

REPLY TO ANTHONY KENNY

Kai Nielsen

I appreciate Anthony Kenny's sympathetic and understanding account in the article we have before us and in his review of my *Naturalism and Religion* in the *Times Literary Supplement*. He reveals an acute though not uncritical understanding of my recent thinking concerning religion. Having said that I will also say that in "Kai Nielsen and the Limits of Naturalism" he has, I believe, in certain crucial respects got me wrong. This comes out most succinctly in the very last paragraph of his essay. There he says:

I am at one with Nielsen in rejecting the God of traditional philosophical theism. But I believe that such a rejection must be based on detailed examination of the concepts put forward by traditional theists. I do not believe that the concept of God can be rejected by some blanket condemnation as being incompatible with "naturalism," whatever that may be. The arguments that I have put forward, and those put forward by other philosophers I respect, show only that particular concepts of God are untenable. For all I know, there may be other concepts, no more different from the God of the Bible or the Qur'an than the deity of scholastic and rational philosophy, that are intellectually coherent and philosophically defensible. For that reason, unlike Nielsen, I am an agnostic but not an atheist.

Kenny claims that the concept of God cannot reasonably be rejected by some blanket condemnation such as being incompatible with naturalism, "whatever that may be," or that, even if it can be had, of some reasonably determinate and adequate conception of naturalism. *Au contraire*, I try to attend to the way religious concepts are used—the uses of first-order God

talk—and I seek to show that developed Judeo-Christian-Islamic theism makes some crucial and (for such theists) central claims that are incoherent. They are, I claim, incoherent not just for naturalists but for anyone, including these theists, who will attend to the uses of our common language. I may be mistaken here. Wittgensteinian fideists think I am. But my claim here, mistaken or not, does not appeal to naturalism. This is not to make a blanket condemnation of such theisms (the God of the scriptures) for being incompatible with naturalism. It is not to say, “If a religious claim is incompatible with naturalism then the religious claim must be wrong.” That, as Kenny says, would be the mirror image of those analytical theists who take it that if a claim is incompatible with a developed theism—say, with Christianity as it has developed—it must be wrong. Both sides have made, Kenny claims, a quick question-begging argument. It is by doing this that analytical theism, I would claim, is made so incredibly boring not to mention question begging. But I do not give to understand that if Jewish-Christian-Islamic theism is incompatible with naturalism then it must be at best false.

A good Wittgensteinian friend who reads my manuscripts counseled me to drop all that stuff about naturalism. He probably thought we didn't have much of a grasp of what it came to anyway. He thought what I should do is just stick to my claims about the incoherence of God-talk and the essentially Wittgensteinian way I have argued for it. I didn't take my friend's advice, but in the way Robert Sinclair has brought out in this volume and in his review of my *Naturalism and Religion*,¹ I sought to set out clearly a naturalistic worldview and provide some reasons for accepting it (which also would, of course, invoke some criticisms of theism), but I could—and *perhaps* should—have not been so hedgehoggy and instead simply stuck with showing that belief in God and in immortality of standard theism is either false or incoherent depending on how it is understood. My case for naturalism does in part involve a critique of theism, but my critique of theism does not rest on my naturalism. Right or wrong, it is self-standing. It involves no metaphysical commitments or even epistemological commitments on my part. In this respect, like John Rawls, I travel philosophically light.

II

Kenny also remarks (as we have seen) that “the arguments that I [Kenny] have put forward, and those put forward by other philosophers whom I respect, show only that *particular concepts* of God are untenable. For all I know, there may be other concepts no more different from the God of the Bible and the Qur'an than the deity of scholastic and rational [rationalistic?] philosophy, that are intellectually coherent and philosophically defensible. For that reason, unlike Nielsen, I am an agnostic but not an atheist.”

