

Does Morality Need Religious Myth? A Benign Platonist Critique of Atheistic Moral Skepticism

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Abstract: Kai Nielsen argues that one can be moral without being religious. Yet he also contends that reason cannot provide self-evident justifications for being moral. Given reason's limitations, should religious myth be used to encourage moral behavior? Although some human beings do not need religion as a foundation for their moral acts, it does not logically follow that all human beings can be moral without some mythical support. Benign Platonism, which builds on the Platonic teaching of the "noble fiction," defends the political usage of religious myth as a foundation for morality in an age beset by the resurgence of religion.

The Canadian philosopher Kai Nielsen has argued that one can be a moral person without being religious.¹ Torture and other forms of cruelty towards human beings "would be wrong and just as wrong in a Godless world" as they would be "in a world with God and in which there is eternal life."² Moreover, religion even undermines morality, since it consists of myths "which are sources of illusion and self-deception."³ These myths have failed to encourage morality in any humane sense, given the bloody history

¹ Kai Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, revised edition (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1990).

² Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 187.

³ Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 84.

of religiously driven wars and conflicts.⁴ The philosophical critique of religion, which includes the repudiation of any attempt to ground morality upon a religious foundation, has been so overwhelmingly successful since the Enlightenment that philosophers today need only undertake “mopping-up operations” which will essentially complete this 500 year-old struggle against religion.⁵

Nielsen has also argued for the more provocative thesis that reason cannot provide self-evident reasons for being moral since, in a strictly rational sense, there is no such thing as objective knowledge of morality. Again, with an eye to the legacy of the Enlightenment and David Hume in particular, Nielsen contends that there is no demonstrable justification for believing that a rational or informed person *should* hold basic moral beliefs such as the inherent dignity of all human beings. A “sensible knave,” to use Hume’s term, may be quite rational while he occasionally violates the dictates of justice if they interfere with his self-interest.⁶ In short, moral

⁴ Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 13-15.

⁵ Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 428; See also Kai Nielsen, “On Sticking with Secular Morality,” in Kai Nielsen, *God and the Grounding of Morality* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1991), 157.

⁶ Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 177-178. This “sensible knave,” which Hume discusses in his *Enquiry into Morals* (Section 9, Part 2), is a rational human being who chooses to disobey moral principles when it serves his advantage even though he understands that society as a whole requires obedience to these same principles in order to survive.

subjectivism, or disbelief in the objective status of ethics, has decisively won out over rival philosophical attempts (e.g., Thomism) to draw any necessary connection between reason and morality. If the subjectivist is right, there is none. “Subjectivists from Hume and Hutcheson to Westermarck and J. L. Mackie have denied that there can be such a justification of moral beliefs. Cultural posturing notwithstanding, do we know or have good grounds for believing they are mistaken?”⁷

To my knowledge, Nielsen has not provided a sustained analysis of the implications which stem from holding *both* of these positions: denying that religion is needed for morality *and* denying that reason can provide convincing justifications for moral praxis.⁸ In brief, neither reason nor religion provides a foundation for morality, which leads to what I call *Atheistic Moral Skepticism* (AMS). If this perspective is correct, does any “rational” justification of morality end up being just as groundless as a

⁷ Kai Nielsen, “Skepticism over Morals,” in Kai Nielsen, *Why be Moral?* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 11-12. See also Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 177-179.

⁸ Nielsen admits in *Ethics without God* that ethical rationalism “cannot fill that void” left by the decline of religious morality, but he does not draw any negative implications from this position. (180-181)

religious defence?⁹ In this paper, I provide a critique of AMS. Specifically, I pose the following questions: if the authority of reason is as weak as Nielsen maintains, then is it prudent to jettison religious myth as a supplemental foundation for morality? Indeed, given the resurgence of religion in the world today, do we not have some reason to hold onto religion as a source of morality for some human beings? Ultimately, these two questions motivate my defence of *Benign Platonism* (BP), a modern version of the Platonic view that political orders at times must utilize religious myth because reason alone cannot convince everyone to act morally. I call this “benign” Platonism because, as I argue, this modernized Platonism is stripped of the metaphysical and anti-democratic baggage which is often associated with Plato’s philosophy. BP ultimately insists, on prudential grounds, that religious myth has always been a necessary, although not self-evidently rational, ground for morality.¹⁰ In brief, BP agrees with AMS that:

a) One can be moral without being religious

b) Reason cannot provide self-evident justifications for morality

⁹ See Colin Grant, “Is Kai Nielsen becoming a Wittgensteinian fideist?” *Studies in Religion* 30, nos. 3-4 (2001): 379. Grant argues that Nielsen defends philosophy on a “fideistic” basis. Here I use the term “groundless” to make the same point.

¹⁰ Whenever I use terms such as “ground” or “foundation” in this essay, I mean that these terms refer to forces such as custom or tradition, not self-evident truths.

However, unlike AMS, BP also argues that:

- c) *Many people still need religious myth to justify morality, especially given the weakness of reason, which has already been stated (b).*
- d) *Therefore, some usage of religious myth is legitimate in a society.*

In defending BP, I shall lean heavily on the modern Platonist philosophy of Leo Strauss (1899-1973) as well as a few other scholars who have been influenced by Strauss's interpretation of the philosophical tradition since Plato.

1. *“Ethics without God” since Plato: A brief historical overview*

It is tempting to forget that the “ethics without God” thesis is relatively new in the history of philosophy. The idea that reason is sufficient for teaching morality was foreign to Plato and his many heirs. To be sure, Plato was arguably the first philosopher to defend an atheistic morality. In the *Euthyphro*, he famously posed the question: is something good (just) because the gods love it or do the gods love it because it is good?¹¹ While it is legitimate to claim that Plato is the first philosopher to separate morality from religion, or to argue that one can have knowledge of the good without

¹¹ Jeffrey Stout argues that the *Euthyphro* dialogue is central to Nielsen's own understanding of “ethics without God.” See Stout, “Socrates, Euthyphro, and Nielsen,” in Michel Seymour and Matthias Fritsch (eds.), *Reason and Emancipation: Essays on the Philosophy of Kai Nielsen* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2007), 19-27. See also Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 68, 72, 77, 79.

appealing to the gods, Plato himself never taught that everyone could rely on reason *alone* to justify moral belief.

For this reason, Plato famously describes the “myth of the metals” in the *Republic* (415a-e) as a story which, although fictional, is necessary for teaching virtue to non-philosophers. In the “myth of the metals,” a god fashions the citizens, and who at their birth mixes different metals into them to indicate their place in the social hierarchy—gold for rulers, silver for warriors, bronze and iron for artisans. As Strauss notes in his analysis of this Platonic narrative, it is imperative that untrue myths (or “noble lies”) always involve a god. It is equally imperative that all citizens (who are non-philosophers) believe these stories.¹² If Strauss is right, Greek philosophy, especially Plato and Aristotle, measured the value of religious myth solely in political terms. Plato and Aristotle atheistically distinguished a philosophical understanding of reality from a mythical one. Yet they also understood that some notion of divine law was necessary for non-philosophers. “If it (divine law) is accepted by Greek philosophy, it is accepted only politically,

¹² Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 98, 102.

meaning, for the education of the many, and not as something which stands independently.”¹³

This political usage of religious myth did not end with Plato, whose ancient and medieval heirs followed his distinction between philosophy for the few and myth for the many.¹⁴ It may be tempting to believe that the Enlightenment promptly put an end to this double-truth. Despite Nielsen’s portrait of the Enlightenment as a wholly secular affair, however, the early moderns of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were only too willing to invoke religion to justify a political agenda. Well into the eighteenth century, Rousseau, the famous opponent of clerical tyranny, praised political authorities for constraining “by divine authority those whom human prudence could not move.”¹⁵ Even Enlightenment deists such as Thomas Jefferson were still making use of religious themes for political purposes.¹⁶

¹³ Leo Strauss, “Progress or Return? The Contemporary Crisis in Western Civilization,” in Hilail Gildin (ed.), *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 286.

¹⁴ Carlos Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, translation and introduction by G. D. H. Cole (London: Everyman’s Library, 1973), 196. For an illuminating discussion of the Enlightenment’s usage of religion and its complex debt to medieval Platonism, see Charles Butterworth, “Averroes, Precursor of the Enlightenment?” *Alif* 16 (1996): 6-18.

¹⁶ Jefferson famously asked in Query 18 of *Notes on Virginia*: “And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the

2. Strauss vs. Nielsen on Philosophy and Religion

This brief historical overview would not persuade Nielsen to abandon his view that philosophers should repudiate religious myth. Ultimately, this attitude towards the philosophical usage of myth in history explains the key differences between Strauss and Nielsen. Specifically, they differ on the relevance of this history for two reasons. First, they disagree on the role of philosophy. Second, they disagree on the persistence of forces such as religious myth in modernity. Let us consider the first difference between them.

Strauss contends that philosophy has a special and dangerous insight into the precarious foundations of society. He is famous for arguing that premodern (and even early modern) philosophers had to conceal their most subversive (usually atheistic) thoughts in esoteric language so that they could preserve their own lives while they maintained, albeit with some dissembling, their adherence to a society's credos. In short, they tried to avoid the fate of Socrates, who was executed for questioning the religious

minds of people that these liberties are of the gift of God?" Nielsen too quickly portrays Jefferson as a "typical figure of the Enlightenment" who believed that religion is not necessary for civic virtue. See Nielsen, "Rawls and the Socratic Ideal," *Analyse & Kritik* 13 (1991): 86.

credos which held ancient Athens together.¹⁷ If Strauss is right, the modern age of liberal democracy has not rendered this fact obsolete. “For it is as true today as it was more than two thousand years ago that it is a safe venture to tell the truth one knows to benevolent and trustworthy acquaintances, or more precisely, to reasonable friends.”¹⁸ Philosophy is so dangerously subversive that its true practitioners must be cautious in disclosing their most dangerous thoughts about morality and religion to all but a special few.

Unlike Strauss, Nielsen is convinced that philosophy has never enjoyed such a special place. Moreover, philosophy is no longer even needed to make sense of human life or society (including morality) as a whole. It is not that he would deny the fact that philosophers in the past had to conceal their atheism. In *Naturalism without Foundations*, Nielsen admits that Hume had to be far more cautious than moderns today in presenting his most subversive thoughts. However, the age of Hume is long past: “we write in a cultural climate very different than Hume’s, where, for us, there is no need to be even nearly as reticent in statement as Hume felt, and with good

¹⁷ Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 16.

¹⁸ Strauss, *Persecution*, 23. For a comprehensive discussion of the massive evidence that philosophers wrote in secret (“esoteric”) coded language from antiquity to early modernity, see Arthur M. Melzer, *Philosophy between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

reason, he needed to be.”¹⁹ Far from arguing, as Strauss does, that philosophy is a recurrent threat to political order, Nielsen believes that it has become as irrelevant as religion. In an essay on metaphilosophy in which he displays his dependence on the anti-foundationalism of Richard Rorty, Nielsen contends that neither philosophy nor religion is necessary to give meaning to life and that the traditional philosophical search for “redemptive truth” which began with Plato has been a waste of time precisely because no such truth exists. “We can get on—and get on here well—without religion or philosophy.”²⁰

Strauss and Nielsen also differ on the persistence of religion in the modern age. Nielsen sometimes admits that he holds to the cautious “Whiggish” assumption that religion is on its way out.²¹ Strauss, by contrast, believed that philosophy never truly refuted revelation, which is based on a

¹⁹ Nielsen, *Naturalism*, 428.

²⁰ Kai Nielsen, “Meta-Philosophy, Once Again,” *Philo* 15, no.1 (Spring-Summer 2012): 66. It is worth noting that Rorty may not go as far as Nielsen in claiming that all human beings can give up this need for redemptive truth. Rorty occasionally reveals his own “Straussian” side, despite denials, when he makes an elitist distinction between “non-intellectuals” who need some sort of religious faith and the wise few who do not. See Melvin L. Rogers, “Rorty’s Straussianism, Or, Irony against Democracy,” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 1, no. 2 (December 2004): 107-108.

²¹ Kai Nielsen, “Wittgensteinian Fideism Revisited,” in Kai Nielsen and D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 120.

leap of faith that is impervious to rational scrutiny.²² It is not that Strauss thought that everyone needed faith; certainly the true philosopher, who is “trans-religious,” does not.²³ Yet philosophy cannot convince everyone to live according to “unassisted reason” alone.²⁴ In short, modern progressivism did not persuade Strauss that the Enlightenment had effectively defeated religious orthodoxy.²⁵

Who is right—Strauss or Nielsen? It is significant that scholars who are not Straussian still believe that the rumors of religion’s demise are quite premature. Carlos Fraenkel has noted the fact that liberal political theorists such as John Rawls and others have felt the need to accommodate the persistent religious beliefs of its citizens who still believe in God.²⁶ Andrew Levine, a friendly Marxian critic of Nielsen, is appalled at the survival and

²² See Strauss, “Progress or Return?” 305. See also his *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 75

²³ Leo Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, translated by Marcus Brainard (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 147.

²⁴ Strauss occasionally employed this term to sharpen the contrast between reason and theology. See his *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 13.

²⁵ See Strauss’s critique of progressivism in “Progress or Return?” 249-310.

²⁶ Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, xiv, 297-299.

even growth of religion in the post-Enlightenment age.²⁷ Finally, there is a vast and growing literature on the persistent influence of religion in modernity.²⁸

Nielsen is hardly ignorant of the fact that religion, especially in its most irrational manifestations, has stubbornly held on.²⁹ Yet, as far as I know, Nielsen is not tempted to embrace BP's distinction between philosophers and non-philosophers in light of this evidence. In Platonic terms, Nielsen believes that philosophy can enlighten all human beings, not just a few, in the "Cave."³⁰

Nielsen would also be far from convinced that any Platonism, benign or otherwise, is needed to teach virtue to the non-philosophers. Additionally,

²⁷ Andrew Levine, "Whatever Happened to Marxism?" in *Reason and Emancipation*, 187-189.

²⁸ See Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Brayton Polka, *Rethinking Philosophy in Light of the Bible: From Kant to Schopenhauer* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014); Thomas L. Pangle, *Political Philosophy and the God of Abraham* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

²⁹ See Nielsen's polemical critique which laments the growth of modern "Neanderthal" American evangelism in "Politics and Theology: Do We Need a Political Theology?" in *God and the Grounding of Morality*, 178-184.

³⁰ Allan Bloom, a student of Strauss, writes: "The Enlightenment, taken literally, believed that the light could be brought into the cave and the shadows dispelled; men, in that view, could live in perfect light." See Bloom, "Interpretive Essay," in *The Republic of Plato*, translated with notes and an interpretive essay by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 403.

like most philosophers working in the Anglo-American tradition, Nielsen is dismissive of Strauss's contribution to philosophy. In *Naturalism without Foundations*, Nielsen remarks that Strauss's attempt to recover the "virtue ethics" of the ancients is "though *sometimes* expressed in an updated idiom, in reality a throwback to premodernity and is thoroughly entangled in the grand old problems of philosophy."³¹ Nielsen has also repudiated the attempts of philosophers such as Eric Voegelin and Alasdair MacIntyre to revive classical Greek philosophy for modern usage.³² Even if Stanley Rosen, a student of Strauss, exaggerates when he claims that his teacher was

³¹ Nielsen, *Naturalism*, 197 (author's italics). Elsewhere, he associates Strauss with "grand philosophical narratives" which are obsolete as well. See his "Reply to Richard Rorty," in *Reason and Emancipation*, 140. He may be referring to Strauss's grand thesis that philosophers have had to conceal their most subversive thoughts throughout history. In a 2010 interview, Nielsen briefly acknowledges the influence of Straussianism on his own intellectual journey. When he first came to the University of Calgary, his discovery that the political science department there was "full of reactionary Straussians" spurred him on to study and teach the works of Marx. See "An Interview with Kai Nielsen on Political Philosophy," in David Rondel and Alex Sager (eds.), *Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: The Political Philosophy of Kai Nielsen* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2012), 407.

³² For Nielsen on Voegelin, see "Kai Nielsen responds to Barry Cooper's 'Reduction, Reminiscence, and the Search for Truth,'" in David Cole (ed.), *The Political Philosophy of Eric Voegelin and His Followers: A Criticism of the Voegelinians*, with a foreword by Brad L. Duren (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 299-303. For Nielsen's review of MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, see his "Critique of Pure Virtue: Animadversions on a Virtue-Based Ethic," in *Why Be Moral?* 228-244.

