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**REINVENTING
PHILOSOPHY OF
RELIGION**

An Opinionated Introduction

Graham Oppy





Reinventing Philosophy of Religion

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Philosophy of Religion:
An Opinionated
Introduction**

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and International Studies, Monash University, Australia*

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Preface

This book is an introduction to what I think are the central questions in philosophy of religion. I have labelled it a ‘reinvention’ because it has very different emphases – and very different views of the subject – from other current introductions to, and overviews of, this field. In my view, philosophy of religion is in need of a serious overhaul; this short work offers a sketch of what I think the main contours of philosophy of religion would look like under an appropriate reconfiguration.

▶ The work is conceived as a short introduction to a properly conceived philosophy of religion: it is not intended to be an authoritative treatise that comprehensively covers the field. In this sense, it is genuinely intended to be an *introduction*: it should be accessible to newcomers to philosophy of religion, and it should bring such newcomers to an appreciation of topics that are genuinely worthy of serious consideration and reflection.

Of course, the details of the discussion of the various topics reflect my own views and biases: in its details, this is also an *opinionated* introduction. But, in this respect, it is no different from any competing works that operate according to a more standard conception of the field.

Acknowledgements

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Introductory Remarks

Abstract: *We begin with characterizations of philosophy, philosophy of religion, and religion. Having noted the weaknesses of standard accounts of religion, we settle on a modification of the account provided in Atran and Norenzayan (2004). We conclude with some observations about worldviews, atheism, and competing conceptions of philosophy.*



Keywords: analysis; apologetics; atheism; definition; worldview

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This book is an introduction to philosophy of religion. So, it is an introduction to one part or branch of Philosophy.

Philosophy is the study of deep and important questions that are not amenable to study by the methods of other disciplines. How one ought to live? What reason is there to be moral? What is the best political system? What are our most reliable sources of information about our universe? Is there life after death? Do animals have souls? Is it morally permissible for human beings to eat meat? If numbers exist, what are they like? Is beauty all in the eye of the beholder? Are there objective moral truths?

Important general areas in philosophy include epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics. *Epistemology* is the study of knowledge and opinion: What do we know? What is it reasonable for us to believe? What is the significance of perennial disagreement about philosophical matters? Do we know some things independently of experience? Are commonsense beliefs probabilistic? Is it rational to believe what other people tell you? *Metaphysics* is the study of very general accounts of what there is and what it is like: What *might* the world have been like? Are colours merely subjective? Does time flow? What makes me the same person from one moment to the next? Are some things that happen caused by things that would happen in the future? Do we have free will? Is the future fully determined by the past? *Ethics* is the study of right and wrong, and good and bad: Are our actions caused by our characters? Are moral judgements primarily expressions of desires rather than of beliefs? Is morality entirely a matter of opinion? Are there universal moral laws? Is abortion always wrong? Should we legalize gay marriage? Must atheists say that everything is permitted? Do babies make moral judgements? Can the non-human higher primates distinguish between right and wrong?

For almost any domain of enquiry, there is a *philosophy of* that domain of enquiry; thus, philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, political philosophy, social philosophy, philosophy of art, philosophy of psychology, and so forth. In general, the philosophy of a domain of enquiry is concerned with philosophical questions that arise in connection with that domain of enquiry: questions that cannot (yet) be answered by the regular methods that belong to that domain of enquiry.

Philosophy of religion is concerned with philosophical questions that arise in connection with religion. Are there really different religions? Is there one true religion? Are some of the world's major religions better than others? Are there proofs that ought to bring an end to all disputes

about religion? Might we reasonably agree to disagree when it comes to questions about religion? Are people who do not believe in any religion wicked? Can one lead a worthwhile life if one subscribes to a false religion? Is atheism a religion? Should religious education be an entirely private matter?

