

# PROVIDING FUNCTIONAL ANALYSES OF RELIGIOUS MENTAL STATES

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FUNCTIONALISM REMAINS ONE of the most popular candidates among philosophers for a theory of the nature of mental states. In this paper I will attempt to analyze a certain class of “data”, viz. Christian and Buddhist religious mental states (RMSs) through the functionalist hypothesis. We have reason to think this an especially difficult task for functionalism, since the functional view of mind appears *prima facie* extremely distant from, for example, the Cartesian dualism of many Christians. I doubt many Christians would readily accept that the soul’s existence or nonexistence does not matter, provided that something in the mind performs its causal role. In addition, the *truth* of religious beliefs is extremely important to those who hold them—far more so than in standard doxastic practices—while functionalism disregards issues of truth to focus on beliefs’ causes and effects. On the other hand, the “good works” doctrine of Roman Catholicism, for example, i.e. that good behavior must accompany faith, provides an externalist view that accords well with functionalism. I shall begin by arguing that the wide variety of religious behavior presents insurmountable difficulties for behavioral (output-only) analysis, and suggest that functional (input *and* output) analysis may fare better. However, the functional inputs to RMSs exhibit too great a variety to provide determinate criteria. Finally I will introduce the promising concept of “secondary religious beliefs”, i.e. religious beliefs about the functional properties of RMSs. Incorporating the content of these beliefs would make my project vastly easier; I try to do so without presuming the truth of any given religion. I conclude that RMSs, as we think of them, *are* susceptible to functionalist analysis if we permit an unusual class of “conditional” causal properties. If we do not, I suggest, RMSs will constitute anomalous data for functionalism, damaging its credentials as a theory of the mind.

## **Problems with Braithwaite’s View and Behavioral Analysis**

My project is a successor to a paper of Braithwaite’s: both aim to provide criteria for religious beliefs in terms of a powerful contemporary theory of mind. Braithwaite attempted a verificationist analysis of religious beliefs, taking as a premise the principle that the meaning of any statement is given by its method of verification. In particular, belief statements are verified by observing the believer’s

behavior. Braithwaite appears to regard RMSs other than beliefs, such as mystical experiences, as behavior stemming from the beliefs. He argued that religious assertions imply only that the believer “is subscribing to a policy of action” (Braithwaite 78) or an “intention to behave”. The intended behavior may include “an inner life” of mental states and must be “subsumable under a sufficiently general principle to be a moral one, together with the implicit or explicit statement, but not the assertion, of certain stories.” Braithwaite thus considers the alleged bodies of theological fact a collection of parables or fictional paradigms of the ethical life to which the “believer” aspires, rather than as objects of belief. Entertaining the stories somehow psychologically brings about intention to behave “religiously”.

If we accepted Braithwaite’s view, we could define religious beliefs as intentions or dispositions to behave in certain ways, verifiable through behavioral observation. His success would render my project unnecessary: we would not need to attempt functional analysis in terms of combinations of mental states. Unfortunately, the general loss of confidence in verificationism highlights the implausibility of his view. The intention to behave in accordance with Christian virtue, and the citing of Christian stories, for example, is clearly not sufficient to make one a Christian: many good Hindus, Buddhists and atheists could possess the relevant intention and tell the right stories. Thus Braithwaite’s analysis does not appear to provide a sufficient condition for religious belief; Swinburne argues that he fails equally to provide a necessary condition. For someone may utter sincerely a “credal sentence”, suggests Swinburne, along the lines of “I believe that there is a God, although I doubt whether he’s very interested in me; but anyway I don’t intend to do anything about it now” (Swinburne 87). Such a man would have a religious belief without intending to follow a religious behavioral policy, constituting a second counterexample to Braithwaite’s behavioral hypothesis.

These considerations lead us to a general problem for RMS-analyses based solely on behavior: possessing a given mental state does not guarantee any particular sort of behavior on the part of the subject. This seems an especially salient point in the case of Christian religious beliefs. Perhaps within the Buddhist faith all beings that have achieved *Nirvana* behave in fairly similar ways, but we could not claim this of all Christians in history. There seems to be little behavioral overlap between, say, a rural Church of England pensioner and a member of the “Children of God”, although they arguably share the corpus of Christian belief. Even if it were possible to isolate a general behavioral core of Christianity, perhaps in accordance with the Catholic “good works” doctrine, Swinburne’s apathetic Christian provides a logical

counterexample to any such criteria.<sup>1</sup> It looks as though we need to take into account a whole package of mental and perhaps non-mental information about a subject before attempting to predict the behavior in which his RMSs will manifest themselves; hence my adoption of a functionalist approach.