“one of the most hated men in the English-speaking academic world,”³³

Nielsen’s disdain for Strauss is widely shared among his peers.³⁴

3. What can BP teach to moderns?

Despite this negative attitude towards Strauss, which is perhaps fuelled by polemical debates over the political impact of his thought on the American conservative movement,³⁵ his teaching of what I call *Benign Platonism* raises valuable questions about modern philosophy’s ultimate failure to provide any rational foundation for morality. This benign Platonism is not as much of a “throwback to premodernity” as Nielsen may think. Strauss’s BP is in fact modern to the core, since it accepts the triumph of modern science over premodern teleology. Strauss has no interest in defending Plato’s metaphysics, such as the immortality of the soul.³⁶ Finally,

³³ Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 107.

³⁴ Nielsen at times does not consider Strauss (or Allan Bloom) to be a real philosopher. See his “Reconsidering the Platonic Conception of Philosophy,” *International Journal in Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1994): 52.

³⁵ See Paul Edward Gottfried, *Leo Strauss and the Conservative Movement in America: A Critical Appraisal* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁶ For Strauss’s acceptance of the defeat of Aristotelian teleology at the hands of modern science, see *Natural Right and History*, 8. For a detailed discussion of Strauss’s modern views on democracy and teleology, see Grant N. Havers, *Leo Strauss and Anglo-American Democracy: A Conservative Critique* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), chapter two. Following the medieval Islamic philosopher Al-Farabi’s interpretation of Plato, Strauss contends in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* that Plato himself did not believe in his own metaphysical doctrines (including the immortality of the soul) and that these doctrines “must be regarded as accommodations to the accepted views.” (15) By “accepted views,” Strauss has in mind the views of non-philosophers.

Strauss is absolutely opposed to any modern attempt to revive the hierarchical ancient polis, given his support for modern liberal democracy.³⁷ However, the one feature of Platonism which is of enduring relevance is the recognition that religious myth is always necessary for some human beings. Why does Strauss insist on this point?

In Strauss's view, modern philosophers, as far back as the Enlightenment, advanced a corrosive skepticism which undermines all foundationalism, including the moral equivalent. "For the skeptic, all assertions are uncertain and therefore essentially arbitrary."³⁸ If reason itself is an arbitrary force which cannot distinguish between good and bad judgements, then morality itself must be based on non-rational grounds. "The more we cultivate (modern) reason, the more we cultivate nihilism."³⁹

Strauss draws the same logical conclusions as Nielsen does regarding the implications of modern philosophy for morality. Like Nielsen, Strauss interprets Hume's philosophy as a central contribution to this modern

³⁷ In *The City and Man*, Strauss writes: "We cannot reasonably expect that a fresh understanding of classical political philosophy will supply us with recipes for today's use." (11) For Strauss's support of modern democracy, see Gottfried, *Leo Strauss*, 58-59. It is noteworthy that there has always been a lively debate over the popular view that Plato was absolutely opposed to democracy. See Thomas Landon Thorson (ed.), *Plato: Totalitarian or Democrat?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963). This anthology includes an essay by Strauss.

³⁸ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 20.

³⁹ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 6.

skeptical project.⁴⁰ In fact, Hume himself warned in *A Treatise of Human Nature* that reason, which is confined to understanding either verifiable matters of fact or relations of ideas (self-evident truths), cannot condemn the most immoral thoughts as irrational. Morality is a matter of subjective preference, not fact or logical necessity. Just as it is not contrary to reason to have a preference for a particular color or sound over other colors and sounds, so it is “not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger.”⁴¹ If Strauss is right, one can draw a straight line between Hume’s skepticism and Nietzsche’s nihilism.⁴²

Strauss and Nielsen also agree that modern philosophy has no knockdown answer to the Nietzschean nihilist who “realizes the relativity of all comprehensive views.” This “relativity” leads to the conclusion that human life itself is impossible “for it would destroy the protecting atmosphere within which life or culture or action is alone possible.”⁴³ Despite his passion for social justice, Nielsen admits his own cherished

⁴⁰ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 20.

⁴¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd edition, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 416.

⁴² See Michael Allen Gillespie, *Nihilism before Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 74.

⁴³ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 26.

moral views lack foundation since moderns from Hume onwards have no answer to the skeptical-nihilist view that morality is groundless in any rational sense. Nielsen writes: “In politics I am a socialist and in normative ethics I am an egalitarian. But it is far from evident to me that there is anything by way of an argument, or by way of evidence or the like, that could show that such a Nietzschean concept of morality, with its implicit denial of universal human rights, is wrong (mistaken, untrue).”⁴⁴

Does BP have an answer to this skeptical challenge? Strauss calls on his readers to reconsider the use of myth or fiction while, although not self-evident, could provide a “protecting atmosphere” which makes life (including philosophy) possible. I return to the passage cited above in reference to Strauss’s reading of Nietzsche. Since Strauss is convinced that most human beings cannot live well according to nihilism, there is no alternative for many but to live in accord with comfortable illusions. Moreover, Nietzsche understood this quite well. Strauss writes: “To avert the danger to life, Nietzsche could choose one of two ways: he could insist on the strictly esoteric character of the theoretical analysis of life—that is, to restore the Platonic notion of the noble delusion—or else he could deny the

⁴⁴ Nielsen, “Scepticism and Human Rights,” in *God and the Grounding of Morality*, 107. See also his “Class Conflict, Marxism, and the Good-Reasons Approach,” in *Why Be Moral?* 133

possibility of theory proper and so conceive of thought as essentially subversive to, or dependent on, life or fate.”⁴⁵ If I understand Strauss’s meaning here, he is suggesting that every political order must give lip service to myths (noble delusions or fictions) which maintain human life. The alternative is to embrace all moral views as merely relative to the customs which we are “fated” to live under in a given time. It would be very dangerous for philosophers to openly teach this relativistic understanding of custom (as philosophers from Hume to Nietzsche did), to non-philosophers who may then conclude that one moral preference is as good as another.

Ultimately, BP rationally assumes that non-philosophers will always require myths of some sort. If it is true, as Fraenkel argues, that “only philosophers have the intellectual skills to understand the philosophical doctrines corresponding to religion’s true content,” then it logically follows that non-philosophers “would fall into nihilism” whenever these doctrines were called into question.⁴⁶ It is worth noting here that secular beliefs (e.g., universal human rights) are just as questionable on rational grounds, as we

⁴⁵ Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 26. Strauss warns that this second alternative has led to “historicism,” the reduction of all ideas to a particular time in history. Although Strauss believes that historicism leads to moral relativism, Nielsen, a self-styled historicist, does not. See Nielsen, “Meta-Philosophy, Once Again,” 62.

⁴⁶ Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions*, 15.

have seen Nielsen admit.⁴⁷ Yet it is rational to assume that these beliefs have the salutary effect of teaching morality to non-philosophers.

4. *BP in practice: “God is love” as noble fiction*

In closing, let us consider an example of a belief which, although not self-evidently rational, is arguably required for modern democracy: universal love. This concept of love, which has origins in the biblical tradition, calls on human beings to love each other as they would want to be loved. In fact, its influence is so powerful that modern political philosophers from Spinoza to John Rawls have treated the “golden rule” as the ethical mainstay of a liberal social contract. Nielsen is no exception here. In an essay on global justice, he calls upon the citizens of the world to embrace an attitude of “moral reciprocity,” which essentially means that they must treat each other (rich and poor) as equals, or in short, as they would want to be treated.⁴⁸

Nielsen contends that the practical application of “moral reciprocity”

⁴⁷ See also David N. Stamos, *The Myth of Universal Human Rights: Its Origin, History, and Explanation, along with a more humane way* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Drawing on the implications of Plato’s “noble lie,” Bloom writes: “Today it is generally admitted that every society is based on myths, myths which render acceptable the particular form of justice incorporated in the system.” See his “Interpretive Essay,” 367.

⁴⁸ Kai Nielsen, “Global Justice, Capitalism, and the Third World,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1984): 181. In *Ethics without God*, Nielsen claims that this Kantian principle requires no religious support at all. (126)

requires the radical redistribution of wealth from the richest nations to the poorest ones.

Yet Nielsen elsewhere undermines his call for reciprocal social justice by questioning whether it is even rational to think of one's fellow human beings as equals who are deserving of justice. Nielsen takes aim at John Rawls's view that "the sense of justice is continuous with the love of mankind."⁴⁹ Consistent with his AMS, Nielsen asks: "how do we know that rational individuals *must* love humanity?...But why is it, or is it, that a man is in any way faulted in his *rationality* if he does not love mankind?"⁵⁰ The universal love which Nielsen otherwise insists upon in his political writings has no obvious rational ground whatsoever. It is not reason or facts, he writes elsewhere, which can justify a "pervasive attitude of disinterested caring for all human life (and perhaps for all sentient creatures), the smallest as well as the greatest of us."⁵¹

Here we return to the aporetic implications of AMS. If reason cannot teach us to love humanity, which is an essential precondition of justice,

⁴⁹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 417.

⁵⁰ Nielsen, "Rationality and the Moral Sentiments: Some Animadversions on a Theme in a *Theory of Justice*," in *Why Be Moral?* 220 (author's italics).

⁵¹ Nielsen, "Why Should I be Moral?—Revisited," in *Why Be Moral?* 300.

should we be so quick to dismiss the power of religion to achieve this aim? Given the apparent impotence of reason, should we try to encourage and accommodate religious beliefs which can succeed where reason fails? What I have in mind here is the prudent accommodation of the belief that “God is love,” which is the religious basis for the secular belief in universal love (love thy neighbor as one would want to be loved). Spinoza, Kant, and even Rawls have all recognized the biblical origins of this imperative.⁵² Although Nielsen could easily respond that the historical origins of a principle do not determine its validity,⁵³ my point is to emphasize that reason on its own does not demonstrate validity either. (It is a safe bet that more people believe in universal love for religious reasons than secular ones.)

As we have seen, Nielsen rejects any attempt to draw a necessary connection between religion and morality; one does not need to be religious to be moral. Once again I agree, but I quickly add that many people need some sort of quasi-mythical foundation to justify their moral behavior. In

⁵² See John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, edited by Barbara Herman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 294. Here Rawls locates the origins of Kantian morality in St. Augustine’s biblical ethic and “moral psychology.” See also Brayton Polka, “History between Biblical Religion and Modernity: Reflections on Rawls’ *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*,” *European Legacy* 7, no. 4 (2002): 445-451.

⁵³ Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 18, 123. Nielsen attacks the “genetic fallacy” in this context.

fact, this latter pattern should not surprise Nielsen, who has constantly emphasized the failure of reason to justify moral beliefs. Yet he would refuse to appeal to the idea of “God is love” as a justification for moral belief. In his debate with the Christian philosopher D. Z. Phillips, Nielsen scorns Phillips’ attempts to simply identify “God” with “love” since it is incoherent to identify an alleged supernatural being with an attitude. One can understand love (or any moral belief) quite well without equating it with God.⁵⁴

Nielsen may well be right that this belief in “God is love” raises more questions than it answers. My response here is that *only* secular-minded individuals would agree with Nielsen on this point. The problem is that these same individuals may openly teach the far more dangerous view that it is perfectly rational to disregard universal love as a subjective illusion. If the force of reason is so weak, is it wise to disregard the power of religious myth to motivate human beings to love each other?

Once again, Strauss’s BP and Nielsen’s AMS converge on a very important point. Both philosophers reject the Thomistic view that a rational

⁵⁴ Kai Nielsen, “On Anything Being Beyond Human Understanding,” in Nielsen and Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* 199.

person must necessarily act justly or morally.⁵⁵ Strauss almost sounds like Nielsen when he doubts that there is any evidence for a “moral law” which presupposes a first cause (God).⁵⁶ Strauss also argues that philosophers from Plato onwards have embraced morality for its salutary consequences, and “not something valuable in itself.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, it is prudent that non-philosophers hold onto certain moral beliefs as if they were unchallengeable.

Strauss’s reading of Spinoza’s usage of charity in the *Theologico-Political Treatise* is particularly relevant here. Spinoza insists that charity or the teaching that “God is love” be promulgated as a dogma of citizenship in the liberal democracy which he defends.⁵⁸ Spinoza reasonably assumes that if people put into practice this love, then philosophers will not be persecuted as they were in the age of theocratic despotism.⁵⁹ Yet he uses the term “dogma” to describe this doctrine, which strongly implies that it is not a self-evident truth, in his view. Even Spinoza admits that philosophers and non-

⁵⁵ Nielsen, *Ethics without God*, 25-47. For a discussion of Strauss’s rejection of Thomism, see Clark A. Merrill, “Leo Strauss’s Indictment of Christian Philosophy,” *Review of Politics* 62, no. 1 (2000): 77-106.

⁵⁶ Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” 162.

⁵⁷ Strauss, “Reason and Revelation,” 147.

⁵⁸ Benedict Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, translated from the Latin with Glossary, Indexes, and Interpretive Essay by Martin D. Yaffe (Newburyport, MA: Focus Philosophical Library, 2004), 163-165.

⁵⁹ Strauss, *Persecution*, 168-9.

philosophers understand the meaning of this love differently, since the former do not relate the meaning of this love to obedience to a personal (supernatural) God.⁶⁰ Spinoza shows his benign Platonic roots by recognizing that this biblical morality is ultimately a useful tool which keeps the non-philosophers from persecuting the philosophers.⁶¹ (Throughout *TPT*, Spinoza draws a surgical distinction between truth and obedience.⁶²) It is also important to recognize, as Spinoza does, that reason cannot teach this love.⁶³ Although “God is love” is not philosophically self-evident, it is nevertheless useful for the cause of democracy. It is a recurrent theme in *TPT* to “accommodate” non-philosophers who are not by nature tolerant of philosophers. As Strauss notes, Spinoza is not above using “ruses,” such as

⁶⁰ In an annotation to chapter 16 of *TPT*, Spinoza notes that “reason” is not compatible with a belief in this deity. See *TPT*, 250.

⁶¹ Strauss compares Spinoza’s idea of an impersonal God (as explicated in *The Ethics*) with the God of neo-Platonism. This God (which is Reason) is a deity for philosophers alone. See Strauss, “Preface to the English translation,” in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 15-16. See also *Persecution*, 159. It is worth noting here that Spinoza’s “Platonism” refers to the basic Platonic view that religion is a useful tool for teaching morality. Spinoza himself observed, in Letter 56 of his correspondence, that the “authority of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates carries little weight with me.” See Spinoza, *The Letters*, translated by Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 279.

⁶² Spinoza, *TPT*, 164: “each’s faith is to be considered pious or impious by reason of obedience or stubbornness only and not by reason of truth or falsity.” Spinoza associates piety with love (charity).

⁶³ See Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, translated by E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 245-247.

an appeal to biblical morality, to protect philosophical freedom from the destructive passions of the “vulgar” who may be intolerant of this freedom.⁶⁴

Nielsen may object that we do not live in Spinoza’s age. Yet, as I have shown, the persistence of religious belief in our time requires some accommodation. From a prudential perspective, it is legitimate to accommodate and even encourage religious beliefs which are at least compatible with democracy.⁶⁵ It is all the more important to do so when we recognize (along with Nielsen) that reason on its own cannot provide a self-evident justification for morality. Even Nielsen admits that religious beliefs which do not threaten liberal democracy “can be made to fit.”⁶⁶ I would make this position stronger by insisting that a religious myth such as “God is love” not only can be made to fit but *should* be made to fit. Unless Nielsen,

⁶⁴ Strauss, *Persecution*, 179, 183. Note that Kant as well thought that morality still required religion (e.g., belief in God) even if the former could be defended on rational grounds as well. See his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated with an introduction and notes by Theodore M. Green and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 54-55. See also Stijn Van Impe, “Kant’s Moral Theism and Moral Despair Argument against Atheism,” *The Heythrop Journal* 55, no. 5 (2014): 757-768.

⁶⁵ Note that I am not suggesting that *all* religious beliefs should be accommodated for this reason. I agree with Fraenkel (*Philosophical Religions*, 23-24) that a belief in the immortality of the soul may not be as easy for a democracy to accommodate, given its metaphysical baggage, as a straightforward teaching about living a righteous (that is, godly) life.