Surely Kenny is right. One could at best show by such arguments as both

he and I deploy that some *particular* concepts of God are untenable, not that *all* concepts of God are untenable, let alone must be untenable. But this only shows him to be a *fallibilist*. It is no reason for not being an atheist. A “fallibilist atheist” is not a contradiction or even a deviation from a linguistic regularity. And that is the kind of atheism that mine is. Both “atheism” and “agnosticism” are qualified by “fallibilism.” Moreover, a Jew, Christian, or Muslim (particularly if he were fideistically inclined) could as well be fallibilistic. In each case any of these five labels add something to being a fallibilist. But Kenny treats “agnosticism” and “fallibilism” as if they come to the same thing. It would be foolish for anybody—atheist, agnostic, standard theist, or anyone else—to say that all conceptualizations of God are, let alone must be, incoherent (or, for that matter, coherent) before examining them. What can be said, perhaps with justification, is that the anthropomorphic conceptions of God that we are familiar with lead to false (often plainly false) claims, for instance, “Moses saw the hairy backsides of God.” By contrast, the nonanthropomorphic ones—the conceptions of present-day standard theism—are either incoherent or reductive. (Richard Braithwaite’s and R. M. Hare’s “Christian positivism” are just secular characterizations in disguise.) But that is not to say that no such coherent conceptions are possible that are compatible with the Bible or the Qur’an, though it is not unreasonable to say that that is very unlikely. An atheist need neither be simplistic nor fanatical. But he can, and should, as should everyone else, be thoroughly fallibilistic.

Sometimes the tactic of throwing the burden of proof on the opponent is not wrong. If J. M. E. McTaggart tells Moore that time is unreal and Moore responds, “I am more confident that I put on my socks before I put on my shoes this morning than of any philosophical doctrine that says time is unreal,” the ball is surely in McTaggart’s court to show *in what sense*, if any, time is unreal when in some plain sense, as Moore shows, it obviously does make sense to say that time is real and certainly that statement appears to be an unproblematic candidate for being true. But such kinds of argument, for the reasons I gestured at above, should not be utilized in arguing about the reality of God, however tempting sometimes it may be for the secularist or the Wittgensteinian fideist to do so.

Kenny remarks that, my claims to the contrary notwithstanding, I give in my *Naturalism and Religion* “nothing that can *really* be called a *proof* of incoherence of the concept of God—the God, that is, of standard theism.” What is problematical here is what is taken to count as “a proof” in this context. Kenny’s word “really” tips us off here. Do we mean “proof” as a mathematician or logician does when she speaks of proving a theorem? If that is what Kenny has in mind we should remind ourselves of Frederick Waismann’s remark that it is salutary for philosophers to count the number of theorems proved in philosophy.² But philosophers usually don’t have that strict sense of “proof” in mind when they speak of proofs in philosophy. The closest thing that comes to this strict sense of “proof” in the philosophy of religion is concerning the ontological arguments—

ontological proofs and disproofs of the existence of God. The first try to show that to deny the existence of God comes to a contradiction and the second that to assert the existence of God comes to a contradiction. Norman Malcolm—to the shock of many people when his article first came out—argued in a sophisticated way for the former and J. N. Findlay argued in a sophisticated way for the latter.³ Both were extensively attacked. Findlay recanted and Malcolm remarked that the criticisms directed against him were formidable and he came to doubt whether he could answer them but then remarked he was not so sure that he could not.⁴ But he never got around to trying to answer them.

The other “proofs”—the various forms of cosmological argument, design arguments, or the arguments from religious experience—do not purport to give proofs in this strict sense but something like an inference to the best explanation. They try to show us that we are justified in believing in God and that failing to believe in God is unjustified. The claim is that any rational person, if she reasons carefully and is not corrupted by sin, will come to believe that God exists. But it is hardly news that all of these “proofs,” including the ontological proofs and disproofs, are now thought by most philosophers (except in sectarian Catholic schools) not to be sound and that no new proof is expected to be around the corner. The defense of Christianity (for example) takes new tacks in contemporary life. But it no longer relies on “proofs” or demonstrations of the existence of God or even seeks in any straightforward sense to give evidence for the existence of God. Of course, most philosophers could be wrong, but given the history of argument here it is not very likely that most philosophers are wrong on that issue or that skepticism about the proofs is just a current fad or even a modernist prejudice. This I think is an accurate sociological and historical account of the status of such arguments. I think it would be foolish to discount the weight of such historical-sociological considerations.