Perhaps the very first question that arises for philosophy of religion is whether there is any such thing as *religion*. This question seems straightforward. We are all familiar with Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Jainism, Sikhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What are these, if not religions? Of course, recognizing that the major world religions are religions does not guarantee that we can decide harder cases, nor does it guarantee that we will not go seriously wrong if we try to give a definition of ‘religion’. On the one hand, you might well be unsure whether Scientology – or Discordianism, or the Church of MOO – is a religion; on the other hand, you might think that we simply misunderstand ancestor worship if we think of it as being a kind of religion.

Here are some well-known definitions of ‘religion’:

- 1 Belief in spiritual beings (Tylor, 1871).
- 2 A system of beliefs and practices – by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life – that expresses its refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human aspirations (Yinger, 1948).
- 3 A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic (Geertz, 1971).

These definitions are obviously unsatisfactory. Some religions do not involve belief in spiritual beings, and some beliefs in spiritual beings are not religious. Some religions do not express a refusal to capitulate to death, but rather welcome genuine annihilation as an escape from a cycle of reincarnation; some religions do not express a refusal to give up in the face of frustration, but rather welcome a universal kind of resignation or ‘giving up’; some religions do not express a refusal to allow hostility to tear apart their human aspirations but rather teach a universal kind of renunciation of human aspirations; and some shared

beliefs and practices that enable the overcoming of frustration, suffering and death – as, for example, amongst religiously diverse inmates of concentration camps – are not religious. Some systems of symbols which act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic – for example, the institutions of science, mathematics, and morals – are not religious.

Dictionary definitions suffer from similar liabilities:

- 1 Belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe (*American Heritage*, 2009).
- 2 Belief in, worship of, or obedience to a supernatural power or powers considered to be divine or to have control of human destiny (*Collins English*, 2003).
- 3 Belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (especially, a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship; such a belief as part of a system defining a code of living, especially, as a means of achieving spiritual or material improvement (*OED*, 2012).

As we noted above, there are religions – for example, Buddhism – which do not involve belief in, and reverence for, supernatural or superhuman powers.

One response to these shortcomings of traditional definitions is to give up the search for definition. Since the middle of the twentieth century, it has become increasingly common for philosophers to suppose that there are no definitions – or analyses – for many of our most basic terms. While we know how to use words such as ‘cause’, and ‘know’, and ‘work of art’, our knowledge of how to use these words is not underpinned by knowledge of how to provide exact definitions for them. Rather, perhaps, the things to which our terms apply bear only ‘family resemblances’ to one another, or are counted as falling under those terms only because they are sufficiently similar to standard exemplars or prototypes. In the case at hand, perhaps we can say that anything that is sufficiently similar to one of the major world religions is itself a religion – perhaps leaving us with indeterminacies that only linguistic stipulation could resolve.

Another response might be to suggest that we just have to look a bit harder. Consider the following definition:

In every society, there are:

- 1 Widespread counterfactual and counterintuitive beliefs in supernatural agents (gods, ghosts, goblins, etc.);
- 2 Hard-to-fake public expressions of costly material commitments to supernatural agents, that is, offerings and sacrifices (offerings of goods, property, time, life);
- 3 Mastering by supernatural agents of people's existential anxieties (death, deception, disease, catastrophe, pain, loneliness, injustice, want, loss);
- 4 Ritualized, rhythmic sensory coordination of (1), (2), and (3), in communion (congregation, intimate fellowship, etc.).

In all societies there is an evolutionary canalization and convergence of (1), (2), (3), and (4) that tends toward what we shall refer to as 'religion'; that is, passionate communal displays of costly commitments to counterintuitive worlds governed by supernatural agents. (Atran and Norenzayan, 2004)

While this is unacceptable as it stands – since, among other things, it once again fails to count Buddhism as a religion – perhaps it doesn't require too much modification. Suppose that Atran and Norenzayan had said:

In every society, there are:

- 1 Widespread beliefs in supernatural agents – gods, ancestor spirits – and/or supernatural structures – cycles of reincarnation, reward and punishment;
- 2 Hard-to-fake public expressions of costly material commitments – offerings and/or sacrifices of goods, property, time, and/or life – to supernatural agents and/or in aid of the overcoming of, and escape from, supernatural structures;
- 3 Mastering of people's existential anxieties – death, deception, disease, catastrophe, pain, loneliness, injustice, want, and loss – by these costly commitments to supernatural agents and/or in aid of the overcoming of and escape from supernatural structures; and
- 4 Ritualized, rhythmic, sensory coordination of (1), (2), and (3) in communion (congregation, intimate fellowship, etc.).