⁶⁶ Nielsen, “On Obstacles of the Will,” in Nielsen and Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* 343. Nielsen has also offered qualified praise of adherents of liberation theology, which synthesizes Christianity and Marxism, because “maybe they are the only kind of people who could be successful in radical movements in certain countries and for certain people.” See “An Interview with Kai Nielsen on Political Philosophy,” 412.

in opposition to his AMS, can demonstrate that reason can teach universal love persuasively to all human beings, this practical application of BP is justifiable.

**Response to Grant Havers
On the Need for a Religious Myth or a
Sometimes Foundation for Morality**

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I

I will in this first part say some things that are very unsympathetic with what Grant Havers says. But we should not say that because we believe that they are plainly false. That is not so. But he need not make these points in order to make the important though controversial points that Havers' makes against me in his elaborate and astutely informed account and critique of my views.

In later sections I shall turn to that. But now for the plain falsities in Havers' account. Here we have plain empirical obvious facts which undermine some of what Havers claims. Havers wants to maintain that morality needs religion and that I mistakenly argue that one can be moral without being religious. But *whatever is actual must be possible* and it is plainly actual that there are plenty of people all around the world who are moral—indeed are plainly moral—who are not religious and do not have any religious beliefs at all. Though some, perhaps many, may suffer from some other ideology. Including an anti-religious ideology. Though this is not to say that *all* anti-religious are ideological. Some are. They may even be Trump voters. Still, Trump voters or not, there are plenty of people as both G. E. Moore (a firm atheist who did not like to go on about it) and Alasdair MacIntyre (once a Marxist or Marxist sympathizer turned later into a Thomist) liked to refer to them as ideologically bedeviled people who do not believe in God. Moreover, being religious does not always (even culturally always) mean believing in God. Lesser Vehicle Buddhists do not believe in God or gods of any kind. Moreover, we human beings need not believe in God or the gods. Some get along alright without that. We do not need it to make sense of our lives or to live in security. I am inclined to say

just the opposite. We need not, if we would look at things reasonably realistically, believe in God or have a religion of any kind to make sense of our lives. There are plenty of secularists scattered around the world, more in Denmark than in Saudi Arabia. These are just plain uncontroversial facts.

These are just plain uncontroversial empirical facts about the world and its inhabitants. And there are plenty of them that do not need religion, theology, philosophy or science to establish that this is so. All we need is non-evasive everyday observations of our world and reflections on them. I do not say all reflections but some reflections. At least some of them can be careful. Neither religion, theology, philosophy nor science disestablishes this. What it establishes may well be for the most part banal facts but, banal or not, all the same they are commensally evident empirical ascertained assertable facts. Or at least most of them are.

This is not at all to say or to imply or assume that there can be *self-evident justifications* for being moral or for needing a religious myth or any kind of ideology to *found* or *prove* or even *cause* us to have strongly in place moral convictions. Havers acknowledges that "some human beings do not need religion as a foundation for their moral acts. But it does not logically follow that all human beings can be moral without mythical support." Of course not. But it does not *logically* follow that no strawberries grow at the North Pole and that none can. That is not a logical truth or a truth of reason, even if there could be such a thing. But it is certainly obvious that there cannot. The same thing is so for it being the case that in Canada the days are longer in June than in December. There are, and massively, many things like that. There plainly are many such utterly obvious empirical facts. And are more obvious than any substantive philosophical claims. Havers has dished us up with an empirical truism when he tells us that many people need religion to orient their moral lives or make sense of morality. The above matters are truisms, namely that some people need religion to be moral and some do not. Truisms can be true but they are utterly uninteresting and utterly un-insightful. Moreover, and more importantly, they do not need any philosophical backup. Many of these banalities are more certain than any philosophical claim.

Attention to Wittgenstein will give us conceptual reasons—a conceptual rationale—for there not being any self-evident justifications or any Platonic reassuring of our beliefs or any Platonic forms. But there are massively empirical justifications for many things that no *conceptual* analysis can gainsay. Hobbes, Hume, Marx and Veblen among others have argued this and many plain persons have lived without a whisper of belief in God. It is perhaps not self-evident that they are not mistaken. But there is indeed not the slightest reason to think that they are so. Perhaps, very likely, talk of self-evident reasons is a Holmesless Watson for anything substantive. It is not only logical positivists that say so. But many people will just shove off what some people call self-evident reasons. I was once told by one of my former students who, when she first arrived as a teacher in a community college and had to teach a course with set readings of the great philosophers. The students there referred to Plato as ‘the crazy one’. Plato had indeed had some bright ideas. Some weirdly so. But unlike Thucydides, the father of history who wrote the *Peloponnesian Wars*, Plato was not attuned as he was to reality. There is no need to befuddle ourselves with such allegedly substantive self-evident reasons as emerged out of the Platonic tradition.

Both contemporary Italy and Quebec, once bastions of religiosity, are becoming more like Sweden and Denmark in being less and less in need of some ‘noble fiction’ to sustain moral belief and action. Perhaps it is itself a ‘noble fiction’ to believe the Greens will defeat either Clinton and Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and that Jill Stein will gain the presidency. But to believe so is certainly not in accordance, and I believe unfortunately not in accordance, with reality. The same is true for Havers’ ‘noble lie’.

II

I would be unfair to Havers if I let matters stand as they do above. *Perhaps* to do so is even stubbornly dogmatic of me? But I didn’t say mistaken. But Havers, mistaken or not, has raised a serious consideration that I have not adequately considered and, I would add, other philosophers at

least to my knowledge have not adequately considered. Perhaps we have here matters that philosophy or theology (natural or revealed) cannot adequately consider? Perhaps we cannot reasonably give such answers philosophically? When we try to do so, we end up uttering something we know not what. But something that has been said to be a substantively articulated metaphysical notion that, or so I believe, *perhaps* mistakenly, actually wavers into incoherency. But that aside, some people may need or believe that myths, indeed perhaps even religious myths, are necessary for them to orient themselves morally or more generally to orient their lives. Havers writes, "In brief, neither reason nor religion provides a foundation for morality, which leads to what I [Havers] call Atheistic Moral Skepticism." *Contra* that, Havers poses the following: "if the authority of reason is as weak as Nielsen maintains, then is it prudent to jettison religious myth as a supplemental *foundation* for morality? Havers has it that given the resurgence of religion, religion has increasingly become a *source* of morality for some human beings. But, I respond, being a *foundation* is one thing; being a *source* is another. Havers *conflates* them. And this is a serious error. It is a psychological, sociological, anthropological, historical matter, that is, an empirical matter, whether religion is a *source* of morality for some. Indeed, some use of such a source for morality obtains, and how it obtains, for many. *Perhaps* increasingly so. Religion is indeed no doubt a *source* of morality for some. But for *all*? That is something that philosophy or philosophers *qua* philosophers cannot ascertain or otherwise establish. It is an empirical and anthropological empirical question. And it needs such evidence. It is not a matter of reflecting in your armchair, even perceptively reflecting, but indeed a matter of empirical observation about how people behave. It cannot as a matter of fact be so established, supplementally or not, that religion is the *foundation* or *ground* of morality. A *source*, yes, *perhaps* even *the* source. But a *foundation*? No. No doubt—empirically no doubt—some people will be so encultured religiously. *Perhaps* many people will be so encultured that they will come to religion for their moral orientations. To be moral or to be so attuned to being moral comes for them from religion. Better said, to be culturally attuned to their particular religion sinks into their moral orientation or,

in some instances, causally enables their having a moral orientation. Without that for such people, they will be without a moral compass. But that is more evidently true in Saudi Arabia than in Denmark. Such things are a matter of the wheel of fortune of having a particular enculturation. They are usually a non-rational matter. The Danes and Swedes have one kind of enculturation; the Saudis and Yemenis another. That is a matter of a particular enculturation, not a matter of the human condition or of reason. Or even a matter of what is taken to be rational and reasonable. And it is different in various cultures. The Saudis go on for beheading. The Danes do not. But back a few centuries ago the Danes massively did. Is there sometimes progress in the world? The Americans have the death penalty. The Canadians do not. Does that reveal progress on the Canadians' part that people in the United States lack?

Perhaps (but I wouldn't bet my ranch on it) philosophy can show that, groundless or grounded, there is Havers' 'religious grounding' for morality? 'Rationally grounded' is a pleonasm. But grounded or (if you will) rationally grounded says nothing about *sources*. *Perhaps* as a cultural matter of fact moral belief, moral attunement, is always religiously sourced? But that is an empirical causal matter. Not something that can just rationally go one way or another. It is not something that can be philosophically ascertained. Just something that the light of reason will establish to be what is the case. There is no such establishment. Referring to Plato does not help. But we human animals, if we are culturally lucky, need not be subjects of an irrational or brutish enculturation. Nepal is one thing, Iceland is another. Yemen is one thing, Finland is another. But there is no just 'light of reason' that will tell us the way to go here.

Indeed, *as* philosophers we cannot say anything even establishable or dis-establishable about whether some people, no matter what their enculturation, need religion or not. It is an empirical question objectively answerable by the empirical sciences which can, if anything can, establish it one way or another. *Here* there should be no place for philosophy. Religious morality is scant on the ground in Sweden. In Poland it is pervasive.

Havers speaks to my surprise of the “*resurgence* of religion” while I speak of its *withering* away. It may be one or another. Or it may be staying nearly steady. Perhaps a withering away in the developed world particularly where people are well off and many are reasonably wealthy and socially and politically secure and have a reasonable education. Religion sells better in the Central African Republic than it does in Finland. There is no doubt (empirically no doubt) even among public intellectuals that there will be some people that will be religious and their morality will be religious. Moreover, anthropologists generally agree all cultures will have some kind of religion. *Sometimes* mixed in with a bit of magic and *sometimes* a religion that has gods (the Ancient Greeks, for example), sometimes God (the Medievals) for example. Sometimes no God or gods at all (as with some types of Buddhism and Confucianism). Our cultures are scattered here. But whether any of them or where among them they have their agnostic or atheist people or people with utterly secular beliefs they can have rational or reasonable grounds for their positions is not *just* an empirical question. Moreover, there is no such thing as reason that settles the case. It is instead perhaps a contestable empirical *cum* conceptual question that philosophers as well as some other reflective people have gone on about for years without resolution. *Perhaps* there can be no reasonable resolution? We need here to go in a different way with some contemporary version of a Thorsten Veblen, trained philosophically but sociologically knowledgeable and attuned for such matters. People with a good ideologically decontaminated orientation. Something that is not *readily* attainable. Will that take us to the Promised Land? It is better to think there is no Promised Land. But this is not skepticism *tout court*.

For much of my life I have tried to decisively establish that crude versions of religion are plainly false. Say, for example, anthropomorphic theistic religions have crucial beliefs that are plainly false. For example, a Zeus-like god and other gods as the Athenians had and something that the *primitive* forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam also have. Such conceptions of anthropomorphic deities are intelligible but they are plainly false. There are no such entities or beings. Being *qua* Being is another matter. There it is not falsity but intelligibility or coherence that is at issue. Articulated in

later non-primitive forms of religion from Anselm and Aquinas to Tillich and Barth, their conceptions of God are reasonably believed to be incoherent, though contestedly so. I do not know how many, if indeed any, I have convinced of what I have just said. I have argued for it in several books and articles. In earlier times I tried extensively to do so. Havers has cited some in his article but I have had the good luck to have had forceful critics. Who, if anyone, is more on the mark is another matter. It is an open question. I am an atheist but not an evangelical atheist as some have characterized me.

But *primitive* forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are by now rationally, reasonably and intellectually gone with the wind. I didn't say as cultural artifacts. Havers is right. There is for religion and for its cultural artifacts something of a resurgence. Though this is nothing to greet with applause or even with reasonable assertion. Perhaps it does not take Kierkegaard's claims about crucifixion of the intellect to give it force. But, resurgent or not, it is intellectually in trouble. Crude forms of religion are alive and well in some places as different as the Sudan, the Central African Republic, Saudi Arabia, and the American South. It is dying away in Italy and Quebec and even to a certain extent in Ireland, particularly among the youth and in their urban spaces in these various countries. It is dead or nearly so in all of Scandinavia, from Iceland to Finland and most thoroughly in Sweden now (2016) and without the angst of some Swedish filmmakers we saw in the 1960s (remember Ingmar Bergmann). However, philosophers in Sweden are another thing. Think of Axel Hägerström and Ingemar Hedenius. They were secularists and atheists all the way down.

Whether there is anywhere a resurgence of religion or not is an empirical social question. It may indeed have crucial political implications as well as some non-crude ones. *Some* that are not to be welcomed. It is plainly an empirical factual matter, though a contestable one and it has its vague aspects. Philosophy or logic cannot settle such matters but they can be settled sometimes rather crudely empirically. Philosophy may sometimes clarify what is at issue but not settle it. But it is at least reasonable to believe that it can be settled empirically by the social sciences and by psychology. Freud is not irrelevant here. But neither philosophy nor theology can settle it.

Like Richard Rorty, I am by now somewhat bored by such matters. But I am, as Rorty was, concerned as a moral and political human being about what questions concerning secularism or non-secularism that it is important to come to grips with. I also fear that elements—Neanderthal elements—involved here will lead to intolerance and hatred and more violence. Quakerism is alright. Christian Science is just a plain absurdity sometimes with unintended harmful effects. I remember a childhood friend whose Christian Science parents let him die (probably of cancer) because they believed sickness was an illusion. They were decent and loving parents alright but *their* firm religious beliefs were horrible in their effects. But the standard religious orientations—Catholicism, Anglicanism, Lutheranism and Calvinism for Christian examples bring on a yawn for me. And I am not big on Judaism, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism either in any of their varieties. Unlike Trump, I would not, if I had political power, try to ban Islam from the United States or elsewhere or indeed any religion anywhere that did not set out to kill or torture people. There are Moslems who kill people but there are Jews, Christians and atheists and agnostics who do so as well. I hope that people with such a killing and hating orientation would wither away. And where they so act or try to, they should be stopped. I wish the whole such lot would wither away. Lesser Vehicle Buddhism, Quakerism and the non-Trinitarian Christian religion that Whitehead said believed in one God at the most are not so troublesome. Indeed, some are quite benign but in some ways incoherent. But it is the various fundamentalisms that are the most worrisome. Though the Amish are not. They are just unfortunate. I hope that they cannot escape the tides of modernity. Something that Alasdair MacIntyre deplores that I am comfortable with particularly so when it goes along with *laicity*. It is not Islam itself but Wahhabism as in Saudi Arabia and as rigorously exported from there to its various offshoots that are very worrisome. Some indeed are very, very worrisome. Moreover, to keep properly enculturated and educated persons on the tracks morally and emotionally so as to make sense of their lives without the aid of religion, we are not in need of ‘noble lies’ and we should avoid them. Accurate knowledge

of how things go will help do the job. Where they are thoroughly expressed we do not need and should not have religious myths to order our moral world.

But what worries me the most is not *just* any fundamentalism but Islamic Wahhabism and its offshoots murdering its way around the world. But I *also* am not a fan of *fundamentalist* Judaism or Christianity, both of which have done their share of murdering. They are not quite as bad as their Islamic counterparts, but they are all a rotten lot that do not make for human flourishing or a social order of kindness.

Pope Francis is a breath of fresh air, though I wish he would abandon his positions on abortion and women. A female pope would be refreshing. But I hope that she would not be like Margaret Thatcher or Hillary Clinton. Not *all* women need apply. But just as there are very different men there are very different women. Both have their good and bad agents. Thatcher is one thing, Elizabeth Warren is another and Rosa Luxembourg still another.