III

All the above types of argument for the existence of God presuppose that the concept of God is a coherent notion. To assess these arguments (i.e., “the proofs”) we have to initially at least presuppose that. But both Kenny and I think that belief in God—given the particular concept of God of traditional philosophical theism—is incoherent. Our reasons are in part different, but also in part the same. Kenny’s argument for the incoherence of the concept of God in traditional philosophical theism turns on his complicated arguments about indeterminism and determinism. I am not sure they are sound, but they are at least plausible and he argues for them. And he does claim to show (more convincingly) that there is a contradiction between saying that God is immutable and saying that God is omniscient.

My central argument for the incoherence of the concept of God is different

from his, but it has a similar structure. The God of what is by now standard theism is taken to be the utterly disembodied, omnipresent, infinite individual transcendent to the universe who created the universe out of nothing. This is the being that is at issue. I claim that there neither is nor even could be such a being. Such a theistic claim puts forth considerations (or *tries* to put forth considerations) that turn out to be incoherent not because naturalism makes them so, but because of the very logic of our natural languages. Kenny shows that there are such contradictions in other bits of God-talk. For example, he claims, rightly I believe, as remarked above, that it is a contradiction to say that God can be both immutable and omniscient, and similarly I claim that “an infinite individual” is a contradiction and that “a disembodied individual” is also (though less obviously) a contradiction and “transcendent to the universe” is not even clear enough to be a contradiction. We both are in the same boat, namely, that when we attend to our language—to the use of our words and sentences—we find (or think we find) that these words, conjoined as they are in standard theistic discourse, result in contradictions. Something, for example, cannot be infinite and be an individual. Just think how “infinite” and “individual” are used. These words plainly do not hang together.

Furthermore, to argue about at least a part of another of my arguments, Kenny also believes (as I do) that the “notion of a totally immaterial mind . . . is an incoherent one.” I give arguments for these claims of incoherence, as does he. They may not be proofs in the strict sense, but they do attempt to point out contradictions in the very concept of the God of traditional philosophical theism, and I would say of standard theism as well.

Kenny also points out that defining “naturalism” is not as easy as it may seem. He follows one of my own lines of argument about that and follows it accurately. I will not rehearse that. However he misses the key points I make about naturalism in my postscript to *Naturalism and Religion*.⁵ To talk of nature, I claim, is to talk about the structure of the physical world. And to talk about this is to talk about an all-embracing space-time system. This, it seems to me, gives us a coherent conception of nature. It cannot be correct to say that we do not know what we are talking about when we talk about nature.⁶

When I, as a naturalist, talk about nature, I go on to say that over and above, and as distinct from, the space-time world there is nothing further that exists. When we are speaking of physical realities, space-time is all there is. There is no purely spiritual or purely mental “something” more. This may be mistaken and its logical status may be anomalous, but it is clear enough what the naturalist is saying. But this says nothing about the art world, the world of human affairs, moral realities, political realities, or other cultural realities—the things that led me to speak of *social* naturalism.⁷ But it is a *social naturalism* in part because these social realities are not taken, whatever their “logical status,” to be independent of physical ones. There would be none of these realities if there were not physical realities—space-time entities or processes. I agree with Kenny that the notion of a totally immaterial mind is an incoherent one.⁸

Stump is quoted by Kenny as saying, "Even contemporary philosophers must grant that an immaterial mind is possible." But this notion, as Kenny says, is incoherent, and even *if* (pace Kenny) it is not incoherent we do not know how it is possible any more than we know how, or understand what it would be like, for "procrastination drinks melancholy" to be possible, and while this is compatible with reductionism it does not require it. Think of Donald Davidson's anomalous monism. The most crucial thing here is to recognize that we have specified in a coherent way what nature is. Whether I am right in thinking that there is nothing beyond nature is another matter. But it is something that I argue for and do not just assume it and take its sense to be evident.

