‘Do You Believe in God, Doctor?’ The Atheism of Fiction and the Fiction of Atheism

Rukmini Bhaya Nair¹

Accepted: 4 July 2021 / Published online: 19 October 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2021

Abstract

This paper is an enquiry into some commonalities between fiction and atheism. It suggests that ‘disbelief’ may be a state of mind shared by both and asks how a meaningful semantics might be derived from the mental stance of disbelief. Albert Camus’ *The Plague*, published in 1947 post the trauma of two successive world wars, is a key ‘existentialist’ text that focuses on this dilemma. Not only is this work of fiction especially relevant to our current times of natural, political, economic and psychological distress gone ‘viral’, it is also one in which a blunt question is posed to the atheist hero of the novel, Doctor Rieux, in Oran, a small French Algerian town fighting a terrible pandemic: ‘Do you believe in God, doctor?’. Rieux’s answer is telling: ‘No, but what does that really mean? I’m fumbling in the dark, struggling to make something out.’ It is this human ‘struggle’ to discern the contours of the invisible ‘in the dark’ that could animate the thought worlds of fiction as well as of atheism. The paper seeks to draw out some of these putative similarities through the lens of ‘ordinary language philosophy’ and J.L. Austin and John Searle’s classification of basic speech-acts. It also considers the evolutionary, affective and cross-cultural appeal of the parallel narratives of science and religion. Oran’s most remarkable aspect, Camus insists, is its ‘ordinariness’; yet, it is here that the ‘extraordinariness’ of the plague strikes. Quotidian local circumstances thus paradoxically set in motion the sorts of ‘universal’ inquiries into ‘what it means to be human’ that, my paper argues, alike motivate the fiction of atheism and the atheism of fiction.

Keywords Absurdity · Atheism · Camus · Disbelief · Evolution · Fiction · Humanism · Literature · Narrative · Ordinariness · Plague · Religion · Science · Speech acts

✉ Rukmini Bhaya Nair
Rukmini.Bhaya.Nair@hss.iitd.ac.in

¹ Linguistics and English, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Delhi, Main Building, IITD Campus, Hauz Khas, New Delhi, Delhi 110016, India

Disbelief: ‘Fumbling in the Dark’

What, if anything, do fiction and atheism have in common? This essay suggests that both these concepts pivot on the nature of disbelief. Fiction is a narrative genre that creates beings and contexts that, by definition, do not exist; in Coleridge’s famous words, that is, entering the fictional domain of literature requires of a reader a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. Atheism, likewise, is a position on the ontological status of a being (God) or beings (gods) as well as contexts of creation that also, from the perspective of the atheist, do not exist. We have to willingly ‘suspend disbelief’ in our everyday material world of actors, events and observed causal sequencing when we pray, for example, to some unseen, unknown being to change the course of events in this familiar world; for the atheist, such a position is untenable, even absurd. The question then becomes: how do we derive a meaningful semantics, reasons for intentional actions, ethical stances, and affective dispositions from such absurd worlds in which we can by no means straightforwardly believe?

This is the central conundrum at the heart of Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1960), a key ‘existentialist’ text, published in 1947 post the trauma of two successive world wars, that several critics have also termed absurdist (see Rossi, 1958). Not only is *The Plague* a novel that seems especially relevant to our current coronavirus stricken times of natural, political, economic, and psychological distress gone ‘viral’, it is also one in which a bluntly relevant question is posed to the hero of the novel, Doctor Rieux, by another of its main characters: ‘Do you believe in God, doctor?’ Rieux’s answer is telling: ‘No, but what does that really mean? I’m fumbling in the dark, struggling to make something out.’ I will argue in this paper for the straightforward proposition that it is this ‘struggle’ to discern the contours of the invisible ‘in the dark’ that animates the thought worlds of fiction as well as of atheism, of science as well as of skepticism.

It goes without saying of course that the natural kind (see Putnam, 1975; Kripke, 1972) metaphor of what one might call the preponderance of ‘dark matter’ in the universe (see Ade et al., 2013) has been reused continually in varied cultural contexts and times and across disciplines from philosophy and soteriological doctrine to linguistics and physics. Darkness, despite its connotations of undesirability, has in fact always been a haunting presence in the human search for meaning. That harsh glare of unknowing which renders life’s absurdity too painful to bear, it might even be suggested, is in praxis alleviated by the invocation of ‘darkness’ in a phalanx of texts. Such texts range from the short incantation in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (circa 700 BCE) that asks to be led ‘from darkness to light’ to Paul’s meditation in Corinthians-1 (‘For now we see in a mirror, darkly, but then face to face’, circa 350 AD) to the idea of *pratibhā* (a ‘shining forth’) in Bhartṛhari’s *sphoṭa* theory of language (circa 600–700 AD),¹ via Milton in his major Enlightenment epic *Paradise*

¹ While the central focus of this essay is not Indian traditions of atheism, they do form part of its cross-cultural background. In this connection, it is perhaps worth mentioning that India had many avowedly skeptical schools of philosophy such as the *Ājīvika* and the *Cārvāka* who were both atheist and, respectively, radically fatalist and skeptic. These schools were committed to turning conventional wisdom on its head, as in the verse that speaks in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* 15.1 of *ūrdhvamūlām adhaḥ śākham*, meaning ‘roots on top and branches below’. Remarkably, the ‘orthodox’ schools of Indian philosophy (*darsana*) also include the

Lost speaking of the engulfing flames of hell that give out heat but no light as an oxymoronic 'darkness visible' (1667), all the way to the Churchlands' ingenious thought-experiment (1990) mimicking the 'darkroom' of the mind in support of J.R. Searle's 'Chinese Room' arguments on understanding linguistic meaning via James Clerk Maxwell's physicist's experiments on magnetism and electricity. Noam Chomsky, himself an atheist, uses the metaphor very effectively to explain dilemmas of understanding in the social sciences, thus:

If you go back to, say, the Greeks, and look at the range of questions they asked, most of them we are still asking, without very much progress. There are some areas where there's been extreme progress, in fact in what we call the natural sciences. But that is like a point in a whole sky of darkness that remains as dark as it ever was. We work our way through the murky problems as best we can, but without profound understanding (Chomsky, 1997)

Or, just pick any twentieth-century literary text of consequence in any language and it is an almost sure bet that it will contain the word 'dark', so critical is this trope to all sorts of sense-making, in fiction as in life (see also footnote 3). This essay will explore some of these semantic moves towards extracting light from darkness through a reading of the single representative work of fiction that I have already mentioned: *The Plague*.²

We live today in a world that is still coming to terms with a 'once in a century' pandemic, a world desperately in need of appropriate fictions that will capture some of the salient features of the sociobiological crises said to be typical of the current

Footnote 1 (continued)

atheist *Sāṅkhya* and *Mīmāṃsā*. In addition, literary traditions of biting satire from at least the seventh to the seventeenth century (see in this connection the reference to the translation of some of these satirical texts by Somadeva Vasudeva, 2005) dwell on various social vices, as in the eleventh-century text *Kālavilāsa* by Kṣemendra that roundly castigates doctors experimenting on their own patients:

The physician becomes a renowned success.

After he has killed a thousand patients with his concoctions,

Swapping around their various constituent drugs.