III

I argue that neither reason nor religion provides a *foundation* for morality. Nothing does. We just have a cluster of social practices that constitute a morality and hopefully so in reflective equilibrium. Here both Wittgenstein and Rawls, though in different ways, are relevant. Morality, that is, consists in practices; *perhaps* something of a set of practices but at least a coherent cluster of practices. They give us all the objectivity we are going to get about religion or morality. We can get in what both Rawls and I regard as wide reflective equilibria. (Rawls was the creator of it.) That I put it in the plural, though Rawls does not, on my part indicates that we cannot just do what we like or what we happen to approve of. Nor does he. In a way I am, like Rawls, not a moral skeptic or subjectivist. But I am skeptical about a trans-cultural or trans-historical morality. I don't deny that we can establish or even that we have established it. I hope we can. But I neither affirm nor deny that we have rational moral kernels or even that we have *the* reflective equilibrium. We have moral kernels

alright. I don't say that they are irrational or even non-rational. Or not so. Indeed, they may be banal or truistic and they may not all be banal or truistic or mere moral platitudes but considered moral judgments are in all our various moral practices. There *may* be platitudes in them but they still remain a part of all reflective wide reflective equilibria. Havers unfortunately ignores both me and Rawls on wide reflective *equilibria* or *any equilibria*. Our views are not skeptical, subjective or relativist but they make no absolute claims or claim any trans-cultural or trans-historical objectivity. However, they do not deny it either. But Rawls claims, as I do as well, that wide reflective *equilibria* give us all the objectivity we need concerning moral matters or political *cum* moral matters.

I would like to have trans-cultural trans-historical reflective equilibria but I doubt if we can get this. I do not deny or affirm that we have some that are not platitudinous. But I am skeptical that we have one or are likely to gain one that is not. That reflects a *historicist* attitude on my part but not a *categorical* historicism or an overriding historicism, if indeed there could coherently be such a thing.

To take my approach is not to have with respect to morality or politics what Havers calls an *atheistic moral skepticism* or any other kind of moral or political skepticism or relativism but it is not an *absolutism* either. I have little time of the day for absolutism. I do not, as many philosophers and some other intellectuals, including *public* intellectuals, do, reason about being able non-evasively to take a stand about such matters. Crucially about what may be *the one true really absolute wide reflective equilibrium*. And how it can be achieved. It is very unlikely that there could be such a thing. A lot of things that are logically possible are not in reality possible. Certainly we are not going to get any self-evidence here. There are enough problems in the world that cry out to be faced and indeed could be. It is these that we should get exercised about rather than about whether such a wide reflective equilibrium can be achieved. Reflectively all the objectivity we need to make sense of our lives both individually and together is to get them in some equilibria of considered judgments. To do this we do need reflective equilibria of our considered judgments themselves with the empirical facts

of the world. That is all that is possible or necessary in this domain. It should be a fundamental concern of public intellectuals. I do not suggest it is easy.

This *may* be a slight shift in what was my reasoning in *Why Be Moral?* or in my *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*. I have not read even a part of either in a long time. I hope they square with my present views. I reject the view that there is a *necessary* connection between what reason requires and what morality requires. But I have never denied and do not now deny that when we have wide reflective equilibria with our considered judgments we have all the objectivity we are going to get or need to make normative sense of reality or warrant our considered judgments: our considered moral judgments. Or to make sense of our lives.

However, I reject any form of moral philosophical rationalism or absolutism, including a benign Platonism. I do not claim that we can *categorically* justify anything substantive. To think so is at best false. And I do not claim or deny that either is contingently false or incoherent. We do not get self-evidence about anything that is so materially substantive. There is oil in Saudi Arabia and most Saudis are Moslems. They are material substantives but *not* categorical truths or self-evident truths. All triangles are three-sided and all women are females are not either. They are conceptual truths. Truths about how language is used.

However, I do reject any form of moral or philosophical rationalism. I do not claim that we can either justifiably *categorically* or *self-evidently* claim that either is false or incoherent. But we do not get self-evidence about anything that is a contingency.

There I stand in the fallibilistic tradition of the pragmatists, including Putnam and Quine, and non-pragmatists such as Davidson, Brandon and Bernard Williams. I am fallibilist through and through philosophically. But that is not to be a skeptic, relativist, rationalist or an absolutist, benign or otherwise. But it is to have a measure of objectivity. It is to avoid categoricity and self-evidence for substantive matters. 'Blue jays are birds' is one thing; 'Blue jays lay their eggs in other birds' nests' is another. I reject that there are self-evident substantive truths, such as the so-called first principle

of Thomistic natural law. 'Good is to be done and evil is to be avoided'. It is too much like 'Blue jays are birds'. It doesn't indicate to us what is good or evil or even if there is anything, including any actions, attitudes or practices, that are either.

IV

I *may* have a tangle of things here. I may be able sufficiently for the occasion to clear up things here if in examining Havers' abstract I point out curtly how I regard him to be in error and why.

Havers writes:

Kai Nielsen argues that one can be moral without being religious. Yet he also contends that reason cannot provide self-evident justifications for being moral. Given reason's limitations, should religious myth be used to encourage moral behavior? Although some human beings do not need religion as a foundation for their moral acts, it does not logically follow that all human beings can be moral without some mythical support. Benign Platonism, which builds on the Platonic teaching of the "noble fiction", defends the political usage of religious myth as a foundation for morality in an age beset by the resurgence of religion.

Havers' first two sentences are plainly true and not only of what I believe but also *sans phrase*. But it is the fourth sentence that causes trouble. Indeed, *some* people cannot be moral without some mythical support. Often for them a mythical religious support. Though not recognized as such as either religious or mythical. But we should not and indeed cannot make a coherently moral policy out of that but must struggle instead against it having zero denotation or it being seen to be so. In some societies and for some individuals there are such people who need such a crutch. Perhaps in all societies, though in various degrees. As I have said, Saudi Arabia is one thing, Sweden is another. Or so as not to put in an ideologically biased way, we should show that it has such a backup.

In some societies there are many such people. Even in a few in developed societies. There are people who are well-educated and indeed even philosophically education such as Alasdair MacIntyre who think we need such anchorage. And in MacIntyre's case he has it that we all do. But we are, or

many of us are, in a state of denial here or at least not seeing reality accurately. Havers, however, does not think those things. He is confident they are mistaken. But he thinks *some* people think that morality requires a religious backing and that they should be supported. I, by contrast, think they can and should be shown that we do not need that alleged anchorage. Moreover, there is no such anchorage. To think there is is rather a matter of being caught by an illusion. What should be done instead is to work to dispel such a belief by showing that it is at best false and more likely incoherent.

We need not be such frail reeds that we must succumb to such an illusion. Our lives would be better if at least as adults we could dispel such illusions. And many of us do if we have had the good fortune to live in a developed society and have had a good education. It is better that we grow up in Amsterdam than in Kinshasa or Baton Rouge. In Copenhagen it is easy. In Kansas City it is not. But in 19th Century Copenhagen it was difficult. Now it just goes with the flow there at least for the reasonably well off. In the West, though more so in Europe than in North America, secularity and *laicity* are common though not so among some groups. But this is mainly to do with what our enculturation has been. But with education, particularly with what Freud called a sober education, religion tends to die. There is more in existence a non-evasive style of living. Less and less living enhanced by dogmas and myths. Historically, religion encased in dogmas has again and again led to horrible situations in some way or other. But also importantly with illusory moral anchorage. We should struggle to lessen the number of such captives of such illusory thought. Not, of course, by killing them or depriving them of a life of equal respect and acknowledgement in a society in which they must not be treated as outcasts. They must not be locked up and with a closing down of their churches, synagogues or mosques. They must be welcomed as equal participants in society. There must not in any way be the wisp of Jim Crow. They can in no way be given a bad time. Some of us may find some of their beliefs antique. But we should not let it show in our relationships with them. Is that paternalistic? Perhaps? Perhaps it is inevitable for some of us. But we must be very careful to not let it show for that would show a lack of respect for people.

This attitude and place of behavior is not as a matter of fact always in place. But the values of secularism and *laicity* should be in order. That need not come to anti-religion, though it will and should diminish fanaticism, dogmatism and sectarianism. We may think some religious beliefs are ridiculous but we should not in normal circumstances say so.

Where education is extensive and free spirited and non-dogmatic and where social wealth increases across the board, religion will tend to wither away. Stockholm is one thing, Saudi Arabia another. Iceland is one thing, Tehran another. Reflection on matters like that and with my stress gives people like Alasdair MacIntyre the chills but it should not. With what Freud called a sober education and with what Veblen and Dewey articulated religion and angst concerning religion will wither away. The need for religion and religious moralizing becomes unnecessary and sometimes antique. That morality needs belief in God will become as unreal as the belief that Christian Science can prove or establish that cancer is an illusion. Sometimes *some* people unrealistically think they have cancer when they do not have it but that is another matter. Intelligence is in the world but it unfortunately is not always present.

Where I speak of education I do not mean just a training for a job or even necessarily at all that we must have some training component for a job. But ideally what we would get at places like Cambridge, Harvard, Heidelberg or Uppsala is very different. They are paradigmatic as models for higher education but they are widely respected and even more widely approximated in a number of places scattered around the world. Where this goes along with a reasonable amount of social wealth and security such a situation will not usually make for religious insurgence. There will be religious persons, of course, including some astute religious intellectuals, but they are becoming thinner and thinner on the ground. This belief is not a matter of a philosopher's imagination, hope or fear but an empirical reality. Something that a sociologist or historian might make us aware of. Not usually a philosopher. And never from a philosopher *qua* philosopher.

This empirical reality is something that both Havers and MacIntyre steer away from. There is here a reality—or what I take not unreasonably to be an empirical reality—that is rooted in empirical evidence. There is no philosophical argument that can counter it or support it. Platonic metaphysics or any other metaphysics cannot counter it. Some conceptual considerations might show that this physical evidence is irrelevant but it has not shown that or how it could be done.

Whether we, as Pascal would say, are ‘frail reeds’ or not is in a large measure a result of what kind of enculturation we have had. Included in this is the kind of nurturing that we have had, the type and the extent of education we have had. And there is also the wealth and security we have had and are having. The security, including the kind of parental attention we have had, the secularism or not and the *laicity* or not, that we have had are important matters here in terms of how if at all we take to religion. How the need or lack of need for our having a religiously oriented moral compass and of the kind of moral compass. Under desperate conditions *some* will be driven to religion and its accompanying morality. But not always. It is well known that it is false to say there are no atheists in foxholes. Desperate or even just difficult times can either drive us to or away from religion. Sometimes it can also go with indifference to and disinterest in religion one way or another. Or sometimes leave us unchanged in what our lives were like even in our initial adult experiences. Where we go depends on our situation and the experiences that happen to go with it. On our enculturation. There is nothing to get steamed up about that makes some think requires religion to make sense of morality. There is no such requirement. And there are good reasons for discouraging a religious anchorage for morality. Namely, that that gives morality an anchorage in an illusion. We do not want or need any Platonism at all, let alone a benign Platonism, providing us with a religious myth as a *foundation* for morality or even a reasonable *source* of morality even in a world “as beset by the resurgence of religion” or, for that matter, in its decline or something meshed in between.

In a moral order of kindness, we treat all people with respect and kindness that we should so treat people, though it will be in a different way, with respect and kindness when we rely on

religious myths to be moral. It is *unfortunate* that they think we need or even actually should need such a crutch. But unfortunate or not they should still be respected and certainly should not be punished or ridiculed for it. There should, however, be a saddening including an intellectual saddening about its continuing existence. Like any illusion we should in most circumstances seek to end it. Seek its benign end. But where it would cause great incurably suffering to them and no harm to others we should not seek to end it. Though unfortunate, let them live with it in this situation. Holding on to their illusions.

This may sound arrogant on my part but it isn't. I fully recognize that our lives are up for a cultural and empirical draw and increasingly so. That is not ours to choose. Much of our enculturation is not ours to choose. None of us can avoid this. Some of us luck out on it and some do not. But I am confident that what I am saying here is on the march of the enlightenment. History and science, philosophy and social studies, have established it. But it has not established anything that is self-evidently so. Nothing substantive is. Nor can it be. But this need not give us the chills.

Havers rightly ascribed to me the belief that these religious beliefs are *sources* of illusion. And are a matter of self-deception and that on religious sides we have had and still are having bloody episodes and histories of religiously driven wars and conflicts. Think, for example, of Saudi Arabia going after Yemen or one sect of Islam brutally against another sect in Syria. Pagans kill Christians, Christians kill Jews, Jews kill Moslems, Moslems kill Hindus. Hindus kill Moslems. Buddhists kills Moslems. Look at present day Syria, Iraq, Yemen, the Central African Republic, Libya and Myanmar, among others. Neoliberal secularists kill Moslems. The hate parade goes furiously on and on. Look at the long relation between Israelis and Palestinians. On both sides people are typically religious. Sometimes within such populations there is either the belief that the only good Palestinian is a dead one or the only good Israeli is a dead one.

Many religious people either need or think they need their religion to support their morality but *that* morality often leads to blindness, fear and hatred of others that many people are largely

blind to. It is a morality that should be acknowledged but certainly not encouraged. We do not need religion to be kindly or even decent or reflective or to be rational. A moral point of view or even *the* moral point of view (if there is one) does not need religion to be maximally flourishing or even to flourish at all. In reality religions actually get in the way of respect, concern or kindness.

V

Havers should not encourage religious belief as either an underpinning or foundation of morality or for morality. Something that is essential or even important for a moral life. However, with some kinds of enculturation religiously anchored morality will be, reasonable or not, our lot but that does not mean that that being so is a good thing. Some religious people will tenaciously and irrationally hang on to it. But they should not be encouraged to do so. It may be as Marx thought that religion is the heart in a heartless world. That is a fine metaphor and carves out something that religion is, but it is a mistake to believe that therefore we should come to be religious. To recognize and acceptingly believe what I have just quoted Marx as saying need not lead us down a religious path or even lead us down the or a *philosopher's weg*. We can and should with Marx's understanding of religion and without becoming or taking a pro-attitude toward religion, take it that religion is the opiate of the people and, more importantly, the heart in a heartless world. We can with these powerful and insightful metaphors evince a non-religiousness as Marx did but it need not be and should not be a barking anti-religiousness. I do not set myself against people being religious as long as they do not go around butting, pushing or subverting others. Particularly others who differ from them. Differ in being religious at all or being religion in their way of being religious. I think they are living an illusion and that is an unfortunate thing. But I think it is wrong to attack them or interfere with them as long as they do not interfere with others. Though a little secular education would not hurt.

The second Marx metaphor is less contentious than the first. It might even be had by a believer though it can go with an utterly atheist orientation as it did with Marx or a through and through non-teleological historical non-metaphorical historical materialism as it did for G. A. Cohen and some other analytical Marxists. With that there should be a shuttering out of metaphysics. It will go well with the struggle for a world of kindness. Something we surely do not have now. We will come to have a world of kindness where we human beings will live in a classless world where everyone counts and counts equally. Where there are no classes and where—something we plainly do not have anything like now—the conditions of kindness obtain. Indeed, most of us have a fragile understanding of this and sometimes no understanding of it at all. Something we must get some grip on. We need to give a sense of conditions for this. A sense, for example, of what Marx's two metaphors are metaphors of. How this contributes to a part of what it would be like to have a world of kindness without fairy tales.

We talking featherless bipeds can come to live, as Marx, Freud and Veblen learned to and as Joyce and Zola in different ways learned to as well without religion or religious *angst* or temptation or despair. We need not go through the convulsions concerning religion that William James went through. Havers leads us down the garden path here into a swamp that *some* people need to shore up their morality with religion. But they only feel they need that because they have been so enculturated in religiosity. But why do they need, or do they need, that enculturation? There are cultures that do not have such enculturation. Even some religious cultures. Godless ones like Theravada Buddhism or the non-Trinitarian religion of an American sect that Whitehead once ironically called a religious sect with one god at the most. Human beings need not believe in Christian fairy tales or any other religion's fairy tales in order to be moral. Enculturation *per se* does not require that. And where psychologically speaking it does it requires something which is at best false. They should not be so encultured. And it is clear enough they rationally or reasonably need not be. All of us get encultured but not in the same way. And not in always a religiously longing way.

Someone might remark that while this is so it is important to realize that there are some who are not so encultured. That if they are and it is deeply so for them to be moral they must believe in such a religious mythology to make sense of their lives. Where people are so encultured it can be and often is cruel to deprive them of that. If they are dis-encultured of their religious enculturation they sometimes will no longer feel that their lives are meaningful or have a firm or even an acceptable morality. How is that to contribute to a world of kindness? It does not.

