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## BELIEF, UNBELIEF AND THE PARITY ARGUMENT

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The contemporary heirs of natural theology (including those philosophers who have been dubbed 'reformed epistemologists') have become much more modest than the natural theologians of times past. They have taken up the less demanding defensive task of defeating the arguments of skeptics over religion emanating from the Enlightenment. They have tried to show that skeptics are not justified in claiming that religious beliefs are irrational. The religious believer, they contend, is both intellectually and morally within his rights to remain faithful to his religious traditions. A key argument here for them is the argument that has been dubbed the *parity argument*. Crudely expressed, as a first approximation, the parity argument goes like this: suppose, for the sake of the argument at least, that the skeptical arguments against natural theology are well-taken and that we have no proofs, including proofs of probative revelatory phenomena, for the existence of God; suppose further that skeptical arguments such as Hume's are also well-taken concerning our basic common sense convictions, e.g. the reliability of our sense impressions, our belief in induction, our belief in other minds, the reality of the past and the like, such that they are revealed to be mere *natural* beliefs, bits of animal faith, as devoid as are our revealed beliefs of rational justification. If this really is our situation, the unbeliever (the atheist or agnostic) can hardly be justified in claiming that there is anything irrational about the believer's continuing to believe in God and Divine Providence when she too accepts, as well, many groundless beliefs (beliefs for which there is no rational justification) which are also fundamental to her life. Indeed, the unbeliever may even be caught up in an inconsistency of sorts in making secular commitments without grounds while refusing to make groundless religious commitments, commitments which would also be central for a properly human life.

There is a stronger and a weaker form of the parity argument. On the stronger form the unbeliever is said to be in some, not very clear sense, inconsistent in adopting groundless common sense beliefs and rejecting groundless religious beliefs. There

is, however, a weaker more permissive version of the parity argument which does not try to convict the unbeliever of inconsistency but contends that the believer and unbeliever are in the same boat; that both must accept groundless beliefs such that the unbeliever cannot, while accepting the groundless beliefs of common sense, justifiably accuse the believer of irrationality for accepting his religious beliefs purely on faith.

I shall be concerned here exclusively with the weaker permissive version of the parity argument. It is an argument that, at least among the Anglo-American community of philosophers or religion, has considerable support. Defenders of reformed epistemology such as Alvin Plantinga have accepted it, as has Norman Malcolm, among the Wittgensteinian Fideists, and as has such a modest and cautious Christian philosopher as Terence Penelhum.

The stronger form has little plausibility and has been reasonably set aside. My argument shall be that the weaker, more permissive, purely defensive, version, is also without merit. It will not provide a sound basis for setting aside the challenge to religions which emerged from the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup>

## II

The parity argument, in its most general form, has at its core the claim that, epistemologically speaking, religious beliefs are no worse off than the beliefs of common sense and science since all these beliefs rest on assumptions that cannot be rationally justified. We cannot, defenders of the parity argument claim, rationally justify in the appropriate foundationalist sense our belief in the past, in other minds, in the general regularity of nature or in the reality of even the most stable and precious of our moral beliefs. However, we should also recognize that we are not justified in accepting these beliefs as rational or reasonable to believe without proof while at the same time rejecting equally central religious beliefs as groundless irrational religious beliefs. Both sets of beliefs are groundless and since it is not unreasonable, even in the face of philosophical skepticism, to accept the groundless common sense and scientific beliefs, it cannot then, by parity of reasoning, be reasonable or justifiable to claim the groundless religious beliefs are irrational.