Braithwaite's allegiance to verificationism led him to embrace a radically unusual view of religious beliefs. Many contemporary readers would blame the verificationist approach itself for the problems verificationists encounter. In the same way, difficulties for my project could elicit either of two responses. I could, like Braithwaite, adopt an unusual but theoretically convenient view of religious beliefs; alternatively I might question the credentials of functionalism. I will in fact argue that we can functionally define RMSs as we usually think of them, provided that we permit a particular interpretation (or perhaps modification) of functionalism. First, however, we need to define the initial functionalist hypothesis.

### **The Functionalist Hypothesis**

Block ("What is Functionalism") lays down guidelines for functional analysis: we explain a system by breaking it up into its component parts and describing their capacities and integration. Thus the functionalist theory of the mind usually characterizes mental states in terms of their causal relations to (sensory) inputs, (behavioral) outputs, and other mental states. These relations ideally can be represented in a machine table. Functionalism allows "multiple realizability" so we need not assume that only humans can have RMSs.<sup>2</sup> Block has also drawn a distinction between two possible sub-strategies of functional analysis: analytical "Functionalism" (AF) and "Psychofunctionalism" (PF). AF states that the causal essence of a mental state is analytically associated with it, PF that causal essences must be discovered by empirical enquiry. To illustrate, we would probably say that it takes considerable scientific knowledge for a person to understand the causal essence of the term "electron". Before we have studied physics we cannot provide a detailed causal definition. Contrast with this the case of "poison"—we do not need to study any poisons before concluding that their causal essence lies in their ability to kill when ingested. Both forms of functionalism allow for multiple physical realizations of mental states. PF suggests that creatures with different "depth psychology", i.e. mechanisms underlying memory, perception, information processing etc., cannot share our mental states.<sup>3</sup> Therefore a Christian may prefer analytical functionalism if he wishes to ascribe, for example, religious beliefs to angels, since angels may well have different deep psychological processes to our own. This

detail illustrates how someone's religious beliefs may influence their beliefs about functionalism. There exist many other examples, as we will now see in describing the "data" of RMSs for our functionalist hypothesis to explain. For the purposes of this paper, I shall consider causes and effects suggested by AF as well as those suggested by PF.

### Religious Mental States

I shall not deal with every single mental state that could be regarded as "religious" in some sense. Among these I include the states of mind which accompany the observance of religious rituals, and emotional responses to religious symbols. Many Hollywood films have a "religious" structure, involving an heroic self-sacrifice to defeat the forces of darkness. Mafia films often incorporate Catholic religious imagery. The mental states of emotionally responsive viewers could well be described as "religious", but this is incidental to the question of whether or not the viewers are members of a religion. This type of mental state is too widely-ranging to define functionally, and largely irrelevant to religion except insofar as it illustrates the general appeal of religious symbolism and narrative. I will therefore ignore it, and concentrate on providing functional criteria for deep, lasting religious convictions. Henceforth, my class of "RMSs" shall include serious religious beliefs, and only the more conceptually anchored of other religious mental states, such as *Nirvana* and prayer.

RMSs clearly include the "core beliefs" of Christianity, by virtue of which we call someone a Christian. Most obviously, Christians believe in the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent, nonmaterial being, usually taken to have created the universe, "in" which he remains immanent. Christians also believe that each person possesses a nonmaterial immortal soul that survives bodily death and is judged by God on the basis of the corresponding person's moral life. Besides beliefs, the class of RMSs includes prayer, and "mystical experiences" such as those reported by St. Teresa *et alii*. Besides the core Buddhist beliefs, the class of Buddhist RMSs includes *Dhyana*: meditation in eight stages of ascending purity of consciousness, *Nirvana*: the final liberation and end of rebirth, and "*Buddha*-hood": being a truly enlightened being. A class of RMSs I will term "secondary religious beliefs" will prove very important in my analysis; these are religious beliefs *about* RMSs, especially about their effects. For example, many Christians believe that those holding Christian beliefs may thereby benefit their souls through the gift of eternal life. Buddhists have equivalent secondary beliefs, holding for example that achieving *Nirvana* will cause a *Buddha* to leave the cycle of rebirth and withdraw from the causal universe. I will term these alleged effects "secondary

effects”.