In all societies there is an evolutionary canalization and convergence of (1), (2), (3), and (4) that tends toward what is properly called 'religion'; that is, passionate, communal displays of costly commitments to supernatural agents and/or the overcoming of supernatural structures.

That religion is centrally involved in *passionate, communal displays of costly commitments to supernatural agents and/or the overcoming of supernatural structures* does seem plausible: this definition appears to capture a central feature of all of the major religions. But, just to be on the safe side, let me end this discussion by pointing out that, in the hands of Atran and Norenzayan, the definition is *stipulative*: they are telling their readers what *they* will mean by the word 'religion' in their work. I have tried to turn their stipulative definition into an analysis; I leave it to you to decide about the success of this attempt.

On any account of religion, it is clear that there are many ways that one might choose to study it. History, anthropology, geography, sociology, demography, and psychology all promise to yield significant information about religion. Perhaps the study of literature, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture will do so as well. However, while philosophy of religion ought not to proceed in ignorance of the information that is yielded by other approaches to the study of religion, the questions that are taken up by philosophers of religion will not be straightforwardly answered by that information.

Part of the reason why this is so derives from a fundamental distinction between elements of religions. On the one hand, it is clear that religions rest upon *worldviews*, that is comprehensive systems of general beliefs about life, the universe and everything. In particular, a religion relies upon a set of beliefs about (a) what the supernatural parts of reality are like, and (b) how these supernatural parts of reality relate to natural reality. On the other hand, religions are much more than worldviews: religions may involve, among other things, organizations, institutions, hierarchies, movements, practices, behaviours, publications, canons, rituals, events, and so forth. Of course, not all worldviews subserve religions, and not all things that involve organizations, institutions, hierarchies, movements, practices, behaviours, publications, canons, rituals, events, and so forth subserve religions. But, when philosophers turn their attention to religions, they are often primarily interested in the worldviews that subserve those religions, together with those worldviews that are in tension with the worldviews of the religions. And this is unsurprising: many contemporary philosophers think that the primary task of philosophy is the examination and comparison of worldviews.

It is sometimes said that *atheism* is a religion. Our account of the distinction between worldview and religion shows that this is wrong three times over. First, atheism is merely the denial of theism: it is not, itself, a

substantive worldview. Atheistic worldviews maintain that there are no gods; beyond this, they vary enormously. Second, substantive atheistic worldviews, such as naturalism, differ from religious worldviews in their eschewal of supernatural agents and supernatural structures: naturalistic worldviews have more minimal theoretical commitments than religious and other supernaturalistic worldviews. Third, naturalistic worldviews are not supported by the essential underpinnings of religion: they have no ties to ritualized, rhythmic, sensory coordination, in communion, congregation and intimate fellowship, of hard-to-fake public expressions of costly material commitments in the aid of mastery of people's existential anxieties. True enough, there are naturalists who debate the prospects for, and merits of, supporting naturalistic worldviews with these kinds of underpinnings – but the vast majority of naturalists suppose that the provision of such underpinnings is neither feasible nor worthwhile.

There are various different schools of philosophy across the globe. In the West, there is a broad division between *Anglo-American* – ‘analytic’ – philosophers and *Continental* – ‘postmodern’, ‘phenomenological’ – philosophers. While this distinction, too, is problematic, it will be clear to any expert reader that the present introduction to philosophy of religion sits pretty squarely in the Anglo-American tradition. Nonetheless, within that tradition, this introduction is distinctive in its aims and execution. Much contemporary philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American tradition is focused on *Christian Apologetics*, and, in particular, on arguments for and against the existence of God. By contrast, our focus will be on philosophical questions – epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical – that arise from collective consideration of all of the religions of the world.