I want first to argue that it is only a severe foundationalism—a foundationalism of the classic sort—that gives the parity

argument force. Without assuming such a foundationalism we have no good reasons for believing the different sets of belief are actually in the same boat. By 'classical foundationalism' I mean a philosophical account that holds that the only beliefs that are properly basic are beliefs which are self-evident, incorrigible reports of experience or are evident to the senses. These, and only these, are foundational and thus properly basic beliefs on such an account. All other beliefs are rational if and only if supported either deductively or inductively by properly basic beliefs. However, on the basis of this classical foundationalism it is not only religious and theological beliefs that are neither properly basic nor supported by properly basic beliefs; the same thing obtains for our familiar basic common sense beliefs such as belief in other minds, the reality of the past and the like. None of the things we want and need to know or indeed even the things among them that we should be confident we could really know could be known or justifiably believed if we accept the program of classical foundationalism. Indeed classical foundationalism itself would be self-refuting for that very belief itself is not self-evident, evident to the senses or an incorrigible report of experience and we cannot deduce it from any such propositions or inductively justify it on such a basis. If it provides a correct criterion of rationality it is itself irrational.

However, and be that as it may, the whole thrust of the development of contemporary philosophy cuts against foundationalism. Most notably, if there is anything at all to the work of the pragmatists and such powerful anti-foundationalists as W. V. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson, such foundationalism is, to understate it, very implausible indeed. There are no beliefs which are foundational in that strong sense and indeed, except in a very pragmatic sense, we should not take any beliefs at all to be foundational. Rather we have, with a thoroughgoing fallibilism, a web of belief in which all beliefs taken *seriatim* can, at least in principle, be questioned; none are taken to be self-evident or certain or beyond the very possibility of being questioned. The beliefs in a web of belief get mutual support from each others in the system and thus, if you will, are pragmatically basic. But none are permanently immune from revision and perhaps even rejection, and none are basic to all the rest such that if they fall the rest will all come down. (That does not mean that in

practice there is even the slightest reason to be skeptical about some of the central, most deeply embedded, common sense beliefs in the system.)

Classical foundationalism yields, in a way that is utterly fantastic to someone not hooked on philosophy, pervasive skepticism where it is accepted as a litmus test for not only religious beliefs and scientific beliefs but even for those common sense beliefs of which we are the most confident, such as Canada participated in World War II, it is colder in December in New Hampshire than it is in July, that people require sleep, that they are sometimes in pain and the like.

The parity argument found its rationale, such as it is, in the claim that religious belief is no worse off epistemologically than the beliefs of common sense and science, since, after all, all such beliefs—that is both religious and non-religious beliefs—rest on assumptions that cannot be justified. They are all, that is, ungrounded beliefs. But that belief—that strong claim about ungroundedness—itself requires for its justification the acceptance of classical foundationalism, a belief which at worst is self-refuting and is at best arbitrary. Classical foundationalism is arbitrary because (a) its merely stipulated criteria for what is justified and what is not are so severe that none of our beliefs (even our commonsensically firmest beliefs) could possibly be justified if we accepted such criteria, and (2) it does not at all give us grounds for not accepting instead a fallibilistic coherentist model of justified beliefs in a way that roughly squares with our firmly intuitive but still reflective sense of which beliefs are justified and which are not. This model enables us in turn to correct our commonsensically intuitive beliefs when they clash and to correct the practices of practical justification when in their very workings they get into difficulties. There are in that fallibilistic model no absolute presuppositions which just must be accepted, or the utilization of assumptions which cannot possibly be rationally justified. This is a model plainly alternative to foundationalism which squares better with our common sense and scientific sense and scientific understanding of the world, but no reason has been given for accepting the more arcane criteria of foundationalism rather than the more commonsensical criteria of fallibilism. This being so, it is more reasonable to stick with fallibilism.

Many of our common sense beliefs and scientific beliefs can be shown to be justified on such a coherentist basis. We can

know, as we bloody well ought, that the Earth has existed for many years past and that cats do not grow on trees, while still having very good reasons for being skeptical of religious beliefs such as God speaks to us, God created us, shows providential care for us, and indeed that God exists. Defenders of the parity argument take the classical epistemological tradition entirely too seriously. They should take to heart Richard Rorty's and Charles Taylor's attack on the tradition.<sup>2</sup>

Our basic common sense beliefs—beliefs that philosophers such as G. E. Moore took to be common sense beliefs—and our religious beliefs are not at parity. They are perhaps at parity where classical foundationalism or something very like it is accepted, but there are very good reasons indeed for rejecting classical foundationalism as well as any of its near cousins.