Some RMS inputs and outputs seem a matter for Psychofunctionalist research, and some seem to lie more in the domain of AF. Inputs in the former class might include parental and cultural influence, and perhaps individual feelings of wonder, awe, insecurity etc. Some outputs, e.g. those involving behavior and other mental states also seem a matter for empirical research. We might object that religious beliefs preclude certain behavior analytically: someone might say, “She’s not really a Christian if she acts like that!” However, we accepted Swinburne’s point that one can hold a religious belief apathetically; if this is right then there is no *behavioral* output analytically associated with religious beliefs. On the other hand perhaps AF, unlike PF, can incorporate the “secondary effects” of RMSs I mentioned in the previous paragraph. There also exist “secondary causes”: consider Alston’s theory that some religious states, such as mystical trances, are caused literally by perceptions of God (Alston 58). These are a matter for religious belief rather than empirical research. We should note however, that these causes and effects are not given *analytically* by the meanings of RMS-words. Most Christians do not consider the nonexistence of God and the soul logically impossible. If God and the soul do not exist, Christian RMSs cannot have any secondary causes or effects. Christians would nevertheless maintain that they had those RMSs, showing that not all RMS-terms *analytically* imply their secondary causes and effects. Buddhism also invokes secondary causes, for example when it appeals to *karma* from a previous life preventing a current life from achieving *Nirvana*. At least some of the secondary causes and effects of Buddhist RMSs contain an analytical element: if the tenets of Buddhism were shown somehow to be entirely false then *Nirvana*, for instance, could not exist—no one could possibly achieve it. Many religious believers consider the secondary effects of religious beliefs to be among the most important, and I shall focus more on the primary/secondary division than on the PF/AF division.<sup>4</sup>

### **Formulating functional criteria for religious beliefs**

We cannot provide functional criteria for RMSs as a whole, since it is almost impossible to formulate criteria of any sort for the adjective “religious”. The *Cambridge Encyclopedia* says sadly,

What is clear is that no single definition will suffice to encompass the varied sets of traditions, practices and ideas which constitute different religions. Some religions involve the belief in and worship of a god or gods, but this is not true

of all... Buddhism does not require a belief in gods, and where it does occur, the gods are not considered important. (“Religion”, 3rd ed)

The wide variety of religious beliefs and practices seem to preclude a common factor in either belief content or behavior. Even the very vague notion of beliefs and behavior involving a “higher power” would still leave Confucianism as a potential counterexample. I conclude that functional analyses must be at least religion-specific, and probably RMS-specific.

Swinburne’s apathetic believer continues to provide a problem for attempts at functionalist definition of RMSs in terms of behavior. Perhaps we could functionally characterize RMSs in terms of the behavioral effects they *tend* to have: it is standard functionalist doctrine that other functional states, e.g. extreme apathy, may inhibit these effects. Nevertheless, I am not confident that every RMS even tends to produce particular behavior.<sup>5</sup> Two other types of functional property suggest themselves: we may be able to provide input-based criteria for RMSs, or criteria in terms of non-behavioral outputs. I will consider each approach in turn.

We can describe RMS-inputs in general as “religious initiations”. This is not a discovery, since initiation merely means “action of origin”. One can be “initiated” into many sets of beliefs, including socialism, and stoicism. We can functionally quantify over initiations *à la* Shoemaker, defining religious initiations as those which lead to religious beliefs, but this is trivial.

We can look for another characteristic input of RMSs in so-called “religious experience”. Swinburne mentions experience of God through a public, sensory object such as a sunset or an icon. Subjects report feeling “the currents of the Universal Being” circulate through them. However, it is hard to imagine a commonplace perceptual experience inducing such a powerful RMS in a previously unreligious subject. Alternatively, says Swinburne, the experience of God may take place through an unusual object, such as a burning bush, or the Virgin at Lourdes. Again, I suggest that a subject must have a religious belief initially in order to attribute these occurrences to God; consider for example the recent “apparition” in Clearwater, Florida. The burning bush example is rather more impressive, but such experiences occur too rarely—if at all—to be characteristic of religious belief. Swinburne also mentions experience of God through private objects, describable or ineffable, and through no sensory object. The latter type is found in the writings of St Teresa, Angela of Foligno and others.<sup>6</sup> These are the sort of experiences that Alston classes as perceptions of God, and he writes that,

It is clear that putative perception of God normally, if not invariably, gives rise to beliefs about God. To be sure, those who perceive God as loving, powerful, and so on, typically believed that God is so characterized long before they had that experience...[But] one who perceives God will thereby come to learn that God is strengthening her or comforting her *then*, or telling her so-and-so *then*. (Alston 63)