Part I

Epistemology

Philosophy of religion generates a range of distinctive epistemological questions. *Expert disagreement* amongst proponents of diverse religious and non-religious worldviews prompts questions about the *rationality* of endorsing religious and non-religious worldviews. These questions, in turn, prompt reflection upon the role that *evidence* should play in the evaluation of worldviews, and upon the legitimacy of endorsing worldviews that one acknowledges are inadequately supported by evidence. Expert disagreement also prompts reflection upon the role that *argument* can properly play in deciding between competing worldviews.

1

Disagreement, Opinion and Expertise

► **Abstract:** *One fundamental fact about religion is that religious disagreement is more or less ubiquitous. After considering a range of possible responses to the facts of religious disagreement – irreligion, pluralism, exclusivism – we consider some more unsettling questions that are raised to us by our disagreement with those who are at least as smart, well-informed, reflective and attentive as we are when it comes to questions about religion. We argue that it is unreasonable to expect convergence of expert opinions when it comes to the characteristic claims of major worldviews.*

Keywords: disagreement; doxastic peer; doxastic superior; expert consensus; intellectual arrogance; opinion; religious pluralism

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The great world religions – including Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – have very different teachings about divinity, salvation, ultimate Reality, ultimate value, the meaning and purpose of human life, and much else besides. Moreover, within each of the great world religions, there are countless branches and sects that have different – and often very different – teachings about these things. But it is not just that these teachings are different: in many cases, these teachings directly contradict one another. And these contradictions or disagreements in religious teachings – both within and across the great world religions – are no secret: everybody knows that Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Jews and Christians and Muslims and Taoists disagree with one another about divinity, salvation, ultimate Reality, ultimate value, the meaning and purpose of human life, and much else besides.

But where there is disagreement, there is error: if two parties disagree on a particular matter, then it cannot be that they are both *completely* right about it. So it cannot be that each version of Hinduism is completely right, and each version of Buddhism is completely right, and each version of Judaism is completely right, and each version of Confucianism is completely right, and each version of Christianity is completely right, and each version of Islam is completely right; it must be that most – or perhaps even all – of these versions of the religions are at least partly mistaken about divinity, salvation, ultimate Reality, ultimate value, the meaning and purpose of human life, and so on.

The facts about religious disagreement have seemed to some to be grounds for *irreligion*. Given that all of the major world religions cannot be completely right – and, indeed, more strongly, given that no more than one of the major world religions is completely right – perhaps we do best to suppose that none of the major world religions is completely right. But, if a major world religion is not completely right, then it is more or less completely wrong: it can't be only partly right that Jesus is the Saviour of the World; and it can't be only partly right that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet; and it can't be only partly right that suffering will cease if, and only if, all desire ceases; and it can't be only partly right that moksha can only be achieved after many lifetimes of striving; and it can't be only partly right that misogi is required to restore natural purity; and it can't be only partly right that God forbids consumption of non-kosher food; and it can't be only partly right that the sole goal is to live in harmony with Tao; and it can't be

only partly right that the jiva can only save itself by discovering its own perfect and unchanging nature. But if all of the major world religions are more or less completely wrong, then surely the right response is to give up on the major world religions.

In response to the facts of religious disagreement, *religious pluralists* say that the observed disagreement is merely superficial: at a more fundamental level, all religions have the same content, and teach the same things. John Hick (1922–2011) – perhaps the best-known proponent of religious pluralism – argues that all of the world’s religions promote transformational processes that lead the faithful away from self-centredness and towards an ultimate Reality whose nature transcends the conceptions of those religions. According to Hick, ultimate Reality is *ineffable* – it escapes any positive characterization in human thought and language – yet salvation, or liberation, or human fulfilment depends upon experience of, and relationship to, ultimate Reality.