In an attempt to figure out his own science.

Take away the diatribe against doctors and the remark about "swapping around... various constituent drugs" in pharmacological trials for vaccines would not be all that different today! I'd like to thank Ranjit Nair here for an erudite discussion on the above (see also R. Nair, 2010 below).

² Such a focus on a 'single text' recalls Wimsatt and Beardsley's classic 1946 piece on the 'Intentional Fallacy'. The gist of this essay in 'New Criticism' was the idea that a text could be read more or less independently of its historical context and the putative intentions of its author. According to Wimsatt and Beardsley, a text is: 'not the author's (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it). [It] belongs to the public. It is embodied in language, the peculiar possession of the public, and it is about the human being, an object of public knowledge.' While one may not agree with the extreme view that a text can be entirely shorn of its contextual moorings, it is certainly possible, and sometimes even desirable, to read a text with fresh eyes from the vantage point of a specific crisis in reader's own times—in the present case, the trauma of the coronavirus pandemic, as well as to see it as a 'public' resource that concerns 'the human being, an object of public knowledge' without privileging its historical context overmuch. This, in fact, is what I have tried to do in my 'close reading' of Camus' *The Plague* here in the dark context of the global pandemic and its aftermath that has placed 'ordinary' people everywhere in 'extraordinary' circumstances of crisis.

‘Age of the Anthropocene’ (see Zalasiewicz et al., 2010). Today, once again as in *The Plague*, medical doctors and researchers are emergent heroes in an embattled scenario; and a heated debate rages between those who advocate that we should ‘follow the science’ in order to find ways and means to combat climate change, the COVID-19 virus and other ‘plagues’ and those who feel that any scientific advice is part of a ‘deep state’ conspiracy, a fiction malevolently designed to mislead the people into giving up their freedoms of speech, movement, and action.

Interestingly, both scientists and those who doubt scientific prognoses altogether admit that ‘science’, unlike the all-knowing divine, is fallible. The difference lies in the nature of their disbelief. The stereotype of the scientist is that s/he disbelieves in any results not attested by clinical trials and experimental verification while the science skeptics vociferously disbelieve the ‘so-called results’ produced by the scientists, preferring a politically, and often religiously, inflected narrative that suggests that they are being deliberately hoaxed and ‘kept in the dark’.³ Without going into the merits of these often harshly polarized stances and the social circumstances that have engendered them, what I wish to emphasize are the powerful, hostile strains of disbelief in each other’s positions that these camps share in common.

Disbelief is a state of mind that runs the gamut from mild doubt to incredulity to radical skeptical denial.⁴ Without defining disbelief as the simple converse of ‘belief’, I suggest here that it has at least the three following features.

One, disbelief is provoked, in the main, by violating the felicity conditions on just one of the five main speech act classes: namely the representative (‘Algiers is located on the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula’). Given default contextual conditions, tacit background knowledge, etc., when the felicity conditions on this class of speech act are intentionally violated in everyday life, they are likely to arouse the reaction: ‘I don’t believe you!’. It is then up to the speaker to convince the hearer of the truth of these assertions.

This is where literary fictions, I argue, play and have always evolutionarily played a crucial role in human cultures. They offer us exploratory pathways to interpretations of the ‘truth’ as it is encoded in the fictional speech act of the representative in particular and, more importantly, in fiction in general. Entering the ‘representational’

³ The pervasive metaphor of ‘darkness’ in literature as well as ordinary discourse obviously raises issue of the ‘direction of fit’ (words-to-world or world-to-words) in speech act theory/ordinary language philosophy. Where is ‘darkness’ actually located—out there or in our minds? According to Searle, ‘direction of fit’ is one of the most important ‘dimensions of difference between illocutionary acts’ (Searle, 1976, 1). Such ‘fit’ may be taken to be in one direction in the case of fictional renditions and in another in the case of non-fictional or factual renditions. In fiction, the ‘direction of fit’ or causal directionality is almost always assumed to be words-to-world. This matter is discussed more fully in Nair (2002, Chapter 2 ‘Force, Fiction, Fit and Felicity: Narrative as a Speech Act—Gurus: Austin, Searle’). Specifically, in the case of darkness, small children may fear the dark in physical terms but Lyons (1985) argues plausibly that ‘fear’ of the dark in adults ‘may not be fear of the absence of light but fear of the absence of knowledge’. It is precisely this fear of ‘unknowing’ that is expressed so often in a words-to-world’ direction of fit in great works of fiction such as *The Plague* and in several of the other works cited in this essay.

⁴ Most thesauruses list at least over 20 common close synonyms of the common noun ‘disbelief’ such as distrust, incredulity, incertitude, and misgiving. Yet the concept has been largely under-explored in the philosophical literature so far.

world of a fictional text allows us to mitigate mental attitudes, to nuance our disbelief in and suspicion of the stances of our 'others' (Nair, 2012, 2017a).⁵ Narrative fiction, an enduring 'discourse universal' across cultures from very early on in our species history, is today a latitudinous genre that permits an atheist to try on the mental shoes of a priest for fit, and vice versa. At its best, the genre specializes in creating arenas of imaginative empathy by presenting varying 'points of view' among its characters and engendering an appreciation in the reader for the essential humanity of all contending players (Nair, 2011a, 2015, 2018b). 'Fictionalizing' the world through a 'willing suspension of disbelief' even enables imaginative vaults across species barriers through the invention of hybrid mythological such as centaurs, sirens, and elephant-headed gods. These multifarious, multicultural crossovers are evident in the Indian *purāṇa* and the Greek, Norse, and African myths, not to mention early epics like the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*—and they remain observable, as we shall see, in modern novels like *The Plague* where the transgenic plague bacillus enters the human bloodstream through rats in the French Algerian town of Oran with consequences that infuse ordinary 'lived' experience with the 'extraordinariness' of an unexpectedly calamitous, 'once in a lifetime' event.

Two, tellers of stories or writers of fictions draw the hearer into their 'make-believe' world by specifically lifting the restrictions on the pragmatics of everyday interaction and persuading the audience to enter a universe of newly minted beliefs (see Searle, 1975, on 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse' in this connection). In such cases, it might be argued that human authors in effect remodel themselves as 'God', creating the world anew and leading their audiences towards a promised, if often unpredictable, ending. It is in this sense that—whatever the personal beliefs of the author of a text who may in fact be very devout—fiction as a concept strongly implies an atheistic impulse towards disbelief in divinity. This is because it necessarily involves a human—in effect any human among our seven and a half billion since each is endowed with the gift of narrative production and comprehension—merrily usurping the primary creative role of the divine and thus leaving little daylight between her narrative act and that attributed to God or, in some religions, to multiple gods. On this reading of the speech act of fictional narration, a human speaker mentally rejects or expresses disbelief in the very idea of divinity, by assuming, via her creative fictions, God's allegedly unique powers of creation.