So mystical experiences can at least cause beliefs that God is having an effect *at that time*. Mystical experiences are themselves RMSs, with further RMSs as both causes and effects. Previous RMSs are usually prerequisite: only religious people tend to have access to mystical visions. As yet, we can only cite “religious initiations” as the functional inputs of these initial RMSs. This functional model seems to work also in the case of Buddhism, if we replace “mystical experiences” with “meditation, in eight steps of ascending purity of consciousness”. Initially it is possible that the Buddhist student only requires a willingness to practice meditation but I suspect that some degree of initiation into Buddhist beliefs is usually necessary. We can extend the causal chain here: these meditative steps, combined with the gathering of Buddhist wisdom, will lead a Buddhist to *Nirvana* and, on seeing the truth of *dharma*, to *Buddha*-hood.<sup>7</sup> I conclude that input-based criteria are fairly successful after the induction of an initial RMS in a person, but that attempts to specify input-based criteria for this first RMS will fall prey to vagueness or triviality.

We now turn to the possibility of RMS output criteria that involve religious assumptions. If we accept these assumptions, functional analysis becomes dramatically easier. Moreover, religious believers will claim these outputs:

- i) are the most important, since the truth of the religion depends on them.
- ii) hold in all cases, whereas only a chosen few are held to come to religion by secondary inputs.

For example, we could define the basic Christian “core beliefs” mentioned above as those states which have the most beneficial effects on the immortal soul, e.g. a broader awareness of the self and wider sympathies.<sup>8</sup> We should not appeal to their effects on God, since many Christians accept the doctrine of divine impassibility. We should not assume, for example, that prayer has any effect on God, but consider it “an effort to avail ourselves of God’s eternal providence for our welfare” (Creel 33), or, functionally, as the mental state most likely to result in such an availing. Turning to Buddhism, we could characterize the lower Buddhist RMSs as those states which in combination bring about *Nirvana*, the only mental state which plays a significant causal

role in ending the cycle of rebirth and *dukkha*, or earthly suffering.

The immediate disadvantage of my appeal to secondary effects is that most functionalists also happen to be materialists, who would deny that RMSs genuinely have any of these outputs. Besides, Christians would deny that Buddhist RMSs have the outputs mentioned above, and Buddhists would say the same regarding Christian RMSs. In short, these functional criteria are unacceptable to most people for any given religion.

Can we use secondary effects in our functional analysis without presupposing their truth? One approach might cite mental states which have secondary causes and effects as their intentional objects. For example, Christian RMSs might be states which are believed by their bearer to be most beneficial to the soul they invoke. *Nirvana* is that mental state believed by its bearer to end the cycle of rebirth. Unfortunately these criteria are not sufficient. A madman might consider any particular belief to have these properties; making it Christian or Buddhist by our criteria. This approach would therefore make Christianity purely subjective: the corpus of Christian or Buddhist beliefs would vary unacceptably between persons.

We can better incorporate secondary effects by treating them as “conditional” properties. Consider the analysis: “Christian RMSs are those states which *would* most benefit the bearer’s soul *if* it existed”, or more positively, “Assuming the soul exists...”. These “conditional effects” are permissible in functional analysis if we may regard them as dispositional properties. Just as a glass bowl can be fragile without ever breaking, we may characterize Christian RMSs as *potentially* most beneficial to the soul, even if it never exists. Similarly for prayer—the mental state which would avail its bearer of God’s eternal providence if he existed—and Buddhist RMSs, e.g. *Nirvana* would end the cycle of rebirth, if there existed a cycle of rebirth in the Buddhist style. We may reject this analogy because the glass bowl is fragile because there are a relatively large number of things that could break it, while if Christianity is false then nothing exists which the RMS could effect in the important way. I suggest therefore that we treat the secondary causal properties as Lewisian “conditional properties”. Lewis writes that a conditional will be true, even if the antecedent happens to be false, provided that the consequent is true in the *nearest possible world* where the antecedent is true. Secondary causes and effects seem to meet this criterion: in the nearest possible world where the relevant religious beliefs (including secondary beliefs) are true, RMSs will have secondary properties. I suggest that such “conditional properties” are acceptable functionally, unless we think the core beliefs of a religion are in combination *necessarily* false,<sup>9</sup> and therefore false in *all possible*