The claim that ultimate Reality is ineffable is mirrored by claims found in many of the major world religions. So, for example, within the Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – there are mystical traditions which insist that there is nothing positive that can be said about God: we can only say what God is not; we cannot say what God is. From the standpoint of given religious traditions, claims about the ineffability of ultimate Reality are both suitable expressions of awe, mystery, and transcendence, and potential defeaters for certain kinds of critical attack. But, within given religious traditions, claims about the ineffability of ultimate Reality are always combined with detailed claims about what ultimate Reality requires of human beings, and, in particular, of those who belong to the religious traditions in question.

Hick’s religious pluralism stands in an uneasy relationship with the world’s major religious traditions. On the one hand, according to Hick, the detailed claims about what right relation to ultimate Reality requires of those who belong to given religious traditions are *all* false: right relation to ultimate Reality does *not* require subscription to the five pillars of Islam, or following of the Buddhist eightfold way, or adherence to Hindu rules regarding purity and marriage, or keeping of the Jewish Sabbath, or undergoing Christian baptism, and so on. On the other hand, according to Hick, right relation to ultimate Reality does depend upon subscription to *one or other* of the world’s major religious traditions: one only attains salvation, or liberation, or human fulfilment by way of experience

of, and relationship to, ultimate Reality that is mediated by *one or other* of the world's major religious traditions.

Religious pluralism looks unattractive from the standpoint of many who belong to one or other of the world's major religious traditions. Most adherents of a particular religious tradition do suppose that the detailed claims about what right relation to ultimate Reality requires of them are true; they would not be adherents of a particular religious tradition unless they thought that the requirements of that particular religious tradition are requirements that derive directly from the nature of ultimate Reality. Religious pluralism also looks unattractive from the standpoint of many who do not belong to one or other of the world's major religious traditions. What reason is there to suppose that right relation to ultimate Reality depends upon subscription to *one or other* of the world's major religious traditions? Even if we accept that our ultimate goal is or should be the overcoming of self-centredness, why should anyone suppose that we need *religion* in order to achieve that goal? And how does the supposition that there is an *ineffable* ultimate Reality establish grounds for thinking that our ultimate goal is, or should be, the overcoming of self-centredness?

The shortcomings of religious pluralism may well make us suspect that, if we accept that all of the major world religions are more or less completely wrong, then we shall end up rejecting religion altogether. The clear and obvious alternative, at least from the standpoint of religious believers, is to suppose that exactly one of the major world religions is more or less completely right. Of course, given that at most one of the major world religions is more or less completely right, most of the adherents of the major world religions will be mistaken in believing that *theirs* is the one true religion: but *each* will suppose that it is adherents of the *other* major world religions – and, of course, those who reject all of the major world religions – who are getting it more or less completely wrong.

Is there something uncomfortable about the view that you are getting things right and the vast majority of people are getting things wrong? It is sometimes suggested that it requires a certain kind of *intellectual arrogance* to believe that you are getting things right and the vast majority of people are getting things wrong. But, in circumstances in which there is a widespread diversity of opinion, holding any attitude at all will require you to have attitude that diverges from the attitudes of most others. Pretend that, as things now stand, there are 20 different positions on

religion, each adopted by 5% of the population – including 5% who never think about religion, 5% who have thought about religion but are entirely undecided, and 5% who are naturalists, and hence hold a positive worldview that is in conflict with all of the religious worldviews. Whatever you do – subscribe to a religious worldview, subscribe to an irreligious worldview, remain undecided between the full ranges of views, or refuse to think about the matter at all – you will be in a tiny minority. In this circumstance, you would be convicted of intellectual arrogance only if everyone else – no matter what they think – stands similarly convicted. Whatever might be wrong with holding a contested opinion, it surely cannot be that it is intellectually arrogant to hold such an opinion!