IV

The above clarifies what "naturalism" is, though there is still *perhaps* a problem about the logical status of "there is nothing that exists over and above this all-embracing space-time system" or of "over and above the space-time world there is nothing further that exists." I would not like them, as they appear to be, to be metaphysical claims. But it must be said that they certainly appear to be so. I try in *Naturalism and Religion* to construe them in such a way that they are not.⁹ But what I want to consider here is a claim that Kenny makes. He remarks: "An underlying argument against the existence of God can, however, be detected throughout the book. Naturalism is the only correct form of philosophy. But naturalism is incompatible with a belief that God exists. Therefore, one should not believe that God exists." Put just like this it sounds like pure dogmatism on my part. To dispel this it should be formulated like this: "Naturalism is incompatible with a belief that God exists. *If* naturalism is the only correct form of philosophy, *if* it is the only correct way of construing things, then one should not believe that God exists."

In trying to undermine this argument Kenny argues that determinism is false. I, compatibilist that I am, am not convinced, but I could go along with J. L. Austin's remark that "determinism" is not a name for anything clear and consistently remain a naturalist. It is also false to claim that I think the problem of evil yields the strongest argument of all for rejecting the existence of God. I have always thought that it never has played the powerful role in atheistic or contra-theistic accounts that many atheists and agnostics think that it does. It seems to me that long ago Alasdair MacIntyre, and more recently Alvin Plantinga, gave us good reasons for thinking that the argument from evil is at best indecisive, and more strongly so than other fallibilistic arguments, though I would add that I think J. L. Mackie's arguments here have considerable force, though, as he himself admits, as I do, not decisive force. (See my remarks in my new preface to the paperback edition of my *Atheism and Philosophy*.)¹⁰

What remains most decisive for me is (1) my particular arguments for the incoherence of God-talk mentioned above, (2) the coherence and plausibility of

naturalism, and (3) what I have called my cumulative argument against theism.¹¹ The argument (to gesture at it) goes something like this: Anthropomorphic forms of theism, which are the earliest forms, admit of verificationist challenges, and these forms of theism can be seen to be just plainly false. *So construed*, theism is little better than a superstition. For a long time now most of the theistic sects (*some* somewhat ambivalently) have developed beyond those anthropomorphic forms into something that is utterly nonanthropomorphic, or at least less plainly anthropomorphic. That is, they have developed into what Wolterstorff calls standard theism, which I have argued is I think plausibly, though not utterly, decisively incoherent, or has taken incoherent metaphysical forms (e.g., Tillichian theology or process theology and the like). I doubt that Kenny would have much truck with them. There have also recently been forms of Christian and Jewish articulations of faith (I don't know about Islam here) that are (though in an unacknowledged way) naturalistic in substance but Christian or Jewish in *rhetoric*. And finally, baffling to me, there are among some theologians reconstructions of Christianity or Judaism that are *avowedly* naturalistic. I take all these later construals of religion that go with them to be at best false, some incoherent, and some with a more impoverished vision than an explicitly nonreligious atheism. I further argue for the coherence, greater normative adequacy, and more coherent vision of naturalism at least on some articulations,¹² articulations that come along cumulatively as the earlier religious ones are defeated.

These claims are, of course, controversial, as are all philosophical claims of any import. I seek to make them less problematic and less contestable in my *Atheism and Philosophy*, *Naturalism without Foundations*, and *Naturalism and Religion*. How successful I have been is not for me to judge. But *if* I have come near to the mark, it would support the argument that "naturalism is incompatible with a belief that God exists." I would support the claim that naturalism (on its more adequate articulations) is the best worldview we have. Therefore, if one wants to be reasonable, one should not believe that God exists. Yet this argument rests not only on contestable considerations but also on hedgehogish considerations. So it could not plausibly be taken to be decisive. Moreover, naturalism gains strength from my quite independent arguments against belief in God. I do not just *assume* naturalism and say that, this being so, God cannot exist—which is not to say that the reasonableness of naturalism should not have considerable weight. My most crucial arguments against the viability of religious belief do not assume that materialism or rest on arguments for naturalism, though they, of course, are compatible with naturalism.