*worlds.*

Objections to secondary effects tend to reduce to the argument that secondary effects are not dispositional properties. Functionalists may object that they seem to deny multiple realizability: in appealing, for example, to effects on the soul I stress mental “hardware” rather than “function”. I reply that functionalists cannot reject all functional analyses that make reference to hardware. We must define mental states such as “the intention to move one’s arm” by reference to arms. A functionalist may respond that the soul is a particularly implausible piece of hardware: his argument thus collapses into the view that the soul is not a fit object for dispositional effects. Besides, one could still have Christian religious beliefs without having a soul; the beliefs would simply be prevented (by lack of hardware) from performing their characteristic function. Alternatively, someone might object that my criteria are not sufficiently behavioral: in what way are “benefiting the soul” and “ending one’s cycle of rebirth” forms of behavior? I reply that these secondary effects can be behavioral, if we incorporate the principle that benefiting the soul leads to good behavior: “a sound tree cannot bear evil fruits” (*Matthew 7:20*). A doubt that any behavior is common to all religious believers is then a doubt that these secondary beliefs are *true*, not a doubt that they are behavioral. I therefore suggest that this objection also collapses into an objection to treating secondary effects as dispositional properties. We can meet these objections successfully by treating secondary effects as conditional properties.

### **Conclusion**

Attempting functional analysis without religious premises has proved problematic, since purely material religious behavior and initiation vary so widely in form. Besides, I cannot help feeling that these inputs and outputs are less *essential* to religious belief than those involving religious premises. For those who have religious beliefs, their importance lies in the beliefs’ truth and place in the metaphysical structure their religion invokes. My analysis through secondary effects would therefore appeal more to religious believers than a more commonplace functional analysis. I appealed to secondary effects via “conditional properties”: religious mental states *would* have clearly characteristic and partly behavioral effects *if the relevant religions were true*. In the machine tables below I make use of conditional properties to provide functional sketches of certain RMSs. If functionalists do not permit these properties then my project has not succeeded, and this potentially reflects poorly on functionalism as a theory of the mind. For a definitive characteristic of religious mental states is their

positions within the relevant religious schemata, and functionalism without the conditional effects on which I relied cannot easily represent them.

The Christian machine table:

Conditional Inputs			Perceptions of God		
Other Inputs			Mystical turn of mind		Desire for devine help
RMS	<i>Initiation -&gt;</i>	<i>Basic Christian beliefs -&gt;</i>	<i>Mystical experiences -&gt;</i>	<i>Strengthened basic Christian beliefs -&gt;</i>	<i>&amp; Prayer</i>
Behavioral Outputs		Appeal to Pyschofunctionalist survey?	Reports of mystical experiences	Appeal to Pyschofunctionalist survey?	
Belief Output			Belief that God is having an effect <i>now -&gt;</i>		
Conditional Outputs		Greatest benefit to the immortal soul			Availing of God's grace

The Buddhist machine table:

Conditional Inputs				Seeing the truth of <i>dharma</i>	
Other Inputs	Initiation ->		Beliefs concerning the nature of the cosmos		Death
RMSs and other states		<i>Meditation stage 1</i> ->	<i>Meditation stage 2-7</i> ->	<i>Meditation stage 8</i> ->	
Behavioral Outputs		Appeal to Pyschofunctionalist survey? Behavior along the lines of the Eightfold Path, following the Five Precepts		Serenity, peace, and other signs of enlightenment.	
Belief Output		Beliefs concerning the nature of the cosmos		Belief that all things are impermanent	
Conditional Outputs		Greatest benefit to the immortal soul		Realisation that all things are impermanent	Ending the dukkha and the cycle of rebirth. Disappearance from causal relations with the universe.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Compare Putnam's "perfect stoic", who exhibits no pain-behaviour despite being in pain.
- <sup>2</sup> For instance angels, and non-human animals, could perhaps share RMSs with us.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Shoemaker "Some Varieties of Functionalism."
- <sup>4</sup> Religious believers can embrace the "primary" (non-religious) causes and effects of RMSs, but non-believers will deny their secondary causes and effects.
- <sup>5</sup> This view does not deny that behaviour is a vital part of religion. We may agree that belief alone, i.e. without behaviour, is an inadequate form of religion. I only claim that such belief exists.
- <sup>6</sup> Alston's example is taken from St Teresa (pub. 1957), chap.27, "One day when I was at prayer...I saw Christ at my side—or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul [the imagination]"
- <sup>7</sup> At this point it may be useful to refer to the machine tables I include at the end of this essay.
- <sup>8</sup> We could allow that virtuous non-Christian mental states benefit the soul to a lesser extent.
- <sup>9</sup> Many philosophers of religion—Mackie, for example—have considered the "Problem of Evil" to show that certain Christian beliefs are logically incompatible.

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