There may be more unsettling considerations that are raised by widespread disagreement. In particular, it is worth observing that, no matter what opinion you take on a widely contested question – from religion, or politics, or philosophy, or some similarly perennially contested domain – it is almost inevitable that there are smarter and better-informed people who have thought longer, harder and more seriously about the matter in question, and who disagree with you. Say that someone who is as smart and well-informed as you, and who has thought as long, as hard, and as seriously as you about a given domain is your (doxastic) *peer* with respect to that domain; and say that someone who is smarter and better informed than you, and who has thought longer, harder and more seriously about a given domain is your (doxastic) *superior*. The consideration before us is that, no matter what religious beliefs you hold, you have peers and superiors who disagree with the beliefs that you hold. What might you say in the face of this consideration?

Perhaps you might try denying that you have peers and superiors who disagree with you: anyone at least as smart and well-informed as you, and who has thought at least as long, hard, and seriously as you have about these matters accepts your religious beliefs. I think that this kind of denial is impossible to take seriously. If you are inclined to make such denial, then you really need to get out more: you need to expand your social and intellectual horizons.

Perhaps you might try saying that, in this unsatisfactory kind of situation, what ought to happen is that everyone has to converge on the correct opinion: if everyone holds the correct opinion, then there will be no disagreement between peers. Alas, this is entirely unhelpful. Of course, if everyone moves to the *same* opinion, then the holding of that opinion

will not be controversial. But peer disagreement is just a disagreement about which is the correct opinion, and, hence, about which is the view upon which the current spread of opinion should converge. It is obvious that, if everyone agrees with you, then no one disagrees with you – but that tells you nothing about how you should respond to the fact that peers and superiors do disagree with you!

Perhaps you might think that, since (almost) everyone is in the same boat, we are all free to ignore the fact that (almost) everyone has peers and superiors who hold divergent religious, and political, and philosophical beliefs. But that seems too hasty. If you've grown up in a community in which everyone shares a particular religious worldview, and you then discover that there are other communities with divergent worldviews, it seems reasonable to suppose that your confidence in your own religious worldview should be decreased. Finding out that you have peers and superiors who do not believe what you previously took to be universal beliefs surely ought to shake your confidence in the truth of those beliefs.

Most of us are not in the position that it is news to us that we have peers and superiors who disagree with our religious beliefs: most of us have (almost) always known that our religious beliefs are controversial. Should we, nonetheless, suppose that proper recognition of the controversial nature of those beliefs requires reduction in the confidence with which we currently hold them? Should we further suppose that, since everyone ought to be moved by similar considerations, there will actually be a process of convergence: perhaps to the opinion of the one who has thought longest, hardest, and most seriously about matters of religion; or perhaps to some distribution over the opinions of all of those who have thought longest, hardest, and most seriously about matters of religion; or perhaps to some other distribution over the opinion of all of those who have thought sufficiently long, sufficiently hard, and sufficiently seriously about matters of religion?

I suspect that these kinds of thought depend upon the application of a model of expert consensus that only has proper application in broadly scientific domains. For many subject matters, we do think that, if only we thought as long, as hard, and as seriously, as those who are experts in those domains, we would have arrived at the same opinions that those experts hold. I think that, if I had been sufficiently clever, and sufficiently well-informed, and if I had worked hard enough, I might have proved Wiles' theorem; I do not think that, if I had been sufficiently clever, and

sufficiently well-informed, and if I had worked hard enough, I might have *disproved* Wiles' theorem. But what goes for mathematics goes also for physics, chemistry, biology, geology, and a host of other disciplines: in these areas, expert opinion converges *because* expert opinion tends to track the truth. However, we simply do not think that religion – and philosophy, and politics – are similar to this: if there are experts in religion – and philosophy, and politics – we do not expect that we shall see convergence of their opinions.

Perhaps you might be inclined to say that it is an intellectual scandal that there is so little convergence of opinion in religion, and philosophy, and politics. Perhaps, more strongly, you might be inclined to think that, since there is so little convergence of 'opinion' in religion, and philosophy, and politics, isn't really true that there is opinion in these domains. Maybe, as the logical positivists argued, the 'claims' of religion – and philosophy, and politics – are 'meaningless'. Maybe, as non-cognitivists say, the 'claims' of religion – and philosophy, and politics – are expressions of desires rather than expressions of beliefs. Maybe, as fictionalists say, the 'claims' of religion – and philosophy, and politics – are more or less deliberate fictions. Maybe ... well, maybe you can think of other radical options that might be pursued at this point.