Three, a feature attributed to 'God' is that such a being has an absolute grip on space-time. God is an entity who already has all the answers; the 'truth' has eternally been at his/her disposal. The darkness of soul that plagues human beings grappling with the difficult problems of human existence and multiple interpretations of a presumed 'truth' cannot logically constitute any sort of impediment for an

⁵ There is of course a long tradition of philosophically evaluating the 'representational' world of a fictional text'. Frege, for example (1979), considers two types of proper names in fiction: historical characters like Caesar and fictitious characters like Scylla and opines that: 'In myth and fiction thoughts occur that are neither true nor false. Logic has nothing to do with these' (Frege, 1979, 1984). Despite Frege's dismissal of fiction as inimical to logic, Munton (2017) has recently argued in a persuasive manner, in general consonance with the thesis of this paper, that Frege's views actually suggest that fiction could have something of the 'force' of a speech act.

all-knowing God. By inference, then, doubt, skepticism, or the pursuit of ‘scientific reason’ would hardly matter to a God of whom neither belief nor disbelief in propositions couched in a human language is required. Fiction, in turn, would be a redundant device for such a being. Likewise, presumably God is neither a theist nor an atheist; he or she simply is. I want therefore to somewhat incautiously argue that fiction always ‘lives without God’. Because it is primarily concerned with the business of decoding the puzzles of human existence, even when fiction has as its overt subject matter ‘Acts of God’ such as plagues, pestilences, and fires (Nair, 1997, 2011b), even when it introduces gods as heavily anthropomorphized players as in the classical epics, the trajectory of these tales invariably follows human trials and follies. The transcendent divine, as it were, remains outside the frame of the human story; it can be intuited but it cannot be narrated.⁶

I want to argue for the necessary ‘atheism of fiction’ in this respect. Some critics have suggested that atheism is parasitic upon theism in that it needs a God or gods to prove its disbelief in the proposition that these beings exist. My suggestion, on the contrary, is that the ‘fiction of atheism’ is actually a conceptual space that is inimical to divine intervention. When gods (or animals and machines) enter the fictional space of narrative genres such as the novel, they are ‘humanized’, much as the reverse process is set in motion when humans become ‘god-like’ creators as the producers of fiction. In fiction, as in the atheist’s universe, illumination when it does come to a character or a reader derives from a focus on the human rather than the divine. Or, as the narrator in *The Plague* puts it: ‘In this respect, our townsfolk were... humanists; they disbelieved in pestilences.’ Even when the universe is absurd and meaningless, bereft of any divinely decreed ultimate destiny, that is, Camus thought a ‘blind faith’ in humanism was so core to our species that it inspired people to wage heroic battles against death and to want to survive at whatever cost.

Camus’ antidote to an acceptance of the ‘absurdity’ of existing in a universe without meaning, one minus the guiding hand of an all-powerful God overseeing human

⁶ One of the reviewers for this paper asks an interesting question: Does negation stand for ‘disbelief’ or something more in the fictional world? It seems to me, in a preliminary sort of fashion, that ‘negation’ cannot stand for ‘disbelief’ in ‘the fictional world’ (or perhaps in any other kind of world) because that would imply synonymy between the two terms—which is by no means the case. To **negate** a proposition is, *inter alia*, to deny its truth. For example, consider the question and answer pair below: Q. ‘Did you eat the last chocolate in the box?’ A. ‘No’. The question here has the speech act force of a directive (D) and the logical form D(p) where p stands for the proposition, which is in this instance being categorically denied in the answer. In ordinary language philosophy, concerned not so much with ‘truth’ as ‘use’ (Austin, 1962), negation can also be achieved indirectly, e.g., via the defeasibility of the presupposition and/or implicature, for example: A. ‘Which box?’ or ‘There were no chocolates in the box, just biscuits’ or ‘I only ate the second last one’ and so on. **Disbelief**, on the others hand, can range from mild (the raised eyebrow) to strong (the head shake) forms of skepticism. This is well illustrated in the famous apocryphal Niels Bohr story which goes something like this: Visitor to the physicist Niels Bohr’s home: ‘I thought you did not believe in superstitions but you have a horseshoe nailed above your desk for luck!’ Bohr: ‘Of course I don’t believe in any such superstitious nonsense—but they say the horseshoe works whether you believe in it or not!’ Much the same can be said, I suppose, of narrative fiction. It exists as a discourse genre across cultures whether you believe in its qualities or not! You cannot negate its existence as a linguistic form; at best, you can only express your disbelief (mild to severe) in its propositions, if you so wish.

action, was first to come to terms with the fact there was no God (see his Notebooks, 1970, 227, on this point where he writes 'It is our task to create God', a task presumably undertaken by fiction); second, to enjoy each moment of the quotidian delights of human existence, such as a bath in the sea after a tough day's work, romantic love, the company of 'others', conversation in cafes, and the dappled sunlight during a walk in the woods—for there was nothing beyond this frame of the every day; and third, to cultivate an ethics of ordinary human 'decency' towards other human beings because them resolving their predicaments constituted an important justification for one's own existence. It is the nature of this sort of 'humanism', its 'disbelief in pestilences' and 'acts of God' and the consequent cleaving unto an 'ethics of decency' or responsiveness to the 'causeless' suffering of fellow humans that the current paper seeks to explore, tracing our need for fiction back to its ancient evolutionary roots.

This emphasis on evolution is not only because Camus' text postulates that the plague bacillus is an intrinsic part of human history but also because, as I see it, the concept of 'multiculturalism cannot be confined just to contemporary regions and cultures but is exemplified by 'ways of living' across evolutionary time (see Nair, 2002, 2011a). In the sections below, I will consider, mainly with reference to the text of *The Plague*, the three tentative 'hypotheses' outlined above, but always bearing in mind Newton's classical *hypothesis non fingo* caveat,⁷ so relevant to the 'science and religion' discussion in all historical contexts including the present global crisis we face with respect to the coronavirus pandemic.

Humanism: 'Some Rare Kind of Fever'

This section concerns the first feature of narrative fiction as a 'representative speech act' among humans that could easily and obviously provoke disbelief. Indeed the enigmatic epigraph from Daniel Defoe that prefaces *The Plague* focuses on this very act of representation. It says:

It is as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment by another, as it is to represent anything that really exists by that which exists not.

Camus' choice of this Defoe quote has been variously interpreted, mainly with a focus on its first part which critics feel could mean that the motifs in *The Plague*, published soon after World War II, are also emblematic of other nominal-kind disasters such as the war itself, the root cause of which was the virulent racist hatred perpetrated by Hitler's Nazi rhetoric. The second part of this quote has received less notice but appears directly germane to the subject of my paper, namely fiction.

⁷ This is considered Newton's most famous saying and is from his *Principia* (1687).

The original English translation of 1729 is by Francis Motte and says: 'Hitherto we have explained the phenomena of the heavens and of our sea by the power of gravity, but have not yet assigned the cause of this power ... I have not been able to discover the cause of those properties of gravity from phenomena, and [so] I frame no hypotheses [*hypotheses non fingo*]' Source: https://philosophynow.org/issues/88/Hypotheses_Non_Fingo

Defoe speaks of ‘represent[ing] anything that really exists by that which exists not’. To my mind, this is a more than sufficient, admirably succinct, description of the crucial representational role performed by the speech act of fiction from very early on in human evolution across cultures (Nair, 2011a, 2019, 2020a, b).

The cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett has, for instance, argued that human beings tell stories as naturally as beavers build dams and birds build nests. To paraphrase Dennett further, we need language representations and narrative activity to fashion our cognitive environments as much as we need food, security, shelter, and sleep for physical survival (Dennett, 1991). Similarly, J.B. Carroll and the ‘Literary Darwinists’ maintain that the great literary texts of any age go back to certain basic patterns in the formation of early communities.

Just as Charles Darwin studied animals to discover the patterns behind their development, Literary Darwinists read novels in search of innate patterns of human behavior: child bearing and rearing, efforts to acquire resources (money, property, influence) and competition and cooperation within families and communities. It’s impossible to fully appreciate and understand a literary text unless you keep in mind that humans behave in certain universal ways... the most effective and truest works of literature are those that reference or exemplify these basic facts. (Max, 2005)

Following on from Dennett’s ideas, I suggest in my own work (Nair, 2002, 2011b, 2014) that our stories make us up as much as we make up our stories.⁸ Thus, in asking what evolutionary value narrative has had as a genre, I conjecture that, although it is by no means the most effective way of conveying information straight up, narrative fiction affords us a relatively cheap epistemic means of learning and intergenerationally transmitting life lessons by producing ‘make-believe’ representations of the world not as we know it—but as we do not know it. In terms of species preservation and the will to live (a philosophical problem that was of deep concern to Camus), narrative fictions, I argue, can prevent us from taking major individual and species risks, i.e., actually confronting a snake or climbing a mountain in order to learn what is dangerous or actually falling in love to learn about its wonderful and/or problematic consequences.

Fiction achieves this life-preserving objective via gripping ‘life-like’ representations of crisis situations. In this sense, they are quite a bit like flight simulators, training us without danger in survival skills. As we know, most children have told their first lie and have learnt to evoke ‘contexts of disbelief’ by the age of four (see Talwar & Lee, 2002; R. B. Nair, 1985, 1991, 2010, 2018a; R. Nair, 2010). Fictions, we could argue, are socially sanctioned and pleasurable forms of ‘the lie’ that serve the purpose of guiding us from childhood onwards in the arts of both bodily and cultural survival.

⁸ Gillian Beer’s (1983) book *Darwin’s Plots*, which wonderfully connects Darwin’s evolutionary discourse to George Eliot’s novels and other nineteenth-century fictions of the period, is relevant in this respect, as are Michael Ruse’s explorations in *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us about Evolution* (2016).

Think of what happens to us when we listen to an engrossing but 'false' story—our pulse rates go up, our eyes fixate, our palms sweat. In fact, we have many of the same reactions that we would have if we were in the real situations that these stories depict. This is a chief reason why fictions (epics, myths, novels) are discourse universals, found in every known human culture and why they remain a chief mode of communicative interaction.

Fictional stories, as a genre, are in fact cognitively designed to probe into contexts, present conflicting hypothesis, examine causal evidence, and come to some resolution. In this sense, stories are a species of 'natural theory' and embody an instinctive research methodology. Narrative is proto-theory and proto-method. As I have argued elsewhere (see Nair, 2014), the history of cultural evolution has worked by introducing us to 'primitive' but foundational versions of biological theory (how the leopard got its spots); political theory (Robin Hood was a revolutionary who challenged the oppressive class structures of a feudal society); moral theory (Cordelia's 'sin' was to plainly tell the 'truth' and Lear's to stubbornly refuse to hear it); aesthetic theory (the mirror on the wall in Snow White proved itself a dispassionate judge of beauty); and so forth.

These stories perform, in essence, a function not dissimilar to the cultural 'work' done by, say, Darwinian theory for biology or Marxist theory for political science or Christianity for ethics or Platonic theory for aesthetics. Naturally, this process constitutes hard intellectual labor. At the same time, fictions sugarcoat this hard cognitive labor we undertake uncomplainingly each day by constantly appealing to our emotions, thus giving readers and listeners the seductive emotional practice so necessary to cultural survival (Nair, 2002, 2020a, b). I believe that Camus makes precisely this point when he radically reconfigures the Sisyphus myth, usually a metaphor for having to engage in the same repetitive activity of rolling a stone up a hill forever as a punishment for having offended the gods, by asking us to imagine Sisyphus happy even as he endures his punishment. Would this not take away the very point of the 'suffering' inflicted on him? I will return to this point about the ethical valence of human suffering and its literary representation in the next and final section of this essay.

At this point, I must reiterate that narratives overall, fictional as well as factual, are structures that convert talk into text and raw experience into reusable cognitions of memory and feeling. They offer us a powerful linguistic framework to explain and internalize the 'problem of others in the world', teaching empathy and social survival. Children across the world arrive at a foundational knowledge of their cultures, which includes imbibing cultural prejudices, via stories and myths (Nair, 2002, 2015). We shall note again in the next section that it is the death of a child from plague that most closely binds together in an emotional embrace the warring factions of religion and science, represented in Camus' novel by Dr. Rieux, the doctor, and Father Paneloux, the priest. But for now, to turn briefly to the work of the sociolinguist William Labov (1972) who further suggests in a now classic paper that all narratives, fiction or factual, display in their 'full form' a six-part structure that he found among African American youth narratives describing the first person protagonists finding themselves in 'danger of death' situations. These consist of the Abstract (that pertains to the theme of the story); the Orientation (that describes

scene, time, and other contextual details); the Complicating Action (that focuses on the narrative crisis); the Evaluation (that brings out emotional reactions of the characters in the story as well as listeners to the story); the Resolution (that resolves the narrative crisis); and the Coda (that returns the narrative time to the present so that the audience is freed from the grip that the story has on him or her).

While this is not the place to go into a detailed explication of Labov's 'universal' narrative schema, it is worth noting three points that he makes: one, that these typical aspects of a story do not come bunched together but are spread throughout the text giving it texture and emotional resonance; two, that while these six features comprise the 'full form' of a story, the only 'essential' part of narrative among these six is the element of 'complicating action' or crisis; and three, that 'danger of death' stories are always the most tellable. As he puts it, it is always relevant to say, 'I saw a man fall off a bridge today'. Labov's contention is that the idea of death—to my mind, of all species happenings the most inevitable as well as the most unimaginable—does indeed seem essential to the construction of iconic myths in most cultures. My further argument is that thoughts of death are prototype emotion boosters in two basic ways. They arouse in us feelings of both speculative curiosity (prompting questions like: what lies beyond this earthly compass?) and of knee-jerk fear, panic, love, etc. (encouraging the query: what's most precious—present delights or the promise of an afterlife?). With this theoretical background in mind, a brief reading of *The Plague* as a representative modern narrative concerning religious belief versus atheistic skepticism during pandemic times seems in order.

Next day, by dint of a persistence that many thought ill-advised, Rieux persuaded the authorities to convene a health committee at the Prefect's office... The Prefect greeted them amiably enough, but one could see his nerves were on edge. "Let's make a start, gentlemen," he said. "Need I review the situation?" Richard thought that wasn't necessary. He and his colleagues were acquainted with the facts. The only question was what measures should be adopted. "The question," old Castel cut in almost rudely, "is to know whether it's plague or not." Two or three of the doctors present protested. The others seemed to hesitate...