### III

The parity argument was designed at the very minimum to show that in important respects, with respect to the justifiability of their beliefs, believers and non-believers alike are, if classical foundationalism is true, in the same boat, and that as a result non-believers cannot justifiably accuse the believers of irrationality. Whatever we want to say about the justifiability of that general accusation about irrationality, the parity argument, if my above argument is near to the mark, cannot be deployed to protect the believer. Classical foundationalism is just too implausible.

Perhaps a more modest foundationalism could be used to shore up the parity argument. Suppose this foundationalism claims that a belief is properly basic if and only if it is either self-evident, fundamental, evident to the senses or to memory. 'Being fundamental' is plainly the most worrisome thing here. Suppose the modest foundationalist, to try to meet that worry, says that a belief is correctly said to be fundamental if it is unavoidably part of the noetic structure of every human being and could not be abandoned without causing havoc to that structure. I have in mind beliefs like 'The sun comes up in the morning', 'The Earth has existed for many years past', 'Human beings need food and sleep', 'Stones cannot fly' and the like.

However, I am not inclined to believe that we should accept even this modest foundationalism, but should continue instead to work with a non-foundationalist coherentist model such as the one described above. But suppose for the sake of continuing

the argument, we accept this modest, rather commonsensical, foundationalism. My argument shall be that, even if we do, it will not help the parity argument in the least, for on such a basis many of our common sense beliefs would be shown to be properly basic in being fundamental or evident to the senses, and many of our scientific beliefs would be defensible by argument and inquiry. But, with the collapse of natural theology under the onslaught of the Enlightenment, and most particularly because of the criticisms of Hume and Kant and their contemporary heirs, religious beliefs cannot be so justified even if we do accept a modest foundationalism. Moreover, and more centrally to the point here, they are not in the same boat with common sense and scientific beliefs. Our noetic structures would not collapse if we abandoned them.

Religious beliefs are not fundamental in the way we have just characterized with our modest foundationalism. Moreover, with the failure of natural theology and like endeavors (including arguments from religious experience), there is no establishing them on the basis of experience or reasoning. Unlike those common sense beliefs that are fundamental, religious beliefs, particularly in our epoch, are not seen as being fundamental and as such universally accepted either intra-culturally or across cultures. But the commonsense beliefs in question (beliefs like Moore's truisms) are so accepted. We can hardly avoid recognizing that people require sleep and that water is wet and that we human beings must have it once and a while, but our very noetic structure would *not* come tumbling down if we ceased believing in God or ceased believing that we are immortal. These beliefs, by now in our culture, as they *perhaps* are in all cultures, are optional. They do not have proper basicity and they may well, for all the parity argument can show, be irrational. Finally religious concepts, whether or not they are finally defensible, are problematic.<sup>3</sup> And this is something, at least in intellectual circles, that is widely recognized by both believers and non-believers. They are at the very least problematic in a way that many commonsense beliefs are not. Moreover, they are not problematic merely because of the acceptance of some contentious epistemological or semantical theory or other, but are widely sensed to be problematic by many moderns quite independently of their adopting any such theory. (It may be relevant that children in the course of their socialization into our culture are not

infrequently very puzzled by such conceptions.) They are, as it were, pre-analytically problematical, though certain theories may enhance and conceptually direct our sense of their being problematic.