Indeed, that is bad. It is even worse that they will be influencing their children and those around them into the same or a similar enculturation. That is sufficient to make it a mistake, a moral mistake, not to destroy the so-called noble lie. Religion has done such harm in the world that we can and should do without it. Without religion and without the so-called 'noble lie'. We should not so enculturate such that people have a belief structure that encourages religion once we see what religion is so often doing. If we look carefully at the history of religion, we do not very often find people encouraged to an order of kindness and tolerance but to just the opposite. It is full of not only either false beliefs or incoherent ones.

By going Havers' way for what he regards as the Platonic teaching of a "religious myth as a foundation for morality in an age beset by the resurgence of religion" we have made an unfortunate and indeed a bad mistake. We will have inadvertently done something that is harmful to the human condition. Harmful, that is, to human beings. Harmful to our capacities to be reasonable caring human beings in reasonable control of our lives. And not embedded in hate of the other who does not follow 'the true faith'.

Religion should not, of course, be banned unless it is of some patently vicious kind such as to engaging the burning or beheading of certain individuals who do not shared their beliefs. Such as the present day ISIS.

Most religious orientations are bad. Their track record is frequently so. Religious belief should be resolutely examined in a rational and critical way. That should be so for all religions as it

should be for all ideologies and alleged ideologies. Some will think that religion is not an ideology or necessarily an ideology. All of this should be up for critical examination. Given its track record, religion should not go scot free. The religiosity of ISIS is plainly evil. Most religions are not so but they are generally bad. Something we could well do without.

But the good guys and gals are not all secularists. And some secularists have been evil. Neither Hitler, Mussolini nor Stalin were big on religion, to put it mildly. But thankfully we in developed societies are not usually in impoverished situations. But impoverishment is growing in most places, though differently in the United States than in South Sudan. Moreover, religious situations are thinning out in many situations, particularly among the highly educated and even reasonably educated. This cuts through most modern developed societies. This gives Alasdair MacIntyre the jitters. But not me and not a lot of other people. And we need not have the jitters because of that.

Recognizing that things are causally determined does not mean that effort and intelligence cannot make a difference politically, religiously, ideologically and ethically. We can be fallibilists without being either skeptical or nihilistic. This obtains and at least a similar thing obtains, concerning the *alleged* need for religious myths to try to make sense of life. John Dewey threw off religious commitments and *angst* about religion without loss and the rest of we human beings can do so as well. Though some of us because of the enculturation we have had can do so only by struggling against our enculturation where our enculturation has a certain kind of religiosity. But to live non-evasively we must do so. But still religion does not necessarily enslave us. Our enculturation need and may not be so strong in such a direction. Taking a moral point of view is not necessarily or even reasonably to believe in a religious myth. No matter how beset a society is with such a myth it is not an acceptable as yielding a foundation or basis for a morality. With the having of a moral point of view or acting in according with one. Taking a moral point of view cannot be the holding on to a moral myth. Such enculturation need not and should not obtain. Though such conditions have obtained and still do.

If we look at actual life conditions in a realistic historical and sociological way, many of us will not be for such a religiously oriented way of life. *Perhaps* sometimes in such situations some of us need such myths. But such situations not only should not obtain but need not obtain. That is usually not our moral predicament and never should it be and need not be. Though this is not to give to understand that any place is a Shangri-La. But our world can at least come a step closer to being a world of kindness. But that does not mean it actually will so straighten out. We need not be and generally are not in such extremely unfortunate conditions. But we are not in Scandinavia either or even less spectacularly but increasingly so in Italy, Quebec, England, Germany and Switzerland where religiously encultured moralistic myths are becoming scant on the ground without undermining morality. Again, forget MacIntyre's chitters. Moreover, this de-mythologizing of *the* moral point of view or *a* moral point of view often goes with education and a reasonable amount of social wealth. Not everyone in an unfortunate condition needs to tell fairytales to shore up their morality. We should respect those who do as well as we should respect all people. We must not say, as one of my students who is now a retired philosophy professor once said to me, "Kai, why do you go around taking candy from children?" That is not a way to show a proper respect for human beings, however mistaken we may take them to be. And indeed rightly so.

We plainly should not have the attitude my former student had, no matter how tempted we may be to sometimes think that way. It is harsh and arrogant and condescending. But if someone thinks that people *pace* a certain enculturation need religion to make sense of their lives, that is not necessary and that belief is disappearing in the developed world. There is no need for a religious myth to sustain morality. People who think so are plainly empirically as well as normatively mistaken. We should not, however, be intolerant of such people. But we should recognize that everyone in the world is by no means in that unfortunate condition. Still, I doubt very much that there are no atheists in Syria, Yemen or in the Central African Republic as there are mistakenly said to be no atheists in the trenches.

Someone who thinks they need such a support, as some do, and some due to their unfortunate enculturation do does not at all mean that most people, particularly now in a modern developed world, do so. It is one thing to live in South Sudan and it is another thing to live in Norway. Where education is extensive and reasonably good and where people live in stable conditions of reasonable wealth religion withers. And sometimes it does under bad conditions as well.

We should not evade the fact that many do not live in horrible conditions but still live often in unfortunate conditions. As many do in even wealthy places like Saudi Arabia or Bahrain. They certainly are not like people in Sweden or in Iceland. However, there are not nearly so many in unfortunate conditions in Canada or the United States as there are in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain where the religious are pervasive and not infrequently captivating. Only a very dwindling few so live in Scandinavia. The world is changing. In formerly such religious stalwarts as Italy and Quebec where once, and not so long ago, religiosity was massively established, things are changing. My Danish father's life was one thing, mine is another. Even in the late 19th Century religion was pervasive in Denmark. By the 1950s it practically withered away. And it has not come back. Italy and Quebec are becoming more secularized as to some extent so is Ireland. These matters are something I believe to be welcomed and not to be deplored as it is by Alasdair MacIntyre and as it does as well to religious myth defending Grant Havers. There are fewer and fewer secularists who suffer from "religious" melancholia.

There are developed societies which are no longer religiously enculturated (e.g., Denmark), some developed societies which are still deeply religious (Saudi Arabia) and developed societies (the United States) meshed somewhere in between. But religiosity is more generally diminishing in developed societies. Saudi Arabia, South Africa and Algeria are exceptions. For the most part in developed societies people are becoming disinterested in religion. It is usually now not a traumatic thing. It just slides away. If we look at life conditions realistically, historically and sociologically, we will see many in these societies becoming secular and without religious *angst*. Their citizens just are

not interested. Going secular without turmoil just increasingly becomes the doing of the thing done. More so in Europe than in North America, particularly the United States, or South America. But to some extent everywhere in the developed world religion is on the decline where there is extensive education and reasonable extension of wealth. It is strange that Havers speaks of the resurgence of religion. In some academic writings about religion *perhaps* in some places yes, but not in the resurgence of religious belief and conviction itself.

Still, to some degree there are religious situations where religion takes existential and sometimes desperate hold on some people. In desperate situations or otherwise troublesome situations do not people sometimes need a noble lie concerning religion and morality to give their lives meaning or a moral sense? Havers thinks so. And even if so, should this be? I argue that it is better for humanity that we have no such myths. And under the conditions I describe it is becoming so. That it will be so for everyone is a more open question.

VI

Is it not the case that *sometimes* Havers' 'noble lie' is justified? Perhaps so? In developed societies, some more so than others, there are fewer and fewer situations where that needs to be so or should be so. It more and more seems like an artificial question of a philosopher. Something very close to being a pseudo question. But is this so really? Aren't there places for it? Places where there in certain ways is no room for truth? For example, where you are an adult crowded into a box car with very young children four or five years' old which you have good reason to believe that they and you are on the way to be killed and where there is no way to stop it. Think of the Nazis and their concentration camps. The children do not know it but you do. For the several hours' ride what should you say to them? Should you stiffen them up to what is the truth? That seems just to be cruel and unnecessarily so. Indeed, it is senseless. There is no point in telling them. You should keep your mouth shut about that and instead soothe them a little with fairytales. There is to be no mention of the horror

that awaits them. Try to give them a few hours of non-horror before what you know will be a deadly horror for them and for you. Pleasant fairytales to soothe them down a bit before the horror. That is indeed horrible but it is better than to tell them the truth and make them immediately miserable. The truth here will give them nothing but only make them miserable for these few hours. Things are bad enough without making them worse.

This, however, is not to engage in Havers' noble lie policy. It may have *some* family resemblance to it. But there is no telling them lies. There is no justifiability for lying, as there is in Havers' case. No taking an alternative to Havers' noble lie policy in an attempt to enable people to be moral by telling them that God requires it. It would just be cruel to make these children face the reality of their being on the way to being murdered. There is no room for truth here. Telling them fairytales is not to tell them a compassionate lie, no lie is being told. Nor should this be. No noble lie, no compassionate lie nor any lie is being told but there is a compassionate concern. There is no room for truth here. They may have a few hours of peace and kindness while the pleasant fairytales are told. Isn't this the compassionate human thing to do before the big but unavoidable horror sets in? It is. This is a horrible situation but isn't this the thing to do under the situation? But it does not fit with Havers' policy of the 'noble lie' to hang on to a belief in morality for people when they lose their faith. When they mistakenly think that religious belief is needed to be moral and this belief is encouraged. Such 'noble lying' is not justified or required.

That is not like the death trip for the children. Telling them the pleasant stories will not yield them an understanding of how to live. It will just relieve them for a while from what is in the situation an unavoidable but still unnecessary suffering. There is no giving them there a firm grip on a moral point of view. There is no need at all for truth or lying in that child situation. We have no noble lying here. There is just the horror and vileness and a trying to keep it at bay for a while. That requires no philosophical or anti-religious as distinct from a non-religious turning. Not even *laicity*. Ways of life and political and social orientations cannot gain transcendental, transcendent and timeless

orientations and stand in no need for them to do so. All we need is a few banalities always in the background when we are engaged morally. Such a banality but still a truth is that unnecessary suffering is evil. But that evil cannot always be avoided. To be in accordance with that is to accept a plain reality.

This is not to deny that all banalities are worthless, any more than it is to deny that some, indeed many, banalities and truisms are true. But where this is so it will also be embedded in something more substantive but still contingent. For example, when emancipation obtains that unnecessary suffering is plainly bad. It is not that it is false or even non-contingent but it is not something to get steamed up about philosophically, theologically or even just plain religiously.

Another such account we could get steamed up about legitimately is not an account of Hillary Clinton's or Obama's *indispensable* nation. For them the United States. Nor is it China, Russia, Japan, Sweden, the United Kingdom, France, Germany or the Islamic Caliphate. There is no such place anywhere. Only too often ideological claims of one. Clinton and Obama are big on that. Any more than that there is a chosen people. No nation is indispensable. No people are the chosen people. That is all ideological twaddle. Though sometimes unfortunately there are peoples and states that are hegemonic or nearly so as once were Great Britain or the Roman Empire or now the United States and perhaps tomorrow China. None of these matters should be welcomed.

VII

What is to be done here has no answer from sociology, psychology, anthropology or history. And it has no philosophical or theological answer either. Though there are different ways people can act sometimes to come at least a little closer to a world of decency and kindness. That may very well not happen. A knowledge of history, anthropology or sociology does not make us jump with joy. But a world of a little betterness and kindness is not incoherent or a mere logical possibility. It is in some degree possible. Perhaps only to a small degree and we should struggle for it and not tell ourselves

noble lies or fairytales. But perhaps we can get more. A better life is possible. But it is not there like fruit on a tree.

But not all secular attitudes are desirable either and some are not even tolerable. We should remember that neither Hitler nor Mussolini nor Stalin were big on religion. And Hitler called his movement national socialism though it was not socialist at all. Its viciousness out-scored and put to shame that of the United States or the British Empire in that way. But they were or are not cultures to be prized.

If we look at the conditions of life of many places in developed societies they are not places to be cheered about. Still, and perhaps surprisingly, if we look at the life conditions of societies we will find many that are plainly rotten. They are usually undeveloped or semi-developed countries but still also and not infrequently they are in developed societies as well. However, if we look at developed societies we find pockets of relative decency that go together with an extensive growth of secularism. There is there *pace* MacIntyre less and less need for religiosity. When for a while in my twenties I was religious and then after a mild struggle ceased to be, the poem *Dover Beach* resonated with me. I felt a then saddening sense of the loss of faith in both myself and in our world. For a very long time I have no longer had a "Dover Beach" feeling. Something which I feel became a secularization. It is not a matter that I feel it as a liberation though I feel a non-evasive living is better than one that requires fairytales. But liberation or not, I feel that to be religious is to illusorily prop up ourselves, as Freud put it, and that to so prop ourselves with an illusion and that we go for a world that would not only keep all of us on track morality. But that would be to justify the enculturation of a noble moral lie. It is paternalistic if we try to justify it even if we do not make it necessary for all of us but only for weaklings. That is a Nietzschean turn of moral. Keep rooted in the tracks no matter what falsities we have to tell ourselves. That is not only paternalistic but false. It is not true that all societies will need Havers' Platonic lie in place for some people to keep themselves on track with morality. Even if people all the way down cannot escape, and should not escape, a noble lie

orientation, Platonic encrusted or not, without some modernistic ideology there can be no non-ideological living it as Havers'-style or any style benign Platonism. Indeed, if we humans ever needed it, we no longer do. More and more people in that respect can go in for non-evasive living. *Perhaps* we need other idols, but not Havers' Platonic one. We need not think that religion is necessary for the moral development of human beings who are non-philosophers. It is not true that only philosophers can be reasonable moral agents who are non-religious.

It is not the case that there is not only no room for truth in terrible happenings but it is also the case that morality has been trampled on here. Is it not also the case that we have no need here for Havers' deployment of a 'noble lie'? There isn't for there is no way to argue concerning this. It is not that we are beyond good and evil. It is just that when anything like this happens good or even decent has been crushed. Negated. There is just the brutishness of it. What Joseph Conrad called in *The Heart of Darkness* the sheer horror. And the attempt to keep it at bay for a little while longer. This is just that sometimes our condition and to turn to religion is just illusory.

This is something that did not happen a long time ago but something that happened in my lifetime while I was happily playing basketball in the Midwest United States during the Second World War. It happened in developed societies. It happened in Germany and other developed societies in Europe though then to my ignorance.

So it is not just in primitive societies that these things sometimes happen. They happen in developed societies as well though more in some than in others. Still, in all developed Western societies at least there is now an enhanced secularism. Religion is no on an upward march. Though things go better in Denmark and Norway contra religion and its sometime irrational and its sometimes destructive actions than they do in the United States and Canada. But there is little humanizing of things in non-Western developed societies. There is little advance in humanizing in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Yemen and Egypt. But no place anywhere for Havers' so-called noble lie.

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Response to Kai Nielsen by Grant Havers

*There was a muddy centre before we breathed,
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.*
(Wallace Stevens, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction)

I am deeply flattered that Kai Nielsen, who taught me as an undergraduate major in philosophy at the University of Calgary in the 1980s, took the time to compose a long and incisive response to my critique of his ideas. Although my former professor and I obviously have our disagreements, I have always appreciated the good will and intellectual honesty which Nielsen has demonstrated in his many debates with opponents from the other side of the philosophical (or political) aisle. Moreover, for anyone who is familiar with his works, it is hardly surprising that Nielsen's counter-critique of my arguments is characteristically formidable and tough-minded. Indeed, I wouldn't have it any other way.

Before I cut to the chase and respond to Nielsen's arguments, I should explain from the outset that I come to this discussion as a political philosopher. I am not a theologian, nor am I a philosopher of ethics or religion, nor am I a meta-ethicist. As a political philosopher, I adhere to the premise (hopefully a not too foundationalist one) that the utility of political ideas can be judged in part according to their salutary effects on the citizens

and rulers of a particular regime. Political ideas may include useful beliefs which do not always stand up to the withering scrutiny of philosophy. For this reason, I argued in my paper on “Benign Platonism” (BP) that at times myths, including religious myths, may have the effect of motivating ethical behavior for many human beings. I further contended that the authority of reason on its own does not necessarily have this salutary effect, since, if Nielsen is right, reason cannot provide self-evident reasons to be moral. For the record, I agree with Nielsen that reason cannot decisively “settle” anything here with respect to whether people need religion or not. The practice of myth needs more than just philosophy to unpack its meaning. Perhaps political philosophers, who have to cross disciplinary boundaries, appreciate this fact better than other philosophers, since the former must have an adequate knowledge of not just philosophy but also history, politics, religion, anthropology, and sociology to remind them that philosophy does not automatically provide us with categorically correct answers about the necessity or utility of religious myths.