Rieux, who had said nothing so far, was asked for his opinion. "We are dealing," he said, "with a fever of a typhoidal nature, accompanied by vomiting and buboes. I have incised these buboes and had the pus analyzed; our laboratory analyst believes he has identified the plague bacillus. But I am bound to add that there are specific modifications that don't quite tally with the classical description of the plague bacillus." Richard pointed out that this justified a policy of wait-and-see; anyhow, it would be wise to await the statistical report on the series of analyses that had been going on for several days.

"When a microbe," Rieux said, "after a short intermission can quadruple in three days' time the volume of the spleen, can swell the mesenteric ganglia to the size of an orange and give them the consistency of gruel, a policy of wait-and-see is, to say the least of it, unwise. The foci of infection are steadily extending. Judging by the rapidity with which the disease is spreading, it may well, unless we can stop it, kill off half the town before two months are out.

That being so, it has small importance whether you call it plague or some rare kind of fever. The important thing is to prevent its killing off half the population of this town."

Richard said it was a mistake to paint too gloomy a picture, and, moreover, the disease hadn't been proved to be contagious; indeed, relatives of his patients, living under the same roof, had escaped it. "But others have died," Rieux observed.

"It doesn't matter to me," Rieux said, "how you phrase it. My point is that we should not act as if there were no likelihood that half the population would be wiped out; for then it would be." Followed by scowls and protestations, Rieux left the committee-room.

Some minutes later, as he was driving down a back street redolent of fried fish and urine, a woman screaming in agony, her groin dripping blood, stretched out her arms toward him. (1960, 46-49)

This passage of less than 450 words contains examples of all five classes of speech act in its very opening: the directive ('Let's make a start, gentlemen'); the expressive ('The Prefect greeted them amiably enough'); the commissive ('Rieux persuaded them'); and the declarative ('The question... is to know whether it is the plague or not')—but it is the representative ('We are dealing... with a fever of a typhoidal nature, accompanied by vomiting and buboes.') which dominates (see Searle, 1969, on speech act classes and Searle et al., 1980, on speech act analysis). Indeed, it could be said that this passage—and the novel as a whole—strictly belongs to the representative class of speech act, as it is descriptive fiction (see Austin, 1962, on the use of 'connecting particles' in genres such as the novel).⁹ What is worthy of note, though, are the psychological objectives accomplished by the representations in this passage.

We witness here the reinforcement of character types in animated dialogue: Old Castel is irascible and rude; Richard is cautious, a non-committal 'wait-and-see' man; the Prefect is uncertain and worried; the doctors as a group hesitant and indecisive. The only person who emerges as a strong-willed, persistent man, one who looks the facts in the face and does not flinch, one not concerned with the form of words but the consequences of actions, is Dr. Rieux. The novel therefore implies that he is the one whom we as readers can trust most when a future course of action is to be charted out. He is the one who, as a man of science and an out-and-out humanist, appears to be really inoculated against the plague since his knowledge of this 'rare kind of fever' is deep and empirical. It is in his blood, so to speak. The next section will return to this issue when we discuss the last predictive sentences in *The Plague* and the evolutionary importance of the 'seer' in the discourse of religion, but there is one other feature of this fictional representation that bears mentioning before we move on. This is the manifest affective load the passage carries: nerves are 'on edge', death is an ever-present 'gloomy' specter and 'scowls and protestations' abound.

⁹ Austin (1962) suggests that 'the sub-heading "A Novel"' might indicate a connected speech act of a specific kind', involving specific 'felicity conditions' for fictional discourse.

Most emotionally disturbing of all is a device Camus uses very effectively throughout the novel: a single qualia-laden representative sentence ‘coda’ at the end of chapters that throws into sharp relief, without comment, the trauma and total horror of the situation being discussed. Here, it is that sudden appearance out of the dark in Rieux’s path of a woman ‘screaming in agony... her groin dripping blood’. This image appears to imaginatively encapsulate both Rieux’s fearful ‘other’ and his intimate ‘self’. Returning now to Dennett, commenting on the interpretative role of the other in fictional texts as he explains his idea of the self as a gravitational center for cognitive activity:

A center of gravity is just an abstractum. It’s just a fictional object.... [Similarly] a self is also an abstract object, a theorist’s fiction. The theory is not particle physics but what we might call a branch of people-physics; it is more soberly known as a phenomenology or hermeneutics, or soulscience (*Geisteswissenschaft*). The physicist does an interpretation, if you like, of a chair and its behavior, and comes up with the theoretical abstraction of a center of gravity, which is then very useful in characterizing the behaviour of the chair in the future, under a wide variety of conditions. The hermeneuticist or phenomenologist—or anthropologist—sees some rather more complicated things moving about in the world—human beings and animals—and is faced with a similar problem of interpretation... The theoretical problem of self-interpretation is at least as difficult and important as the problem of other-interpretation.... Now how does a self differ from a center of gravity? It is a much more complicated concept. I will try to elucidate it via an analogy with another sort of fictional object: fictional characters in literature. Pick up *Moby Dick* and open it up to page one. It says, “Call me Ishmael.” Call whom Ishmael? Call Melville Ishmael? No. Call Ishmael Ishmael. Melville has created a fictional character named Ishmael. As you read the book you learn about Ishmael, about his life, about his beliefs and desires, his acts and attitudes. You learn a lot more about Ishmael than Melville ever explicitly tells you. Some of it you can read in by implication. Some of it you can read in by extrapolation. (1992, 12)

In this passage, Dennett makes four points that reinforce connections between literary representation and philosophically oriented cognitive research on narrative. The first, by now familiar, reminder he has for us is that there is no special location where the ‘self’ is to be found. The self does not reside exclusively in the brain or in culture, although it certainly is an epiphenomenal creation of brain processes in which millions of chemical transmissions across synapses together contrive to give us a strong illusion of self. This illusion of selfhood is important in humans because it then serves as a focus of interpretation—which brings us to Dennett’s second idea, namely, the juxtaposition of ‘self-interpretation’ with ‘other’ interpretation. Dennett’s third argument is that ‘theories’ about the self help explain the future behavior of selves, that is, they have predictive power—and this remark is obviously related to my own ideas about narratives as ‘proto-theory’, while his fourth and final idea is that fictions are never wholly explicit.

Literary narratives, including religious and quasi-religious narratives such as those of the modernist Camus or the postmodernist Salman Rushdie, as I see them, strikingly bring together the 'narcissistic' desire of an author to reflect on his own life and the 'altruistic' urge of a storyteller to gift his readers/listeners pleasure and self-knowledge.¹⁰ When Dennett reminds us that literary narratives work by 'implication and extrapolation', I interpret this as the suggestion that even the simplest narratives need the gravitational pull of a 'moral' to render them acceptable and reusable in other contexts and conversations. A primary task of narrative is to underwrite these shared human premises. Yet, because narratives are intrinsically indeterminate, there is always infinite scope for further interpretation and moral choices. The next and final section considers the second and third features of 'disbelief' argued for at the beginning of this essay: that is, the confounding of the powerful 'fiction of atheism' with the equally strong 'atheistic' impulse of fiction in cultural texts that represent grave 'danger of death' situations.