As a philosopher doing second-order conceptual analysis, I can get equally puzzled about the proper *analysis* of God and the soul, on the one hand, and about the past and what it is to have a sudden thought, on the other. But that second-order puzzlement about the proper analysis of the past, or what it is to have a sudden thought, can, and indeed should, go hand in hand with there being a firm agreement about particular claims and ways of uncontroversially establishing their truth, as (for example) establishing the truth of 'Abraham Lincoln was the American President during the Civil War', and 'Jones suddenly thought that it might rain and went back for his umbrella'. But 'God spoke to Jones' or 'Jones has a soul' are not something whose truth we know how to settle and we are not clear in making such utterances what, if anything, we are talking about when we speak of God and the soul. We are, that is, not only unclear about the correct *analysis* of these terms, we are uncertain as to whether they make sense. Our doubts are not only second-order doubts but first-order doubts as well. With the past and with sudden thoughts, by contrast, they are *merely* second-order doubts. We are, that is, in no doubt at all as to the reality of what we are talking about in speaking of the past or in the having of sudden thoughts.<sup>4</sup> The engine is idling when we have doubts here. Our doubts are mere Cartesian doubts, not real doubts, as when we have doubts about God and the soul.

#### IV

It might be asked, why make so much of this? Why be concerned to criticise religion and defend atheism? Isn't that, the questioning could continue, like taking in religion's dirty linen? Atheism among the philosophers of our time is as common as the common cold. Why, standing where we are now, knowing what we know, make such a big deal about 'the death of God'? It is, after all, as evident as evident can be.

I share, as things I have written in the philosophy of religion make plain, that fairly widespread intellectual judgement, taking it to be only slightly hyperbolic.<sup>5</sup> Still, that notwithstanding, it reveals in us a depressing human

blindness—and most particularly so if we are lucky enough to be members of the intelligensia—if we do not also find the death of God a cultural problem. It might very well not be a personal problem for some of us at all, but it should be evident that it is now a cultural problem: a problem deeply anguished over by many thoughtful and sensitive people in our society and societies like ours.

To not care about atheism and its denials in such a circumstance reveals a distressing historical and psychological blindness; over very preoccupation with the ‘post-modern condition’ in effect attests to that. It takes a not inconsiderable obtuseness about our lives as human beings not to feel the chill of modernity, to be incapable of feeling the power of Nietzsche’s words in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

‘Wither is God?’, the [madman] cried, ‘I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murders. . .’ What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun? Whether are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, wideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breadth of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?’<sup>6</sup>

I write in the tradition of the Enlightenment and, as does Jürgen Habermas as well, in defense of modernity against both pre-modernity and post-modernity. Put otherwise, I, in effect, argue, as against post-modern Heideggerian and Derridian challenges, that there is no nihilism that lies at the heart of humanism. Still, and that notwithstanding, not to see the loss in metaphysical comfort given (1) the demise of the age of faith with the, to borrow Weber’s idiom, relentless disenchantment of the world and (2) with the replacement of Cartesian certainty, in later modernism, by a through and through fallibilistic outlook, betrays a certain spiritual blindness. Indeed with not a few of us this fallibilism has become such a deeply embedded, routinely accepted, background assumption that we are hardly even aware of it as an assumption. And with that mind set, there is no longer even a trace of any nostalgia for the Absolute. But, it is also true, that for many, decentredness remains a human problem and, for some, it leads to a raging against reason. It



is simply to be blind not to see in our cultural circumstance the depth of our culture shock here.

It could be responded that all of this should have been played out in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the core intellectual issues vis-à-vis religion and secularism were, emotional responses aside, settled. It is now rather late in the day, the response could continue, to be seeking such metaphysical comfort or going on a quest for certainty. The issue of atheism *should* no longer be on the philosophical agenda. Again, I too believe that, but to ignore that it is in fact still on the cultural agenda for many people, and on the philosophical agenda for some of them, reveals a cultural blindness. Perhaps, where there is an unwillingness to argue the case of belief versus unbelief, it reveals intellectual arrogance as well. Such an attitude is something like the mirror image of Christian fundamentalism. It may be wearisome for some of us now, after so much critical water has gone under the cultural bridge, to argue the case against pre-modernity yet again, but it is at least a cultural necessity.