I start with this point of agreement between me and Nielsen because his first counter-argument targets how I mistakenly interpret the empirical evidence of the persistent influence and necessity of religious myth in the lives of many human beings in the modern age. Nielsen writes: “Havers

wants to maintain that morality needs religion and that I mistakenly argue that one can be moral without being religious. But *whatever is actual must be possible* and it is plainly actual that there are plenty of people all around the world who are moral—indeed are plainly moral—who are not religious and do not have any religious beliefs at all.” (Nielsen’s italics) This restatement of my argument, however, is incorrect. I did not argue that “morality needs religion.” I argued that morality *sometimes* needs religion, or at least many people around the world still look to religion as a “foundation” for their moral behavior, given the limited authority of reason in the moral sphere. I also conceded from the start Nielsen’s long-argued view that many people can be ethical without belief in God. My main argument in defence of BP, however, was that religious myth is still necessary for many human beings, a fact which is confirmed by an adequate knowledge of human history, both past and present. Moreover, philosophers from Plato to Leo Strauss have recognized that this usage of myth is not a bad thing as long as it has the salutary effect of teaching virtue to those who lack a philosophical education.

Of course, it all depends on what we mean by “necessary.” Is it logically necessary, historically necessary, or politically necessary? My quick answer here is that myth represents what Strauss calls the “pre-philosophical,” or the

various traditions, conventions, and assumptions which *necessarily* form the moral glue of a given society or regime, none of which has been subjected to philosophical scrutiny.¹ (Nielsen would call these “background beliefs.”) To be sure, Nielsen does not take religious myth to be necessary in any sense to motivate human beings into an ethical direction. If he is right, I am just offering an “empirical truism” when I state that “many people need religion to orient their moral lives or make sense of morality.” Yet truisms like this one “are utterly uninteresting and utterly un-insightful.” These are “banalities” which “are more certain than any philosophical claim.” Nielsen emphasizes this empirical point with great effect because he can confidently point to evidence that many human beings live meaningful and morally decent lives without even paying lip-service to a belief in God or a Supreme Being. The overwhelming evidence that most human beings living in advanced capitalist regions of the world such as the European Union, the United Kingdom, or Quebec are atheistic to the core apparently exposes my view that human beings need religious myth as trivial at best and plainly false at worst. The “march of the enlightenment” (Nielsen’s phrase) in our time is surely so obvious that my appeal to BP crumbles in the face of these

¹ Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 241.

facts. Nielsen is genuinely surprised at my claim that there is a “resurgence of religion” when it is so clearly “withering away” in the developed world.

For the record, I agree with Nielsen that facts are stubborn things.

However, we interpret the facts rather differently. It is far from obvious that history is on the side of atheism. Religion is the fastest growing force in the developing world today. For at least the past forty years, Islam has enjoyed a mighty resurgence in the Middle East and much of Asia. Moreover, the most fundamentalist versions of the world’s largest religions have experienced impressive growth on almost every continent in the world.² The former satellites of the Soviet Union have witnessed a rebirth of orthodox Christianity. What George Weigel calls the “unsecularization of the world”³ has been attributed to the massively dislocating effects of rapid urbanization, the destruction of agrarian economies, and the transition towards capitalism on traditional third-world societies.⁴ This last point may confirm Nielsen’s long-held view that the appeal of religion is strongest for those who are poor, uneducated, and marginalized in an age of rampant globalization. As

² Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 95-101, 109-120. See also Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Faith: Why the World Is More Religious than Ever* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2015).

³ Quoted in Huntington, *Clash*, 96.

⁴ Huntington, *Clash*, 101.

Marx famously put it: “Religion is the heart in a heartless world.” The “world” in this case, if Nielsen is right, refers at least today to the most marginalized parts of the globe, not places like Finland or Sweden. Once secularism takes hold of developing nations which are moving along a more modern pathway, religion will surely decline there as dramatically as it has in the advanced capitalist nations.

One problem with this rather Whiggish argument is that the impact of mass immigration from the developing world to the most advanced nations has stimulated a revival of religion even in the latter polities. One could even argue that religion is putting pressure on secularism, not the reverse.

Traditionally modern and secular nations have had to “accommodate” the growing demands of traditional faith communities which have emigrated from the Middle East or Asia. As Carlos Fraenkel astutely remarks, “the secularization thesis is in trouble” even in the most liberal climes, as modernist political theorists struggle with the challenge of “how citizens who submit to God’s will can be led to endorse the norms of a liberal state which are only valid if its free and equal citizens consent to them.”⁵ In fairness, Nielsen never denies that religion may persist well into modernity,

⁵ Carlos Fraenkel, *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza: Reason, Religion, and Autonomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), xiv. .

even influencing the lives of some well-educated citizens. However, I do not think that he takes into account the fact that religion is doing more than persisting: it is flourishing even in much of the developed world due to immigration. It is far from obvious that secular polities such as Quebec or Holland will remain uniformly secular in the face of this challenge. Even if religion is “intellectually in trouble,” as Nielsen puts it, the need to accommodate faith-communities, which is an often thorny process that liberal regimes in the past never had to engage, arguably reflects the fact that religion is on the march at a global level. Once again, philosophy on its own cannot settle these issues in any certain way.

1. *Is Benign Platonism Foundationalist or Pragmatic?*

What, then, can philosophy teach about religious belief or myth? Nielsen clearly rejects my main argument that philosophy should revive the “noble fiction” teaching of Plato, which teaches that many (if not most) human beings must rely on some version of myth as a foundation for their ethical praxis. Any appeal to Plato in this vein strikes Nielsen as a desperate attempt to revive a “moral philosophical rationalism or absolutism” which smacks of long discredited metaphysical or foundationalist arguments. In fact, it is a “serious error” that I make when I conflate a “foundation” with a “source.” Religion may be a source of moral belief (Nielsen concedes it may even be

the source) but it is not a foundation if by “foundation” one means a trans-historical, indubitable, Archimedean point. If Nielsen is right, no such foundations ever existed. The “grand old tradition of philosophy” from Plato onwards seriously erred in assuming that there were self-evident truths which could impartially solve the great questions of philosophy without taking into account the contextual or historical factors which shape these ideas in the first place.⁶ To believe in a God of Reason is just as mistaken as to believe in a God of Faith. Once again, my appeal to Plato, even a benign version of his philosophy, surely leads people down the “garden path.”

In response, I concede that I may have too quickly conflated the term “foundation” with “source” or “influence.” I intended my usage of the term “foundation” to be more pragmatic in meaning than to refer to any idea which is perfectly objective or transcendent. Why, then, should I appeal to Platonism, which is surely the beginning of all foundationalism in western philosophy? My quick answer is that Plato is not a foundationalist in this sense. For what it’s worth, I believe that Nielsen leans too heavily on Richard Rorty’s interpretation of the philosophical tradition as a long series of footnotes to Platonic foundationalism. *Contra* Rorty, it is not evident that

⁶ Kai Nielsen, *Naturalism without Foundations* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1996), 170. Given the numerous references which I make to this pivotal study throughout the course of my response, I shall henceforth use the abbreviation “NWF” in the text.

Plato was a foundationalist or at least a consistent one. Once again, if foundationalism refers to the metaphysical belief that a trans-historical reason holds all the answers to life's questions, Plato is a pretty poor foundationalist. How many times in his dialogues does Plato (through the voice of Socrates) warn that human wisdom is worth little or nothing? (See, for example, *Apology* 23b) The "love of wisdom" (*philosophia*) which Plato famously articulates is not wisdom itself: it is the *lack* of wisdom. (We can only love or desire what we lack.) Although Plato's theory of the Forms has generated the popular impression that these abstract entities are transhistorical and incorrigible foundations of knowledge, it is not obvious that any human being, on Plato's terms, can know them with certainty. (As Socrates tells us, at least philosophers know that they are ignorant.) Philosophers may *desire* to know the Forms (of justice, truth, beauty, etc.) but the seeking of these does not equal knowledge of them.⁷ For this reason, Leo Strauss, as I noted in my paper on BP (see note 36), was not convinced that even Plato believed with certainty in the metaphysical claims that he actually made. Rather, much of his metaphysics was driven by pragmatic or political considerations which are related to the accommodation of non-

⁷ Stanley Rosen, "Founding Philosophy," *Reason Papers*, vol. 16 (1991): 7-10. For the record, Nielsen has shown dissatisfaction with the Socratic pursuit of truth if it does not yield knowledge of truth. See his "Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone," *Iyyun* 43 (January 1994): 17.

philosophers. Lest this final point sound too elitist, Nielsen himself admits in an essay in which he reconsiders the Platonic conception of philosophy that “Plato himself was an inconsistent rationalist” since he appealed to “intuition or feeling” as alternatives to a rational way of understanding reality.⁸ In short, Plato had no objection to the possibility that some human beings may reason their way towards knowledge (although there is no guarantee that they would obtain it) while others could use less rational means to figure out reality. This last point is the gist of what Plato calls the “noble fiction,” after all, which hardly counts as a foundationalist argument.

What, then, is so pragmatic about the “noble fiction” argument? For Nielsen, there is absolutely nothing pragmatic about the use of myth, religious or secular. He writes: “Most religious orientations are bad. Their track record is frequently so. That should be so for all religions as it should be for all ideologies and alleged ideologies.” Even though at times Nielsen has conceded that “religion has often been a humanizing force in the world” (NWF 529), it is plainly obvious from his writings that religion in his view is generally false, incoherent, and oppressive. If one wants to change the world for the better, one should look forward to the end of religion, which

⁸ Kai Nielsen, “Reconsidering the Platonic Conception of Philosophy,” *International Journal in Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2 (1994): 60.

has usually been an obstacle to progressive change. It is not that Nielsen believes that the end of religion will bring about a secular New Jerusalem. There have been evil secular regimes, after all: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia are obvious examples here. However, Nielsen is adamant that we should give up all talk about "saving myths" if we are to soberly face the task of making the world a more decent place for human beings to live. (NWF 495, 594)

Admittedly, I agree with many of Nielsen's claims here (perhaps reflecting my studying of Marxism as his student over thirty years ago). There is plenty of evidence to show that religion has deterred human beings from improving the social conditions of their time. As Marx persuasively showed, religion can be a crutch for many human beings who are oppressed by a heartless ruling class. It can also serve as a very useful instrument for the same ruling class to suppress dissent or divert attention away from addressing serious injustices within the capitalist system. However, my appeal to BP does not require or even welcome the usage of *all* religious beliefs or myths, especially the most oppressive or problematic versions of the latter. For example, a belief in the immortality of the soul (as I noted in footnote 65), is not a necessary or desirable noble fiction for my purposes, especially if it became a rationale for cutting health care for seniors.

(Nielsen's example of the belief in a chosen people, which he calls "ideological twaddle," would also be hard to square with a decent or humble liberal regime.) I will even admit that Plato's "myth of the metals" is too fatalistic and hierarchical to fit a liberal democratic regime. (Benign Platonism is not the same as classical or simon-pure Platonism, which promotes a resigned acceptance to the injustices of the mortal world.) While I can appreciate the power of Hannah Arendt's sobering remark that the decline in the fear of hellfire (which, she believed, had a Platonic origin) in the secular age perhaps weakened the political conscience of rulers to the point of unleashing the "entirely new and unprecedented criminality" of secular tyrants such as Hitler and Stalin,⁹ it is not my intention to justify the usage of all religious myths which may have been politically useful in the past. BP, as I articulate it, could even fit, and perhaps must fit, the kind of decent, liberal order which Nielsen and others have defended.

2. "God is Love," once again

For this reason, I chose the idea of "God is love" as an example of BP which is arguably still needed in our secular age. "Love of thy neighbor" is identical in meaning to "God is love." As the Bible famously puts it:

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Meridian Books, 1963), 133.

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 John 4: 16)

In my paper, I argued that philosophers in the past (particularly Spinoza) interpreted the biblical idea of “God is love” as a moral teaching which is absolutely essential to a democratic social contract. Furthermore, “God is love” is essentially the same as *agape*, or love of all human beings. As the biblical scholar Brayton Polka explains:

In other words, the absolute authority of the God of the Bible rests on the divine command that subjects love other subjects as they want other subjects to love them. We remember that the apostle John in his first Epistle writes that God is love. God does not exist outside of the love of neighbor. If you love your neighbor as yourself, then you love God and God loves you. If you do not love your neighbor as yourself—if you place either yourself above your neighbor or your neighbor above yourself—then you do not love God and God does not love you.¹⁰

In the terms of BP, which are perhaps overly simplified, religious folks believe in “God is love” while secular folks believe in “love thy neighbor.” (As Nielsen appropriately reminds us, it is often difficult to distinguish between atheists who have religious beliefs and theists who have atheistic ones.¹¹) In practical terms, however, both beliefs can mean the same thing. To understand God as “love” is to love one’s fellow human beings as if it is a godly practice to engage in. God does not tolerate *double standards* akin to

¹⁰ Brayton Polka, “Modern Philosophy, the Subject, and the God of the Bible,” *Sophia* 54 (2015): 567-568.

¹¹ See Kai Nielsen, “Wittgenstein and Wittgensteinians on Religion,” in Kai Nielsen and D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgensteinian Fideism?* (London : SCM Press, 2005), 250. See also Nielsen, “On Obstacles of the Will,” 312 (in the same volume).

putting oneself above one's neighbor in a hierarchical, racist, or chauvinist manner. As I argued in the last section of my paper, philosophers from Spinoza to John Rawls have insisted that "universal love" (or love of thy neighbor) is the basis for a viable social contract. What I argued, in accord with Spinoza, is that this moral belief needs a religious "foundation" (once again, "source" may have been a better choice of words) since reason on its own cannot provide reasons for putting into practice this credo.

Before I go any further, it is necessary to recognize that Nielsen absolutely rejects my view that a "noble fiction" of any kind is necessary here. Even if we do not have self-evident or transhistorical reasons for being ethical, we need not have the jitters about all this. We do not need fictions at all. In fact, to live according to fictions of any kind (sometimes he calls these "illusions") is very bad and harmful indeed. "God is love" would be just another example of such a fiction which is at best incoherent and at worst false. A noble fiction (or "noble lie," which is not the best translation of Plato's meaning) in most contexts is wrong, notwithstanding extreme examples such as the need to comfort children on a train bound for a death-camp (Nielsen's example). Even benign versions of noble fictions serving as

“approximations of the truth” presented in narrative form “when the full truth is not manifest to mere mortals” would be unacceptable to Nielsen.¹²

To be sure, there have been Christian thinkers such as R. B. Braithwaite, R. M. Hare, D. Z. Phillips, Hendrik Hart, Reinhold Niebuhr, and many others who have acknowledged the mythical content of Christianity while insisting that human beings still follow the moral lessons which arise from these myths. In his famous essay on empiricism and religious belief, Braithwaite admitted that the most important stories of the Bible are myths.¹³ Niebuhr even used the term “true myth.”¹⁴ Readers familiar with Nielsen’s scholarship know exactly where he stands on these attempts to revive the mythical power of Christian allegories or symbols. In his view, this “Godless Christianity” is fundamentally dishonest since it teaches that human beings should see “God” as a metaphor for some moral absolute while repudiating any belief in a supernatural deity as intellectually

¹² See Christopher Morrissey, “The Truth about Plato’s Noble Lie,” *The Imaginative Conservative*, <http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2016/11/platos-noble-lie-christopher-morrissey.html>

¹³ R. B. Braithwaite, “An empiricist’s view of the nature of religious belief,” in Malcolm L. Diamond and Thomas V. Litzgenburg (eds.), *The Logic of God: Theology and Verification* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), 142-143.

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 12. This book was originally published in 1935. Nielsen dismisses Niebuhr’s idea of a “true myth” as incoherent in his *Philosophy & Atheism: A Defense of Atheism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1985), 22.

untenable.¹⁵ This version of Christianity is simply “phony,” since its defenders are dressing up atheism in religious clothing. (NWF 491; see also pp. 501, 526, 593) Moreover, it would be rare to find someone who accepts the proposition that Christianity is full of myths and yet still lives according to them.¹⁶ Why, then, is it practical or even necessary to indulge in these myth-eaten traditions?