Divinity: 'Today the Truth Is a Red Spear Pointing Towards Salvation'

A striking feature of *The Plague* is that it is 'multicultural' in a very obvious sense since it is set, not in Paris or other imposing center of western civilization, but in Oran, a real town in the French colonial territory of Algiers. Oran's most remarkable aspect, Camus insists, is its 'ordinariness'; yet, it is here that the 'extraordinariness' of the plague strikes. Quotidian local circumstances thus paradoxically set in motion the precise sorts of 'universal' inquiries into 'what it means to be human' that, my paper argues, motivate alike the fiction of atheism and the atheism of fiction.

In one of the most dramatic scenes in *The Plague*, the priest Paneloux, 'a man of a passionate fiery temperament' and widely respected in the community for his scholarly integrity, delivers a sermon on the subject of the pandemic that has mysteriously struck the town of Oran—and although the ordinary folk of Oran might normally have preferred to let 'sea-bathing compete seriously with churchgoing' on Sundays, they recognize that they are living through an 'exceptional' situation and thus, despite dripping rainy weather, a 'huge congregation' flock into church for Father Paneloux's sermon. And the priest does not disappoint.

He had a powerful, rather emotional delivery, which carried to a great distance, and when he launched at the congregation his opening phrase in clear, emphatic tones: "Calamity has come on you, my brethren, and, my brethren, you deserved it" there was a flutter that extended to the crowd massed in the rain outside the porch. (1960, 90)

¹⁰ See Nair (2011a) for an extended analysis of the discourse of religion and literature, with several literary texts such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, and David Lodge's *Thinks*, analyzed in terms of the narrative of evolutionary biology and the emotive notion of a 'threat' from without that is both morally and physically destructive.

Thus, Paneloux begins by pointing his ecclesiastical finger directly at the town's people. They are the guilty ones; they bear responsibility for the ghastly 'calamity' that had struck their inconspicuous humdrum town and although the atheist Dr. Rieux may feel that the priest's sermon fails to follow any 'strict logic' and depends greatly on oratorical ploys such as detailed references to several sites of sin (the plague of Egypt, Gomorrah, Job, the zeal of the Abyssinian Christians and so on), others like M. Othon, the magistrate, assure Dr. Rieux that the preacher's arguments are 'absolutely irrefutable'. And so it is that Paneloux is able to deliver his coup de grace in a 'calm, almost matter-of-fact voice':

Many of you are wondering, I know, what I am leading up to. I wish to lead you to the truth ... Today the truth is a command. It is a red spear sternly pointing to the narrow path, the one way of salvation. (1960, 94)

Dr. Rieux remarks that it was 'hard to say if this sermon had any effect on our townsfolk'; however, it was 'noteworthy... that this Sunday of the sermon marked the beginning of something like a widespread panic in the town'. He then ends the chapter with his usual device of a striking narrative coda.

A few days after the sermon, when Rieux, on his way to one of the outlying districts of the town, was discussing the change with Grand, he collided in the darkness with a man who was standing in the middle of the pavement swaying from side to side without trying to advance. At the same moment the street-lamps, which were being lit later and later in the evening, went on suddenly, and a lamp just behind Rieux and his companion threw its light full on the man's face. His eyes were shut and he was laughing soundlessly. Big drops of sweat were rolling down the face convulsed with silent merriment. "A lunatic at large," Grand observed. Rieux took his arm and was shepherding him on when he noticed that Grand was trembling violently. "If things go on as they are going," Rieux remarked, "the whole town will be a madhouse." (1947, 97)

Madness and truth, light, and darkness: these are concepts most pertinent to the analysis of narrative crisis. Austin, the progenitor of the 'ordinary language philosophy' of speech acts discussed earlier, contended that, in everyday circumstances:

under the heading 'truth' what we, in fact, have is not a simple quality nor a relation, not indeed any one thing, but rather a whole dimension of criticism... there is a whole lot of things to be considered and weighed in this dimension alone—the facts, yes, but also the situation of the speaker, his purpose in speaking, his hearer, questions of precision and etc. (1962, 21-22)

As even the brief passages from *The Plague* quoted in this essay show, Austin's latitudinous description of the truth would greatly suit a writer of literary fiction, enabling him or her to create a detailed experiential world and comfortably 'live without god' within the pages of his or her narrative. In short, 'God' if s/he appeared at all in a fictional text would likely be a product of imaginative excesses of disbelief while imaginative parsimony of belief would typify the narrative of religion. Religious narratives, that is, just like the narratives of science, would seem to

prefer a stricter view of 'the truth', even when it appears counterintuitive, counterfactual, or 'mad'. Indeed, those interested in 'the religious experience' among evolutionary theorists tend to argue that religious narratives seem to have provided an ancient cultural resource whereby strange, estranging, ideas could be explored as 'revealed' truth without fear or debilitating anxiety, since they were told under the protective, homogenizing, umbrella of priestly sanction. Religious stories provided strong community resources that could be used to both protect and/or punish, just as we observed in Father Paneloux's sermon. Evolutionary theorists Scott Atran and Ara Norenzayan, thus argue that:

A key feature of the supernatural agent concepts common to all religions is the triggering of an "Innate Releasing Mechanism," or "agency detector," whose proper (naturally-selected) domain encompasses animate objects relevant to hominid survival—such as predators, protectors and prey—but which actually extends to moving dots on computer screens, voices in wind, faces on clouds. (2004, 713)

According to this theory, an 'agency detector' originally intended to spot predators in the course of hominid survival is also set in motion during a religious experience in which a subject 'sees', for example, an angel in the trees or 'hears' a thunderous God speaking to him. As I see it, this sort of evolutionary explanation is relevant to our understanding of literary production and its sociological effects in that the seer's voice, like that of a literary author is quite unique and requires hermeneutical interpretation. In the words of Atran and Norenzayan, that is, 'these...metacognitive capacities provide the hope and promise of open-ended solutions' to fundamental existential problems.

Hence, no social group can afford to weed out the religious experience and the seer—or indeed the literary author—altogether. A seer's 'vision', for instance, may serve to keep the flock together in times of crisis or offer a version of 'life beyond life' that is a crucial psychological counter to the near universal fear of death in all human communities. That is why the role of the evolutionary 'agency detector' is so crucial; its existence among the human species enables them to build communities that share foundational beliefs without question and visualize a common future for themselves. For the only species on the planet which possesses the linguistic gift of 'displacement'—that is, the ability to summon up scenarios that do not exist in the here and now—such a device could well prove invaluable to survival in a competitive, often depressing, world. Ronald Pies, by profession a doctor like the fictional Rieux and in real life a clinical professor at the Tufts University School of Medicine, analyzing narratives by depressives, writes:

The inherent problem in positing a depressive trigger is that we humans are famous for constructing explanatory narratives, even when the facts of the situation are not clear. Indeed, in her book, *Narrative Gravity*, linguistics professor Rukmini Nair argues that human beings have a genetic drive to fabricate narratives that serve our emotional needs. (2009, 21)

And it is here that we return to the notion of the religious ‘agency detectors’ propounded by Atran and Norenzayan. My thesis in this essay is that when old motifs such as, for example, ‘Satan’ or ‘Sodom’ enter public discourse anew they do so in circumstances where the humdrum has been rudely disrupted by a destabilizing event like the plague or a virus, disbelief is rampant, and trust is severely eroded—or, in Pies’ words, ‘the facts of the situation are not clear.’ It is in these situations of widespread social anxiety that both seers and skeptics as interpreters of the times are most needed. Just as a seer might once have interpreted ‘voices in wind, faces on clouds’, both religious leaders and radical authors (such as Camus reinterpreting the ancient myth of Sisyphus in the troubled period of the postwar) are the twin interpreters of crisis in periods of grave social turmoil—the one from a religious perspective where God is the sole arbiter of human destiny and the other from an atheist viewpoint where humans are in charge of their own fates.

