerance that does not take seriously the people you are purporting to respect. You can make all religious beliefs true only by reinterpreting them in a way that renders them unrecognizable to the people who hold them. The willingness to engage in civil discourse that disagrees with another’s view, but treats it seriously, can be a greater sign of respect than refusing to acknowledge that a disputable truth claim has been made.

While there is a risk of being wrong about a life-orienting story, it is a risk we cannot avoid. As the parable at the beginning of the chapter suggests, we need to act on the basis of some life-orienting story. We can afford to remain uncommitted about many questions, but we do not have the option of being uncommitted about how to live, and ways of life that maintain neutrality regarding contestable claims about reality are hard to come by. Our attempts to withhold judgment on an issue whenever we lack theoretical certainty are sabotaged by the need to act. The understanding displayed in our mode of life will effectively override our stances of pretended neutrality. For example, if we decide to withhold judgment about God, we will most likely shape our lives in accordance with a picture of reality that does not include God. In practical terms we will live as if God does not exist or as if God’s existence makes no difference.

We may or may not be aware of the pictures of reality that shape our behavior and govern our sense of what we are doing. When you are looking through a lens, you tend not to notice the lens itself. When we become aware of the lens, and aware of the fact that not everyone is using the same lens, we may be tempted to throw up our hands at the futility of knowing for sure. Or we may get on with the business of living by the story that convinces us, realizing that there is no better alternative than making our own the story we find compelling.

### Notes

- 1 John Haught, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46. The use of this quotation as an epigraph has been accepted as fair dealing by Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Christian Smith, *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78. The use of this quotation as an epigraph is by permission of Oxford University Press.
- 3 What I am calling a life-orienting story resembles what some authors call a worldview. My account is influenced primarily by sociological discussions of the importance of narrative for human understanding of what is real or significant. See, for example, Christian Smith, 63–94. A worldview is an abstract representation of what functions practically more as a background narrative. Philosophical discussions of narrative include Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1–3, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984, 1985, 1988) and Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 204–25. There is a vast literature on the topic of narrative, including authors who are skeptical of the value of some uses of this category.
- 4 David Hume, *New Letters of David Hume*, eds. R. Kilbansky and E. C. Mossner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 13.
- 5 Plato, *Apology* (29d) in *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Four Dialogues*, ed. Shane Weller (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1992), 30.
- 6 Plato, *Apology* (35d), 36.
- 7 William James characterizes the religious life as consisting of “the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto.” *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1961), 59.
- 8 Peter Berger, *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 2.

- 9 William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 717–35.
- 10 James, "The Will to Believe," 730.
- 11 D. Z. Phillips is a prominent example of philosophers who have used ideas suggested in Wittgenstein to develop nonrealist accounts of religious beliefs. On his view talk about God expresses a particular attitude or perspective on human life, but does not refer to a transcendent reality. For an interesting critical discussion of philosophers who have applied Wittgenstein's thought to religious language, see Felicity McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone – Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2001). Another helpful discussion of issues related to a realist interpretation of theism may be found in Peter Byrne, *God and Realism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003).
- 12 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament For a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 76–7.
- 13 Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 19–21.