It is important for us to realize that we are living in the time of a long spiritual interregnum. The old faith with its essentially pre-modern outlook is not yet quite dead and a firmly New World outlook—*Weltgeist* for a new Age—is still in the long process of forming and is not yet firmed up. In such a cultural condition Heideggerians and Derridians flourish along with talk of post-modernity and nihilism. It is with this backdrop that a probing, non-evasive discussion of belief and unbelief, a discussion of Judaism/Christianity/Islam as over and against forms of atheism, is a cultural necessity.<sup>7</sup> These alternative frameworks need to be juxtaposed with clarity and non-evasiveness, as, culturally speaking, deeply challenging and disturbing options between whole ways in which we can respond to our ensnared lives. Against post-modernity, I argue that there really is ‘a *should*’ to be argued here that is actually worth bothering about and that is not something which is just to be dismissed with irony. These frameworks, with their associated framework beliefs that are our cultural options, carry with them alternative moral visions and we should sort ourselves out with respect to them.

I see it, culturally speaking and philosophically speaking, as a mopping up operation. Such arguments are attempts to bring to completion what the classical figures of the Enlightenment

started. In my optimistic moments (moments which are just some of my moments) I allow myself to hope that in two hundred years or so religion will no longer be on the agenda in our society's attempt to come to grips with itself, but that notwithstanding, human beings will still be making sense of their lives and the moral lives of people will remain intact even though belief in God and God-substitutes will have passed from the cultural scene, and that without our coming to live in a moral wilderness.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Terence Penelhum, "Do Religious Beliefs Need Grounds," *Nederlands Theologisch tijdschrift*, Vol. 80, No. 3, pp. 227-237 and his *God and Skepticism* (Boston, MA: D. Reidel, 1983).
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) and Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), Charles Taylor, "Overcoming Epistemology," *After Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1982), Kenneth Baynes et. al. (eds.), pp. 464-488 and Taylor and Alan Montefiore, "From an Analytical Perspective" in Garbis Kortian, *Meta-Critique* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 1-26.
- <sup>3</sup> For a fine cluster of arguments that bring out how much this is so see here the exchange between John Skorupski and Robin Horton. John Skorupski, "Science and Traditional Religious Thought I & II," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, Vol. 3 (1973), pp. 7-115, and "Science and Traditional Religious Thought III & IV," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, Vol. 3 (1973), pp. 209-230. Robin Horton, "Paradox and Explanation: A Reply to Mr. Skorupski I," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 3 (1973), pp. 281-312. Skorupski, "Comment on Professor Horton's 'Paradox and Explanation'," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (March 1975), pp. 63-70.

- <sup>4</sup> G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London, England: George Allen and Unwin Limited, 1959), chapters II, VII, IX and X, A. E. Murphy, "Moore's 'Defense of Common Sense'," P. A. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore* (New York, NY: Tudor Publishing Company, 1942), pp. 299-318. Gilbert Ryle, *Collected Papers*, Vol. II (London, England: Hutchinson, 1971), chapters II, 14, 23, 24 and 27.
- <sup>5</sup> Kai Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion* (London, England: Macmillan 1971), Nielsen, *Scepticism* (London, England: Macmillan, 1973), Nielsen, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (London, England: Macmillan, 1982), Nielsen, *Philosophy and Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), and Nielsen, "Religion and Rationality," Mostafa Faghfoury (ed.), *Analytical Philosophy of Religion in Canada* (Ottawa, ON: University of Ottawa Press, 1982), pp. 71-124.
- <sup>6</sup> Cited by Mark C. Taylor in his "Descartes, Nietzsche and the Search for the Unsayable," *New York Times Book Review* (February 1, 1987), p. 3.
- <sup>7</sup> I speak of atheism as distinct from agnosticism here quite deliberately. For my argument that agnosticism, where it contrasts with atheism, is a non-starter, see my *Philosophy and Atheism*, pp. 9-28, 55-75, and 77-104.