For the more decisive argument against Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, consider my specific arguments for the incoherence of standard theism. But even they are not decisive, for it always could be challenged whether my judgment about incoherency here is adequate. But then it should be recognized that nothing of importance in philosophy is, or even can be, decisive. But that does not mean that some arguments are not better than others. Note, in this connection, the following passage from Kenny:

In *Naturalism and Religion* the lack of fundamental arguments against the existence of God is not inadvertent. Nielsen believes that on the terrain of argument the battle between theism and atheism was won more than a generation ago. Nowadays, he maintains, naturalism is simply taken for granted by the better sort of philosopher. He admits to being bored when, for instance, Richard Swinburne and J. L. Mackie go toe-to-toe over which belief system, a secular one or a theistic one, has the better claim to having "the true cosmology": "A claim that we have a new perfectly sound argument for the existence of God is more likely to be met with a yawn rather than with philosophical interest."¹³

Kenny is right and perceptive in recognizing that it is not inadvertent that in these works there is a lack of fundamental arguments—I would add of the classical kind—against the existence of God.¹⁴ It seems to me obvious that Hume and Kant did the basic work here. Their arguments are in various ways superficially flawed, but they are and have been readily amended. They have won on these grounds, and the interesting and significant arguments concerning religion since the nineteenth century have turned *not* on whether we can prove or disprove the existence of God but on other matters. This is why I have paid so much attention to Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinian fideism.¹⁵ I could have done much the same thing with J. G. Hamann, Søren Kierkegaard, or Karl Barth. It is the issues raised by them and their atheistic or agnostic counterparts that raise what for us now are issues that are religiously significant, not some refurbished argument from contingency to necessity analytical style.

My assumption that naturalism in some form is usually simply taken for granted by philosophers is, I think, not far off the mark sociologically speaking. Wolterstorff may be right that there are among philosophers and other intellectuals a lot of closet theists. But there probably are a lot more closet atheists and agnostics among philosophers and other intellectuals, many of whom think it is just too vulgar and too boring to argue about belief and unbelief. Moreover, there are plenty of philosophers who are hardly atheist or agnostic but are simply nonbelievers who think the issue is of no interest. They are all naturalists of some sort or other or tacit naturalists who think there is nothing else to be, if you accept any labels at all, but to be a naturalist. It may be too *parti-pris* on my part to say that naturalism is just taken for granted by the better sort of philosopher. Certainly there are some very good philosophers around that are not naturalists and are religious, but when this becomes evident concerning a philosopher it is something that provokes comment, or at least raised eyebrows. But a philosopher being a secularist—as long as he is not aggressive about it—is now par for the course, while a hundred years ago it would have been regarded as just natural to be religious. The naturalist would then have been the odd person out, and indeed a disapproved-of person. Is this just a change in the *Zeitgeist*, or is there something deeper at stake? I think the latter, but again I may be too *parti-pris*.