3. *The Historical Implications of BP and “God is love”*

As I acknowledged from the outset, I am not a philosopher of religion (like Braithwaite and the others cited above) or a theologian (like Niebuhr). As a political philosopher, the internal coherence of a belief system is less important to me than its utility as a source (ground, foundation) of moral belief. Admittedly, this last point is more pragmatic than it is theological. I make no apologies for that, since politics is the art of the practical. What, then, is practical about believing that “God is love” is equivalent to “love thy neighbor as thyself”? After all, as Nielsen has shown, this and similar ideas raise many questions about their meaning or coherence.¹⁷

¹⁵ Kai Nielsen, “Christian Empiricism,” in his *God, Scepticism, and Modernity* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1989), 172-189.

¹⁶ Nielsen, “Wisdom and Dilman on the Reality of God,” in *God, Scepticism, and Modernity*, 154.

¹⁷ Nielsen, “God, Necessity, and Falsifiability,” in *God, Scepticism, and Modernity*, 37.

My answer here is that this idea of universal love, whether expressed in religious or secular terms, is an important constituent of the moral beliefs of western democratic nations. Even if one doesn't believe in God as a supernatural deity, one can appreciate the significance of this belief in "God's love" and its impact on our political or practical lives. As that great pragmatist Richard Rorty once remarked:

For it is part of the tradition of our community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity. This Jewish and Christian element in *our* tradition is gratefully invoked by free-loading atheists like myself, who would like to let differences like that between the Kantian and the Hegelian remain "merely philosophical." The existence of human rights, in the sense in which it is at issue in this meta-ethical debate, has as much or as little relevance to our treatment of such a child as the question of the existence of God. I think both have equally little relevance.¹⁸

Note that Rorty contends that "our tradition" (the western tradition) needs the Judeo-Christian belief in human dignity, which is a corollary of universal love. Note as well his view that atheists have to "free-load" this belief, implying that atheism on its own cannot provide a basis for such a belief. (Human dignity presupposes that God loves all human beings, after all.)

Although Rorty also notes that meta-ethical discussions about the existence of human rights are as irrelevant as debates about God, it sounds as if he is happy to count on the survival of this moral belief which is essential to

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 80, no. 10 (1983): 588-589. (author's italics)

civilization. *Contra* Nielsen (NWF 527), Rorty may require some “metaphysical comfort” after all, at least in a practical sense.

Still, is Rorty suggesting that we need the belief that “God is love” or any other religious belief for that matter? Certainly Rorty did not think that educated philosophers needed such a belief. What about everyone else? In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty writes that most “non-intellectuals,” as he puts it, “are still committed either to some form of religious faith or to some form of Enlightenment rationalism” because most human beings have not given up “the attempt to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision.”¹⁹ This last comment, in which Rorty distinguishes between the educated and the uneducated, has suggested to some scholars that there is a Straussian-Platonic side to Rorty (see footnote 20 of my BP paper). If we put these two texts side by side, Rorty is arguably defending a version of BP. Educated folks who happen to be atheists can make use of moral beliefs inherited from the biblical tradition while less educated folks (who could be atheists as well as theists) can hanker after some version of redemptive truth. What is important, however, is that some moral beliefs are still tied to a discernible, religious tradition in a necessary way. If we push Rorty’s point further, we must accept the fact that some of the most atheistic

¹⁹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xv, xvi.

intellectuals in history have necessarily indulged in myth. Even Freud, whom Nielsen praises as a sober-minded secular thinker, had to employ, in his *Moses and Monotheism*, the “myth of the primal father” as a narrative which “explains” the violent origins of civilization.

Nielsen may well respond that an emphasis on the historical roots of a moral belief, including its religious roots, can lead to the “genetic fallacy” if one mistakenly concludes from this connection that these origins determine the validity of a belief. I think that Nielsen has a point here (and I noted this in footnote 53) but I would also caution that history should not be cast aside so easily. Strauss once wisely observed that the Bible deeply influenced not just medieval but modern philosophy,²⁰ perhaps in ways which modern philosophers don’t want to admit. As a self-styled historicist, Nielsen has often recognized, in accord with Hegel, that one cannot overleap history (NWF 28). At the risk of sounding cheeky here, if we want to be good historicists, can we truly overleap the genealogy of our most cherished moral beliefs, including our belief in universal love? Can we overleap the Judeo-Christian tradition which brought this belief into being? Should we do so? Is

²⁰ Leo Strauss, “On a New Interpretation of Plato’s Political Philosophy,” *Social Research*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1946): 328. Strauss himself is a case in point of a philosopher who is reluctant to acknowledge the influence of the Bible on his philosophy. See my “The Politics of Paradox: Leo Strauss’s Biblical Debt to Spinoza (and Kierkegaard),” *Sophia* 54 (2015): 525-543.

the history of our background beliefs somewhat relevant, especially if we cannot overleap them anyway?

The history to which I am referring here is the astonishing fact, one which was astutely recognized by Hegel and Nietzsche, that the doctrine of universal love (otherwise known as “God is love,” “love thy neighbor as one would want to be loved”) first came into being with the biblical tradition. As Leo Strauss argued, the very idea of a loving God who commands His human creation to love each other has no equivalent in Greek philosophy or mythology. The God of Plato and Aristotle is indifferent to the suffering of mere mortals.²¹ The reader of Plato’s great dialogue about love, *The Symposium*, will look in vain for a version of *agape*, or love of the human as one would love God. Aristotle’s unmoved mover is beyond good and evil, detached from the cares of mortals. In the ancient Greek (and Roman) world, the only relation which obtains is ruler-ruled: either one rules or one is ruled. There was no fundamental equality between human beings because there was no concept of loving all human beings, no matter how lowly, as

²¹ Leo Strauss, “Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections,” in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*. Edited with an introduction by Kenneth Hart Green (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 396.

commanded by one God who loves all.²² In short, the tradition of Jerusalem (biblical revelation) imposes a morality on human beings which would be inconceivable to the tradition of Athens (Greek philosophy).

In fairness, Nielsen at times recognizes in a historical vein the egalitarian implications of the biblical tradition. In a discussion of Friedrich Engels's analysis of the social origins of Christianity in the Roman Empire, agrees with Engels's (Hegelian) view that Christianity is "the first possible world religion" (quoted in NWF 478) because it was the first religion to recognize the universal equality of all human beings (as loved by God) without the distinctions of religions, classes, or traditions.²³ However, this historical evidence would not convince Nielsen that Christianity in any form is still needed. He would likely agree with his sympathetic reader Andrew Levine that Nietzsche was wrong to insist (as I do as well) that the morality of universal love cannot survive disbelief in the God of the Bible.²⁴ As Nielsen puts it, we do not need myths of any kind here.

²² Brayton Polka, *The Dialectic of Biblical Critique: Thought and Existence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). See also Luc Ferry, "The Victory of Christianity over Greek Philosophy," in *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, translated by Theo Cuffe (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 55-91.

²³ I discuss Hegel's interpretation of Christianity in this context in my "Hegel, Christianity, and the Modern Philosophical Revolution," *Fideles* 4 (2009): 5-15.

²⁴ Andrew Levine, *In Bad Faith: What's Wrong with the Opium of the People* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), 134-135.

This line of argumentation would be tenable if one accepts the premise that reason alone is a superior substitute to religion for teaching that human beings must practice universal, disinterested love towards each other. Large historical and theological questions come into play here, none of which can be settled by philosophy alone. However, it is worth noting that not all religions teach this moral lesson. Confucianism, for example, teaches that Heaven addresses the ruling hierarchy of a political order. In contrast, the Bible teaches that God directly speaks to *all* of His people and demands that all of them (great and small) are responsible for obeying the covenant.²⁵ Moral responsibility for all human beings, which the Bible also teaches and commands, may also explain why historically Christian (especially Protestant) nations apologize for past injustices inflicted upon oppressed peoples, a sense of guilt which is absent in most other religions.²⁶ Although Nielsen at times recognizes this egalitarian inheritance, he is more often inclined to believe that there is nothing unique about biblical religions in comparison to all the others. (See NWF 91)

²⁵ Wm. Theodore de Bary, *The Trouble with Confucianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 93-94.

²⁶ Paul Edward Gottfried, *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002).

If the historical influence of Christianity (or the Bible as a whole) is not sufficient to justify the use of its myths, can we fall back on reason to justify the practice of universal love? This is a position which Nielsen categorically rejects. As I noted (see footnote 50), Nielsen chides Rawls for assuming without argument that rational individuals *must* love humanity in this way. In accord with Hume's "sensible knave," one can be quite rational without practicing the golden rule. In the absence of a vital Judeo-Christian tradition and in the presence of a rather weak rationalism, can we count on human beings practicing the golden rule?

4. *BP, Fallibilism, and Wide Reflective Equilibrium*

In order to answer this question, I shall turn to Nielsen's ideas on fallibilism and wide reflective equilibrium (WRE) in order to press my argument that we need mythically shaped religious beliefs more than he acknowledges. For the record, Nielsen rightly faults me for ignoring his and Rawls's writings on these subjects. I welcome this opportunity to discuss these now because, as I shall argue, Nielsen's treatment of the relevant issues tend to vindicate my argument that myths are necessary background beliefs which are more deeply rooted in our morality than he recognizes.

Nielsen, of course, grounds his concept of WRE in the work of Rawls. He defines the method of WRE as "enlightened common sense rooted in our

considered judgments and our use of public reason.”²⁷ Nielsen also looks to the philosophy of Hume as the basis for his invocation of fallibilism which he describes as the view that “no principles or beliefs or convictions, not even the most firmly held, are, in principle at least, free from the possibility of being modified or even set aside, though some moral truisms may always *in fact* be unquestionably accepted.” (NWF 15; author’s italics) Yet fallibilism is not the same as skepticism or nihilism. If Nielsen is right, Rawls himself was a fallibilist. (NWF 181) When fallibilism is applied in the context of WRE, this attitude of modifying judgements is essential in the event that one judgement is in conflict with another. (NWF 65) Out of this process or procedure will emerge a “fallibilistic worldview.” (NWF 66) Controversial beliefs along political, psychological, or sociological lines would not be accepted into WRE, since the participants to this discussion are looking for “overlapping consensus” rather than perpetual conflict between judgements. (NWF 164, 185)

Nielsen is careful to emphasize that WRE is a procedure, not a theory per se. (NWF 448, 541) He also clearly states that there is more than one possible version of WRE (hence his term “wide reflective *equilibria*.”) Yet he is equally adamant that WRE exclude all views which are

²⁷ Nielsen, “Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone,” 17.

“unreasonable.” (NWF 445) He is also absolutely clear that metaphysical and transcendental beliefs would have to be excluded. (NWF 61-62; 68). Following Hume, Nielsen’s WRE would also exclude religion as utterly incompatible with reasonable or considered judgements (NWF 83, 86-87, 89, 103, 123, 145, and 535). Even if religion once served as a background belief (or what Strauss calls the “pre-philosophical), that is no justification for being included in the WRE. (Note that I am not accusing Nielsen of opposing religious freedom, which he defends as long as it is practiced non-violently. Rather, he is arguing that religious claims have no place in the public square of WRE.)

It is worth noting that Nielsen’s version of WRE is much more hostile to the usage of religion than Rawls’s version of RE. (Perhaps WRE isn’t so wide, after all.) This point may be a surprising one, since Rawls, an admitted atheist, opposes in *A Theory of Justice* the use of the Platonic noble lie as akin to the tactics of the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.²⁸ Yet it is far from obvious in his later works that Rawls opposed the inclusion of religious ideas into WRE even if he did not personally believe in them. As Rawls argued in a famous essay on “public

²⁸ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition ((Harvard: Belknap Press, 1999), 398n.

reason,” there are examples in which one can imagine the seamless inclusion of religious ideas into the public square. If a Christian endorsed a constitutional democratic regime in accord with a religious doctrine which teaches that “such are the limits God sets to our liberty,” that would be acceptable.²⁹ Moreover, there are no valid restrictions on religious language per se.³⁰ In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls even imagines the religious symbolism within Lincoln’s most famous speeches to be compatible with at least the public reason of the sixteenth president’s era.³¹ In short, Rawls does not embrace the position that religious ideas automatically must be excluded from WRE, so long as these are not meant to impose theocracy on the citizenry.³² It is also worth noting that Rawls, despite Nielsen’s portrait of him as an anti-metaphysical thinker (see NWF 171),³³ does not devalue metaphysical notions as long as they do not lead to conflict: “political

²⁹ John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” *University of Chicago Law Review*, vol. 64, no. 3 (1997): 782.

³⁰ Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” 784.

³¹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 425. See also my *Lincoln and the Politics of Christian Love* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009).

³² Paul Weithman, “Inclusivism, Stability, and Assurance,” in Tom Bailey and Valentina Gentile (eds.), *Rawls and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 94. This volume is a treasure trove of essays which bring out the nuanced and tolerant approach which Rawls took towards religious ideas.

³³ Nielsen, “Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone,” 32-33.

liberalism does not say that the values articulated by a political conception of justice, though of basic significance, outweigh the transcendent values (as people may interpret them)—religious, philosophical, or moral—with which the political conception may possibly conflict. To say that would go beyond the political.”³⁴ In this vein, it would be wrong to dismiss religion as false in a *prima facie* sense, since such a proclamation would be akin to an application of “comprehensive liberalism” or illiberally imposing doctrines on the citizenry.³⁵ Indeed, Rawls himself may have imported certain metaphysical notions into his political writings, without fully acknowledging his debt.³⁶ Based on all this, surely “God is love” could be accommodated into WRE, as Rawls presents the latter, if this ideal cohered with liberal notions such as universal equality or opposition to prejudicial double standards.

Even if Nielsen cannot tolerate the even partial usage of religious ideas at a morally or politically pragmatic level (as Rawls does), would this doctrine of universal love be included into his version of WRE? After all, the command to love all human beings would not count as the hateful

³⁴ John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 2nd edition (Harvard: Belknap Press, 2001) 37.

³⁵ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, 153.

³⁶ Margaret Meek Lange, “Exploring the Theme of Reflective Stability: John Rawls’s Hegelian Reading of David Hume,” *Public Reason* vol. 1, no. 1 (2009): 75-90.

religious fundamentalisms which he, like Rawls, typically wants to exclude.³⁷ Nielsen also affirms the doctrine of moral reciprocity in other writings (see note 48). Is “love thy neighbor” just another moral truism which need not be subjected to fallibilistic scrutiny? (NWF 482-483) The answer is no. It is interesting that Nielsen does not include the golden rule in a list of moral truisms which he once provided.³⁸ What is his reasoning behind his exclusivism here?

In *Naturalism without Foundations*, Nielsen makes clear that absolutist notions of ethics such as a doctrine of unconditional love, cannot be accommodated into his version of WRE. Although many background beliefs, which happen to be uncontroversial or trivial moral truisms, are welcome, Christian love (*agape*) is not one of these. He writes: “Such a conception of the moral life could not be gotten into wide reflective equilibrium.” (NWF 579) Indeed, Nielsen rejects all beliefs which appeal to “any metaphysical or transcendental conceptions” which do not easily hang together with other beliefs in WRE. (NWF 61) In a discussion of Terence

³⁷ Kai Nielsen, “On There Being Wide Reflective Equilibria: Why It Is Important to Put It in the Plural,” in David Rondel and Alex Sager (eds.), *Pessimism of the Intellect, Optimism of the Will: The Political Philosophy of Kai Nielsen* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2012), 46-47.

³⁸ Kai Nielsen, “On Being Blinkered,” in Kai Nielsen and Hendrik Hart, *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition: Conversations between a Marxian Atheist and a Calvinian Christian* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 138.

Penelhum's thoughts on the meaning and practice of Christian love, he dismisses this ideal as a "harmful moral ideology" which is not only tied to "an unbelievable and unreasonable cosmology." (NWF 583) Christian love also imposes unrealistic demands on human beings. Surely it is irrational to believe that God will love us, reward us, and take care of us if we follow His command to love each other as we would want to be loved. In fact, "love thy neighbor" (*agape*) is unrealistic as well.