Literary fictions, with their great scope for interpretative expansion, underwrite this great evolutionary debate. Camus, for example, can be regarded as an author committedly creating this ‘wider range of possible interaction’ and in the process generating considerable social perturbation. Insofar as he infuses the received narratives of religious discourse, and their time-worn garb with a new literary energy that speaks directly to the times and engages with contemporary intellectual and social dilemmas (see Spencer, 2014), he may paradoxically be said to contribute, in evolutionary terms, to keeping the religious conversation alive, since it abides everywhere including within the interstices of the basic structures of human institutions such as the family. Thus, Richard Dawkins argues, in his book *The God Delusion* (2006), that children have a deep-seated psychological tendency to take on their parent’s beliefs within families. Differing from Atran and Norenzayan on the role played by ‘agency detectors’ in religious evolution, Dawkins fixes not on the unique psychology of the seer, but instead on what, according to him, is the universal orientation towards obedience among human children, which makes them highly vulnerable to the ‘mind viruses’ designed to quell any potential rebellion against the prevailing parental/patriarchal order. Society, Dawkins maintains, actually encourages such absolute loyalty by labeling children with the religion of their parents: ‘A child is not [naturally] a Christian child, not a Muslim child, but a child of Christian parents or a child of Muslim parents’ (2006, 382). In an even earlier essay called ‘Viruses of the Mind’ (1993), Dawkins also remarks that ‘a human child is shaped by evolution to soak up the culture of her people’ and pursuing an epidemiological metaphor in that preliminary paper takes the view that the institutional hotbeds of religion and science in particular offer fertile breeding grounds for ‘mind viruses’ among the impressionable, such as children. These fields, he argued, take in the gullible but also draw in the most profound of thinkers (see also Grayling, 2013).

Camus would not disagree with this view. It is not by accident, after all, that he places a child dying of the plague at the dark center of his novel in a situation where both Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux feel equally helpless—and thus come emotionally closest to each other. Here are Camus’ masterly descriptions of the two men by the dying child’s bedside:

Now and then Rieux took his pulse, less because this served any purpose than as an escape from his utter helplessness and when he closed his eyes, he seemed to feel its tumult mingling with the fever of his own blood. And then, at one with the tortured child, he struggled to sustain him with all the remaining strength of his own body. But, linked for a few moments, the rhythms of their heartbeats soon fell apart, the child escaped him, and again he knew his impotence. Paneloux gazed down at the small mouth, fouled with the sordes of the plague and pouring out the angry death-cry that has sounded through the ages of mankind. He sank on his knees, and all present found it natural to hear him say in a voice hoarse but clearly audible across that nameless, never ending wail: "My God, spare this child!" (1960, 206)

It is such moving textual moments that attest the power of literature as an empathy generator, one that can indeed enable, even if momentarily, the atheistic doctor and the religiously absolutist priest to step into the spaces of each other's disbelief. If there is a sudden moment of illumination in fiction, that jolt of recognition that Aristotle terms 'anagnorisis', it comes after much struggle and is a stark revelation of human inadequacy.

In common, then, between the institutional fields of science and religion—but not so much literary fiction—is that both disallow a skeptical disbelief in their basic premises and each offers individuals specialized, doctrinal and yet capacious and social 'niches' for a. community member-ship, and b. pattern-recognition. As a result, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic needs are simultaneously satisfied when any individual hosts mental 'viruses' from these areas.

Religious and scientific narratives comfortably repeat familiar semantic motifs that make them shore up our aesthetic intuitions and, at the same time, serve to strengthen our belief in the ethical norms that guide us. In this respect, Camus' humanism seems broadly similar to what Tagore on the Indian subcontinent called 'The Religion of Man' (1931, see also Nair, 2017b and c), in preference to the hypothesis of an unforgiving, monotheistic God. The Tagore-Einstein dialogues of 1930 (see Ray, 1995 below) as well as Einstein's 1941 wartime aphorism that 'science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind' are also pertinent to these debates about science and religion being related discourses because each seeks an underlying unified explanation of observed phenomena; Einstein (1930), for instance, expresses this belief in a most unequivocal fashion when he writes, 'I assert that the cosmic religious experience is the strongest and the noblest driving force behind scientific research'. Strikingly, too, Einstein uses exactly that 'universal' metaphor mentioned in my opening section of moving from dark to light in his struggle to find the 'general theory of relativity':

In the light of knowledge attained, the happy achievement seems almost a matter of course, and any intelligent student can grasp it without too much trouble. But the years of anxious searching in the dark, with their intense longing, their alternation of confidence and exhaustion and the final emergence into light – only those who have experienced it can understand it. (see Guilini and Straumann below, 2006)

In his interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, Camus (1965), as we know, suggests that in an absurd universe that has no purpose, the only ‘rational’ choice seems to be to commit suicide. But he doggedly resists this dark, defeatist solution, choosing instead to imagine the impossible through a philosophy of fiction—a happy Sisyphus, or ordinary people like the fictional inhabitants of Oran on the treadmill of a ‘pointless’ human existence but nevertheless able to delight in living. It is, he seems to conclude, better to commit philosophical suicide rather than real suicide. This is the bedrock of Camus’ atheistic humanism, to be good to others as well as to oneself despite knowing that a force such as the plague bacillus—or indeed the coronavirus of today—is ultimately undefeatable and perhaps the truest measure both of the immortality of humankind and the mortality of God.

And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town [because the plague has gone], Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperiled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (1960, 297)

References

- Ade, P. A. R., Aghanim, N., Armitage-Caplan, C., et al. (2013). Planck 2013 results. I. Overview of products and scientific results – Table 9. *Astronomy and Astrophysics*, 1303, 5062.
- Atran, S., & Norenzayan, A. (2004). Religion’s evolutionary landscape: Counterintuition, commitment, compassion, communion. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 27, 713–770.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Clarendon Press.
- Beer, G. (1983). *Darwin’s plots: Evolutionary narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-century fiction*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Camus, A. (1965). *The myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien. Hamish Hamilton.
- Camus, A. (1960). *The Plague*, trans. Penguin Books.
- Camus, A. (1970). *Selected essays and notebooks*. Penguin.
- Chomsky, N. (1997) The ‘Noise’ interview with Fred Branfman, *Hotwired* 1997. <http://www.chomsky.info/interviews/199702-.htm>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Churchland, P. S., & Churchland, P. M. (1990). Could a machine think? *Scientific American*, 262(1), 32–37.
- Dawkins, R. (1993). Viruses of the mind. In B. Dahlbom (Ed.), *Dennett and his critics: Demystifying mind* (pp. 13–27). Blackwell.
- Dawkins, R. (2006). *The God delusion*. Bantam Press.
- Dennett, D. C. (1991). *Consciousness explained*. Little Brown.
- Dennett, D. C. (1992). The self as a center of narrative gravity. In F. Kessel, P. Cole, & D. Johnson (Eds.), *Self and consciousness: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 103–114). Erlbaum.
- Einstein, A. (1930). Religion and science. *New York Times Magazine*, 1–4.
- Frege, G. B. (1979). ‘Logic’ in Frege, 126–151.
- Frege, G. B. (1984). In McGuinness (Ed.), *Collected papers on mathematics, logic, and philosophy*. Blackwell.
- Giulini, D., & Straumann, N. (2006). Einstein’s impact on the physics of the twentieth century. *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Modern Physics*, 37, 115–173.