V

Building on this last set of remarks, I want to return to the passage I quoted from Kenny at the beginning. We both agree that we should examine the concepts “put forward by traditional theists” and that we should reject the conceptualizations of them given by “traditional *philosophical* theism”—the conceptualizations given by, as Kenny puts it, scholasticism and rationalistic philosophy.¹⁶ That is why my core arguments about intelligibility take as their targets the plain, philosophically unadorned, first-order God-talk of traditional theists—what Wolterstorff and Plantinga call standard theism. I do not say they are the only forms incoherence (putative incoherence, if you will) that people give expression to in thinking about religion, but those are the ones I am interested in, not in Paul Tillich’s or J. B. Metz’s rather specialized, jargon-ridden incoherence. I try to show that key elements of ordinary God-talk and the theologizing that goes with them are unintelligible or incoherent or that (where they are anthropomorphic) they result often in plainly false statements but never, where religious matters are at issue, make statements that are true. As traditional religious discourse has slowly changed, it has, in warding off superstition, moved, I claim, from saying false things to being incoherent. When we look at the efforts of process theologians or philosophers or naturalistic theologians or Tillichians or other metaphysically attuned theologians or “Christian positivists” (Braithwaite and Hare) or Wittgensteinian fideists (Malcolm and Phillips), we get thinkers who reject both the God of traditional *philosophical* theism and typically the concept of God of traditional or standard theism.¹⁷

Kenny is right that someone could perhaps articulate (for all we could be *sure* of) a conceptualization of God compatible with the “God of the Bible or the Qur’an” that is intellectually coherent and philosophically defensible. But the point is that no one has and that we do not have much of an idea of how to go about doing it. Kenny and I agree about that for “traditional philosophical theism.” But none of the contemporary moves have done any better. Indeed it could be plausibly argued they are worse. Modern and contemporary philosophical and theological theory either gets tied up in metaphysical incoherencies (Tillich and process theology) or in naturalistic theology or in “Christian positivism” where we are given something that is atheist in substance but Jewish-Christian-Islamic in rhetoric. The same is true (though less clearly) for Wittgensteinian fideism.

Kenny again is right that we can show only that *particular* concepts are untenable—there is no such thing as a general concept of God—and tomorrow we may (as far as logical possibilities go) come up with a concept (or perhaps a conceptualization) of God that is tenable. But God-talk has been around for a long time and all the conceptualizations we have on offer suffer from one or another of the above defects. It is rather fanciful to think that by deep faith, careful thinking, and living with integrity, we are going to gain

something that does the trick. Kenny's agnosticism just comes to *fallibilism*—that is, something that any reasonable person should accept. But fallibilism or atheism doesn't come to, let alone warrant, agnosticism. And it doesn't warrant our thinking that there are no considerations for or against religious belief and that we cannot show, or give any telling grounds for claiming, which cluster of considerations are the stronger. My atheism is fallibilistic. Indeed, "fallibilistic atheism" should be a redundancy.

NOTES

1. Robert Sinclair, this volume and in his "Naturalism and Religion: Review of Naturalism and Religion by Kai Nielsen," *Philosophical Investigations* 27 (2004): 189–93.

2. Friedrich Waismann, *How I See Philosophy* (New York: St. Martin's, 1968), pp. 1–38.

3. Norman Malcolm, "Anselm's Ontological Arguments," *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960): 378–90; John Niemar Findlay, "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" *Mind* 57 (1948): 176–83.

4. Norman Malcolm, *Knowledge and Certainty* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1963), p. 162.

5. Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2001), pp. 429–95.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 446–47.

7. Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), pp. 27–77.

8. Anthony Kenny in this volume, and Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, pp. 77–103.

9. Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, pp. 447–50.

10. Nielsen, *Atheism and Philosophy* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005).

11. Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations*.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 557–97; Nielsen, *Naturalism and Religion*, pp. 56–76.

13. Kenny, this volume, p. 66.

14. I do, however, in some considerable detail and with care, consider these classical arguments in my early work. Kai Nielsen, *Reason and Practice: A Modern Introduction to Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 135–240, 477–91.

15. See the exchange on this between D. Z. Phillips and myself in Kai Nielsen and Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* (London: SCM, 2005).

16. He said "rational philosophy" but I don't know what that means. So I take him to have meant "rationalistic philosophy." "Rational philosophy" (1) should be pleonastic (except for Oriental philosophy and some obscurantist versions of Continental philosophy) and (2) has many and varied species.

17. This is less clear with the Wittgensteinian fideists. Malcolm, for example, tries to stick with the language games that ordinary Christians, Jews, and Muslims play and tries to give them a perspicuous representation.