But to believe that there actually is such divine love is for us—at least for *we critical intellectuals* (my italics) standing where we are now in history and culture—is to have an unreasonable belief, or, at the very least, a badly mistaken belief, and thus the *agape* of Christian ethics, tied as it is to such a cosmological belief, is also unreasonable and unjustified. More than that, if its advocacy were successful and some considerable number of people, even most people, actually tried to live as Jesus advocates, a very considerable harm would be done to them. They would be taken advantage of, often tricked and exploited and sometimes cruelly harmed by those, even if they were only a few, who did not so act. If everybody were all of the time, or at least most of the time, to act as Jesus advocates, then the situation would not be so bad, though even here, with no stress on recognizing and protecting one's own legitimate interests as well as having concern for the legitimate interests of others, we would often not know what to do...it is in reality a harmful *moral ideology* (author's italics): harmful not simply because it is false but (in this context) more seriously harmful because of the effect it would have on the lives of people. (NWF 580)

Much of what Nielsen writes about the Christian tradition of morality here borders on stereotype. Christian theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Joseph Fletcher would soundly reject Nielsen's stereotyping of Christian love as hopelessly naïve about the sinfulness of the world. In their view, one

can live according to *agape* and still have to make difficult choices.³⁹ To love your neighbor may even require, as one Christian philosopher has argued in the context of war, the usage of violence against him for his own good if he threatens you and innocent human beings with violence.⁴⁰ A life devoted to love does not close one's eyes to the grey areas which require tough choices about life and death. The very idea of grey areas even presupposes an absolute standard of ethics.⁴¹ One cannot make sense of exceptional cases in which moral principles are violated unless there are absolute principles which exist in the first place. Finally, it is not good theology to claim, as Nielsen does (see NWF 579), that according to the Bible God takes care of people no matter what happens in the event that they practice *agape*. The God of Jerusalem is not a cosmic Santa Claus who showers presents on believers as a reward for good deeds. Surely the Book of Job, the Psalms, and the story of the Crucifixion militate against this!

³⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Scribner, 1953); Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1966).

⁴⁰ Willmoore Kendall, "A Conservative Statement on Christian Pacifism," in Willmoore Kendall, *The Conservative Affirmation* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1963), 127, 135-136.

⁴¹ Nielsen occasionally admits that a fideistic Christian (or Jew or Muslim) could be a fallibilist. See his "Reply to Anthony Kenny," in Michel Seymour and Matthias Fritsch (eds.), *Reason and Emancipation: Essays on the Philosophy of Kai Nielsen* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2007), 72.

Be that as it may, I concede in part Nielsen's argument that *agape* is not an obviously rational doctrine. It may be foolishness to the Greeks, as St. Paul famously observed. If Nielsen is right, it is not realistic to insist, as Rawls does in *A Theory of Justice*, that the disinterested love of strangers and enemies is rational. If anything, it may be irrational to practice *agape* when one takes into account all the sensible knaves who may take advantage of these well-meaning yet naïve souls. However, many of us (even we "critical intellectuals" with a liberal bent) require the healthy practice of this background belief. In my BP paper, I noted Nielsen's socialist belief that "moral reciprocity" requires the redistribution of wealth from rich nations to poor ones. As I argued in this context, "moral reciprocity" in this vein sounds very similar to Christian love. (Kant, after all, built his idea of moral reciprocity or duty on this biblical foundation.) Yet, if what Nielsen wrote *contra* Penelhum is correct, this idea is about as naïve as loving one's fellow human beings as one would want to be loved. Why is it rational (or self-interested) to redistribute wealth from the affluent to the impoverished? From the standpoint of the richest nations, this demand of moral reciprocity would be irrational. Could they not claim, on rational grounds, that they would be unduly harmed if such a redistribution were imposed on them by naïve Christian do-gooders? As morally abhorrent as this attitude may be, is

it not possible that these rich nations would use the same arguments as Nielsen does in repudiating the absolutism implicit in moral reciprocity? The citizens of rich nations would have to make a mighty, even sacrificial, attempt to put themselves in the position of their poor brethren. They would also have to see these human beings as their moral equals. Can reason demonstrate any of this or do we need to fall back on a metaphysics of morality which Nielsen considers obsolete? Perhaps, after all, we do indeed the idea that “God is love,” which insists on the love of all human beings great and small, to encourage the practice of this demanding principle.

Let us consider another example. In an essay on the consequentialist implications of WRE, Nielsen rightly notes that the very meaning of “injustices” is tied to double standards which treat groups of human beings according to arbitrary distinctions based on racism or sexism. He writes:

If, where it is acknowledged that there is no morally relevant difference between them, there is in law with one penalty for blacks and another for whites, let us say that blacks get the death penalty for murder and whites get a long term of imprisonment, or, again, where it is acknowledged that there is no morally relevant difference between them, men are allowed to go to public bars unaccompanied while women are not, or, again, where there is no morally relevant differences between them, Jews must pay out of their own funds for religious schools while Catholics can finance their schools from state funds, all of these are plain injustices. Any theory of justice which did not recognize them to be such would itself be mistaken. We have more reason to be confident in accepting and sticking with these considered judgments than of accepting any moral theory which purports to show that they are not acceptable, or even that they are problematic, and that no injustice occurs if these things are done.⁴²

⁴² Kai Nielsen, “Methods of Ethics: Wide Reflective Equilibrium and a Kind of Consequentialism,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* vol. 25, no. 2 (Fall 1994): 58.

Although I wholeheartedly agree with Nielsen's views expressed here, I question, once again, whether his meta-philosophy or meta-ethics hangs together with these admirable positions. For one thing, Nielsen strongly implies here that human beings must be treated fairly because we are *equal* in a moral sense: none of us should be subjected to discrimination of any kind. Can reason, however, demonstrate that we are obligated to treat each other this way? The Nielsen who posed the question "Why be Moral?" years ago would answer "no" to both of these questions. However, Nielsen would not necessarily worry about the implications of such moral skepticism today. As he notes at the end of the above quote, we simply do not need to justify according to a "moral theory" whether these judgements about the wrongness of double standards are right or not. They just bloody well are right. These are background beliefs which do not need any philosophical scrutiny whatsoever. A proper "enculturation" is all we need.⁴³

If I read Nielsen correctly, then, his usage of fallibilism (see above) would not be applied to moral truisms of this kind (if they are indeed moral truisms). An attitude of "benign neglect" regarding the great philosophical

⁴³ Nielsen, "Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone," 30.

questions of justice is apropos here.⁴⁴ Although it is legitimate to scrutinize the practicality of living according to *agape*, as we have seen Nielsen argue, it is not necessary to evaluate the principle of equality in the same vigorous manner. My response here is: why not? Why is it valid to exempt moral claims from the fallibilistic, punitive philosophical scrutiny to which Nielsen subjects Christian *agape*? Let us consider the principle of equality from a fallibilistic standpoint, keeping in mind Hume's famous distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. In strict Humean terms, equality is not a self-evident truth (despite Thomas Jefferson). If it is, then, a matter of fact, it should be understood either as a pure sentiment, a customary belief, or what Hume calls "common life" (although one which is not universally shared across all civilizations today). If we apply this reasoning to equality, this idea has about as much force as any custom to which we can point (at least in the western democratic world). Yet customs by themselves, even if they amount to what Nielsen calls a "cluster of social practices," surely do not constitute a reason for believing in equality. (Isn't the practice of inequality at least as deeply entrenched a custom?) Does fallibilism, then, lead us right back to what I originally called Nielsen's atheistic moral skepticism (AMS)?

⁴⁴ Nielsen, "Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone," 11.

I don't doubt for a moment that Nielsen would reject my conclusion here. In Humean all too Humean fashion, he would insist (and has insisted) that background beliefs (whether sentiments or customs or both) are all that we have and all that we need to make sense of our moral judgements. Hume, however, sometimes worried about how reason, as he understood it, was powerless to justify our notion of right and wrong. As Hume famously wrote, we have "no choice left but betwixt a false reason and none at all" when we have to choose between metaphysics and mere custom.⁴⁵ If we have to fall back on customs, how do we know that they are the right customs? Additionally, in order to live according to high principles like equality which cannot be rationally demonstrated, do we have to free-load on biblical notions of human dignity, as Rorty suggested? In short, do we need the credos of biblical morality, mythical as they are, after all? (Once again, not all civilizations believe in human equality. As Hegel, Engels, and Nietzsche well understood, equality is an inheritance from Christianity.)

Nielsen may be quite right that universal love, in religious or secular garb, cannot survive fallibilism. My question, which in a sense is similar to the question that I originally posed against his AMS is: can any moral belief, even a truism, survive fallibilism? Nielsen in his response does not discuss

⁴⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1969), 315.

the disturbing passage from Hume's *Treatise* which I quoted on how "it is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger." Judging from this passage, it seems to me that Nielsen seriously understates just how vulnerable fallibilism is to the charge of moral skepticism. Put in self-referential terms, can fallibilism be applied to itself? Can one be a fallibilist about fallibilism? Can one demonstrate with certainty that fallibilism is valid? One could even make the bad joke that fallibilism may be wrong!⁴⁶

Writing as a political philosopher, it is no mystery to me that there has never been a society based on fallibilism, with or without WRE. (In NWF, he concedes that WRE has never existed in practice: see 186 and 204-205) The simple reason for this fact is that no society could long survive such a state of affairs. Nielsen may respond that moral truisms need not be subjected to a fallibilistic assault. Yet Hume may give us reason to think otherwise. At the end of the *Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he famously observes "Whatever is may not be." This is consistent with his famous distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas. With

⁴⁶ Hume writes in his *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Section 4, Part 2) that judgements based on probability, as opposed to certainty, tend to be circular and end up demonstrating nothing: "To endeavor, therefore, the proof of this last supposition [that the future will resemble the past] by probable arguments, or arguments regarding existence, must be evidently going in a circle, and taking that for granted, which is the very point in question."

respect to human life, all that we have are matters of fact (or knowledge based on custom), not self-evident truths. Yet facts alone do not demonstrate morality: one cannot get an ought from an is. If we apply this to human life, it is simply a matter of fact without any necessity whatsoever. Human life is but it may not be. There is no moral necessity to the preservation of life, or even the world.⁴⁷ If Humean all too Humean reason cannot teach whether human life necessarily has value or not, perhaps we should look to religious (that is, biblical) myth.

Nielsen would likely counter that the “Christian stink” (*pace* Nietzsche) or customary tradition which emanates from modern Enlightenment notions of equality (NWF 243) is indeed an historically verifiable fact but not philosophically or even practically necessary as an influence that must guide our moral praxis. I beg to differ here. I am not convinced that customs in and of themselves, without the vital or enduring influence of the religion which brought into being these customs in the first place, can survive just because we “critical intellectuals” want them to survive. (At the time of writing, far-right movements which are hostile to Christian egalitarianism and even

⁴⁷ Polka, *Dialectic of Biblical Critique*, 171: “There is one negation of a fact which is indeed contradictory, and that is the negation of the fact of a human life. Human existence is not an empirical category, merely a matter of fact, just as interpretation of human existence is not merely a relation of ideas having no necessary bearing on our human existence.”

blame Christianity for opening up Europe to “inferior” races or cultures are on the march again in Europe. Clearly they have no difficulty in brushing these customs aside.⁴⁸) Rawls, in one of his lectures on Hume’s moral psychology, attributes to Hume a “fideism of nature,” or an implicit trust in the human affections and customs which inform a decent moral sense.⁴⁹ It is striking that Rawls chooses the term “fideism,” as if to suggest that a reliance on human nature’s better angels (and the customs which sustain them) is backed up by the passions and imagination rather than any kind of reflection. If our belief in morality, then, comes down to a leap of faith, then why not encourage the old-school fideism that “God is love,” which is a valuable custom in its own right? Put another way (in the spirit of BP), if most human beings cannot be bothered to reflect philosophically on their moral beliefs anyway, why should we lament the fact that Christian love is a valuable and enduring custom, however problematic it might be in practice?

⁴⁸ See Tomislav Sunic, *Against Democracy and Equality: The European New Right* (New York: Noontide Press, 2004), 87-105; Michael O’Meara, *New Culture, New Right: Anti-Liberalism in Postmodern Europe* (Bloomington: 1st Books, 2004), 140-145.

⁴⁹ John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, edited by Barbara Herman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 21-23.

And, if that is the case, why fret about the “packaging” of moral beliefs in the language of Christian morality?⁵⁰

The idea of “God is love,” Nielsen will remind us, comes with the baggage of an antiquated cosmology which Hume and Kant blew to bits. Why, then, rely on the utility of this custom, which might as well be a fiction? My response here is that many moral notions come with baggage (note the “Christian stink” which surrounds human equality). Additionally, the only individuals who seem to experience perplexity about such baggage are philosophers, but not the great mass of citizens.⁵¹ To be sure, as I noted earlier, both religious and secular beliefs may be disqualified from inclusion into WRE (e.g., the belief in hell, the immortality of the soul, etc.) if they are deemed harmful or controversial under the circumstances. (Nielsen’s own “analytical Marxism” is the result of a conscious effort by him and others to strip Marxism of its controversial metaphysical or Hegelian baggage while retaining its core elements.⁵²) We may have to be a tad “Platonic” in

⁵⁰ Kenneth Royce Moore, “Platonic Myths and Straussian Lies: The Logic of Persuasion,” *Polis* vol. 26, no. 1 (2009): 109.

⁵¹ Nielsen appropriately attacks this sort of perplexity in his “Christian Empiricism,” 172.

⁵² Kai Nielsen, “Analytical Marxism: A Form of Critical Theory,” *Erkenntnis* vol. 39, no. 1 (July 1993): 7-9.

deciding which myths are and are not beneficial.⁵³ If enlightened folks in western democracies are in such a position to decide any of this (which has never happened outside of Plato's *Republic*), then certain myths would have to be banished to the private sphere of life. If that sounds elitist or paternalistic, so be it. However, I am arguably no more elitist than Nielsen, although in a different sense. While I want to accommodate less educated individuals who cling to religious myth for guidance, Nielsen envisions "overlapping consensus" as something that can only be understood by well-educated individuals, not those with a "very limited history and cultural background."⁵⁴ Ironically enough, this last point is in accord with BP, particularly the subtle distinction between the educated and less educated. (Presumably, both of us would still be kindly and respectful to those who hold beliefs which we took to be irrational.)

All these efforts of sorting out myths, both good and bad, would require the kind of historical, pragmatic, and philosophical reasoning which I have

⁵³ In NWF (433), Nielsen notes that Stuart Hampshire chides Rawls for adopting a "Platonic" stance by invoking public reason as the criterion for accepting or rejecting judgements or beliefs.

⁵⁴ Nielsen, "Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium," 29. Hendrik Hart has sharply critiqued Nielsen here on the grounds that this sort of consensus would only be possible within "Euro-American philosophy departments" rather than global society as a whole. See Hendrik Hart, "Can Nielsen escape both God and Rorty?" in Nielsen and Hart, *Search for Community in a Withering Tradition*, 71.

marshalled to “make sense” (to use one of Nielsen’s phrases) of “God is love” in a manner conducive to a liberal order.⁵⁵ In short, the idea of “God is love,” as I have tried to show, is not inherently harmful. Given the fragility of our customs and sentiments, it is a necessary myth after all. (In good fallibilistic fashion, Nielsen even admits at times the possibility that “we need *some* foundational beliefs.”⁵⁶)

My point is that our most cherished moral beliefs are more fragile than we know. They often rest on pre-philosophical (historical, mythical, religious, background) sources which are not philosophically pure or accessible. The noble fiction which I have defended here may well be called a “lie” by Nielsen, although at times he concedes that the truth may not always be the greatest good. (NWF 496-497) For reasons of pragmatism, it is conceivable that advanced democracies need at least some of these myths. This observation about our “enculturation” does not, once again, suggest that all religious beliefs pass muster. Those which encourage a decent and humane morality (universal love) should be welcomed. The idea of “God is love,” if preserved or accommodated, might even counter the force of the

⁵⁵ Nielsen, “Philosophy within the Limits of Wide Reflective Equilibrium Alone,” 30.

⁵⁶ Nielsen, “On There Being Wide Reflective Equilibria,” 69.

various religious and secular fundamentalisms which promote hypocrisy, hatred, bigotry, and terrorism in our dangerous zeitgeist.