- Grayling, A. C. (2013). *The GOD argument: The case against religion and for humanism*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Kripke, S. (1972). Naming and necessity. In G. Harman & D. Davidson (Eds.), *Semantics of natural language* (pp. 253–355). Reidel.
- Labov, W. (1972). The transformation of experience in narrative syntax. In *Language in the inner City*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lyons, W. (1985). *Emotions*. Cambridge University Press.
- Max, D. T. (2005). The literary Darwinists. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/06/magazine/the-literary-darwinists.html>. Accessed 28 June 2021.
- Munton, J. (2017). Frege fiction and force. *Synthese*, 194, 3669–3692.
- Nair, R. B. (1985). Telling lies: Some literary and other violations of Grice's maxim of quality. *Nottingham Linguistic Circular*, 14(Special Issue on Pragmatics), 53–71.
- Nair, R. B. (1991). Expressing doubt and certainty: The tag question and the 'to' particle in Indian languages. *Studies in the Language Sciences*, 13, 207–227.
- Nair, R. B. (1997). Acts of agency and acts of god: The discourse of disaster. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 32, 535–542.
- Nair, R. B. (2002). *Narrative gravity: Conversation, cognition, culture*. Oxford University Press.
- Nair, R. (2010). The nature of reality: Einstein contra Tagore. In P. Ghose (Ed.), *Materialism and immaterialism in India and the West: Varying vistas* (Volume 10, Part 5 of History of Science, Philosophy and Culture). Centre for Studies in Civilisations.
- Nair, R. B. (2010). Yudhishthira's lie: The fiction of India. *Poetiques Comparatistes/Comparative Poetics*, 227–242.
- Nair, R. B. (2011a). The nature of narrative: Schemes, genes, memes, dreams and screams! In A. W. Geertz & J. S. Jensen (Eds.), *Religious narrative, cognition and culture: Image and word in the mind of narrative* (pp. 117–146). Routledge.
- Nair, R. B. (2011b). Thinking out the story box: Creative writing and narrative culture in South Asia. *Text*, 10, 1–22.
- Nair, R. B. (2012). Philological angst: Or how the narrative of census, caste and race in India still informs the discourse of the 21st century. In M. Messling & O. Ette (Eds.), *WortMachtStamm: Rassismus und determinismus in der philologie 18./19. Jh* (pp. 55–87). Wilhelm Fink.
- Nair, R. B. (2014). Narrative as a mode of explanation: Evolution & emergence. In M. Lissack & A. Garber (Eds.), *Modes of explanation: Affordances for action and prediction* (pp. 140–154). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nair, R. B. (2015). Virtue, virtuosity and the virtual: Experiments in the contemporary Indian English novel. In U. Anjaria (Ed.), *The history of the Indian novel in English* (pp. 251–266). Cambridge University Press.
- Nair, R. B. (2017a). "Localopolis and cosmopolis: An Indian narrative" (2017) in the Special Issue on 'Cosmopolitanism and Cross-cultural Negotiation' ed. Didier Coste in EU-topias. A Journal on Interculturality, Communication, and European Studies 147–159.
- Nair, R. B. (2017b). The nature of language and the language of nature: Rabindranath Tagore's Sabda Tattwo or the essence of words as an integrationist text. In A. Pable (Ed.), *Integrationism and humanism: Critical perspectives* (pp. 45–62). Routledge Research Series. Routledge.
- Nair, R. B. (2017c). Language, nation. Freedom: Rabindranath Tagore and Ludwig Wittgenstein on the Epistemology of Education. In K. L. Tuteja & K. Chakraborty (Eds.), *Tagore and nationalism* (pp. 219–244). Springer Nature.
- Nair, R. B. (2018a). Intending to mean, pretending to be: Reflections on the limits on genre. In R. B. Busse & N. Norgaard (Eds.), *Rethinking language, text and context: Interdisciplinary research in stylistics page* (pp. 147–163). Routledge.
- Nair, R. B. (2018b). Putting oneself in someone else's shoes. In Innovate SDGs, Issue 1 on the Role of Creativity and Innovation in Implementing SDGs: Publication of the Permanent Mission of St Vincent & the Grenadines to the UN, New York 5.
- Nair, R. B. (2019). Epithymetics: The psychology of desire. In G. Misra (Ed.), *The annual review of Indian psychology, Volume 1 'Cognitive and Affective Processes'* (pp. 204–270). Oxford University Press.
- Nair, R. B. (2020a). Figuring it out: Old modes and new codes for multimodality, technology and creative performativity in 21st century India. In L. Hidalgo Downing & B. Kraljevic Mujic (Eds.), *Performing Metaphorical Creativity* (pp. 311–342). John Benjamins.
- Nair, R. B. (2020b). *Keywords for India*. Bloomsbury Academic.

- Pies, R. (2009). Narratives, normality, and diagnostic neutrality. *Psychiatric News*, 44(5), 21.
- Putnam, H. (1975). The meaning of 'meaning.' *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 7, 215–271.
- Ray, S. (1995). The Tagore-Einstein conversations: Reality and the human world, Causality and Chance. In A. T. Tymieniecka (Ed.), *Heaven, earth, and in-between in the harmony of life. Analecta Husserliana (The Yearbook of Phenomenological Research)* (Vol. 47). Springer.
- Rossi, L. R. (1958). Albert Camus: The plague of absurdity. *Kenyon Review*, 20, 399–422.
- Ruse, M. (2016). *Darwinism as religion: What literature tells us about evolution*. Oxford University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R. (1975). 'The logical status of fictional discourse' in *New Literary History*, 6(2), 319–332.
- Searle, J. R. (1976). 'A classification of illocutionary acts', in D. Hymes (ed.) *Language in society*. Cambridge University Press.
- Searle, J. R., Kiefer, F., & Bierwisch, M. (Eds). (1980). *Speech act theory and pragmatics*. D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Somadeva Vasudeva. (2005). *Three satires of Nilakantha Kshemendra and Bhallata*. Clay Sanskrit Library, New York University Press.
- Spencer, N. (2014) *Atheists: The origin of the species*. Bloomsbury Continuum.
- Talwar, V., & Lee, K. (2002). Emergence of white-lie telling in children between 3 and 7 years of age. *The Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 48, 160–181.
- Wimsatt, W. K., & Beardsley, M. C. (1946). The intentional fallacy. *The Sewanee Review*, 54(3), 468–488.
- Zalasiewicz, J., Williams, M., Steffen, W., & Crutzen, P. (2010). The new world of the Anthropocene. *Environmental Science & Technology*, 2010(44–7), 2228–2231.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.