In "Religious discourse and first person authority" (Godlove 1994), my question was: Why do so many scholars of religion seem to think that religious people are not really talking about what they seem and claim to be talking about, namely, invisible, intelligent powers? I argued that the answer has less to do with scholarly arrogance or reductionism run amok than it does with the very nature of linguistic interpretation. Roughly: An indispensable moment in interpretation is the interpreter's appreciation of the connection between a speech act and its mental and physical environment, its "natural history". This already hints at why speakers are generally authoritative as to the meanings of their words: because they know without appeal to evidence to what they intend their words to apply. But, when it comes to religious discourse, this natural history is often unavailable and in the case of abstract monotheism, often unavailable in principle. The main burden of the article was to suggest that the answer to my question lies in that unavailability.

In his perceptive response, Wayne Proudfoot advances two sorts of objections to my argument. First, he objects to my conception of the methodology of interpretation. Second, he disputes my readings of several of the individual authors to whom I appeal, in particular Hume and Durkheim.

As to the methodology of interpretation, Proudfoot sees it as "something like an inference to the best explanation"; he says that it "is an elaboration of the 'principle of charity' Godlove mentions" (Proudfoot 1995: 283). Since I am all for charity, whether any large issues divide us here depends on how each of us envisions the details of the "elaboration". So, to lay my cards on the table, I see charity as imposing at least these four distinct, unavoidable constraints on interpretation.

(1) Semantic and attitudinal holism. In assigning content to beliefs (and other propositional attitudes), and meaning to utterances and sentences, we unavoidably assume the content of many neighbouring potential beliefs, utterances, and sentences. Thus, no matter how broad the smiles or how vigorous
the head-nodding, we would not take our interlocutor's, "It is raining", to mean that it is raining absent our assumption that she believes rain is wet, that it typically falls toward the earth, that it is associated with clouds, etc. I take it that, absent the likes of these assumptions, we would resist the invited interpretation even if it were raining then and there, and even if our interlocutor's competence with English had been independently established.

(2) Preponderant truth. The initial claim is that we lose confidence in attributing the belief that it is raining absent a pattern of related beliefs. But if those related beliefs are to support the attribution of the belief in question, the bulk of them must (as far the interpreter can tell) be true. The reason is that too much error or falsity in neighbouring belief weakens our grasp on what the target belief is about. (This conclusion is suggested, though not proved, by the thought-experiment in the previous paragraph — rain is wet, it does fall toward the earth, it is associated with clouds, etc.)

(3) Preponderant rationality. The beliefs that we attribute to a person should be those which we consider it most likely that that person will have, given our theory of knowledge, and our knowledge of the person's experience, attitudes, likes, dislikes, and so on. This sounds as though it has the makings of an inference to the best explanation, and perhaps it does. But we also know that our attributions are constrained by the twin considerations of holism and truth, as above. Thus, the beliefs we attribute in explaining a person's behaviour will have to cohere with the beliefs we attribute in understanding his utterances and sentences. And such coherence will require, among other intellectual virtues, consistency — the person must be taken to recognize many (though of course not all) of the implications of his beliefs and desires, both at the moment and over time.

(4) The distal theory of meaning. Charity leads us, finally, to recognize the dependency of many of our beliefs about the world on those features of the world that prompted them. We learn to make certain sounds under certain conditions — "It is raining", paradigmatically, when it is raining nearby. Knowing this, interpreters will — all things equal — assign content on the assumption that those they wish to interpret correctly appreciate the perceptible features of their environment.

In sum, it seems to me that if we want to understand utterances, attribute thoughts, or see behaviour as intentional, we must respect these four constraints, whether that respect takes the form of deliberately allowing them to guide assumptions, hypotheses, and inferences, or is reflected in the unavoidable presuppositions of our everyday interpretive judgments. (In these paragraphs I have helped myself to conclusions variously expressed by Baker, Bennett, Davidson, Dennett, Follesdall, Putnam, Ricoeur, Stich, and others, though I have departed at points from all.) Where does this leave me with respect to Proudfoot's criticism? If, in Proudfoot's judgment, all this unavoid-