Can we hold onto the idea that we really do have opinions about religion – and philosophy, and politics – while rejecting the idea that, if there were expert opinion in these domains, then there would also be expert consensus? If we suppose that there is expert opinion about religion, should we find it surprising that there is no convergence in this expert opinion? Arguably not. Worldviews consist of large packages of beliefs that are deeply embedded in total networks of beliefs, tightly linked to a range of motivational states, and often accompanied by heavy emotional charges. People who do not share worldviews do not just differ on one or two beliefs; people who do not share worldviews typically differ on a wide range of beliefs, and the beliefs in question often have heavy motivational and emotional significance. Moreover, satisfying worldviews are quite different from one another: if we take a worldview and amend it by replacing a few of its contained beliefs with beliefs from a very different worldview, then the resulting worldview will almost always be much worse – much less believable – than either the initial worldview, or the worldview from which the replacement beliefs are drawn.

Worldviews contain large numbers of beliefs that swing together. Changing religious beliefs is not just a matter of making a small change

to a relatively isolated collection of beliefs. Moreover, surveying a system of religious beliefs is no easy matter: if I do not hold certain religious beliefs, then it is very hard for me to see what beliefs – and other attitudes – I should give up and take on were I to change my mind on those particular religious beliefs. While it is easy for me to see that just taking on those particular beliefs would definitely make my worldview worse, it is very hard for me to reach a perspective from which I can see that taking on a broader constellation of beliefs, including the particular beliefs in question, would plausibly lead to improvement upon the worldview that I currently have. And this point generalizes: any modification to my current worldview that I might make in response to the distribution of opinion on those particular religious questions amongst my peers and superiors will almost certainly make my worldview worse.

If we accept that worldviews and worldview beliefs do have the kind of significance that is being attributed to them, then perhaps we can see why we should not be too perturbed by the lack of convergence of expert opinion when it comes to worldview beliefs. True enough, there are practical – social, organizational – questions about the facilitation of ‘agreeing to disagree’; but, given the difficulties involved in surveying worldviews, the relatively ‘uncontrolled’ way in which worldviews develop, and the difficulties involved in changing worldviews, it is perhaps unsurprising – and no particular cause for concern – that long, hard, good, serious thought about worldview questions does not lead to convergence of opinion.

2

Belief, Faith and Evidence

► **Abstract:** *Attitudes towards the role that evidence should play in the assessment of religious belief differ widely. Some suppose that one can only be reasonable in one's religious believing if one appropriately apportions one's beliefs according to the evidence that one has. Others suppose that reasonable religious belief can be a matter of faith, that is of belief in the absence of sufficient evidence to justify the belief in question. Yet others believe that all properly cognitively functioning people are born with – or acquire, as a result of exposure to universally available environmental triggers – the characteristic beliefs of the one true religion. We offer reasons for thinking that worldview beliefs should be properly proportioned to evidence.*

Keywords: belief; contradiction; evidence; faith; reason; testimony

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The preceding discussion of religious disagreement arrived at a somewhat irenic conclusion. Many will think that this irenic conclusion cannot possibly be sustained. In particular, many will say that the proper application of reasoning to evidence must lead everyone to the same views; whence, it cannot be that there is persisting disagreement amongst genuine experts. In order to pursue this matter further, we need to think some more about the nature of belief, and its connection to reason and evidence.

Human beings are believers: creatures that have systems of *beliefs*. More generally, human beings are creatures that have systematic *attitudes*. Amongst the systematic attitudes that human beings have, there are not only beliefs, but also desires, intentions, and so forth. What human beings do – the actions that they perform – is explained by the systematic attitudes that human beings have: human actions are products of belief, desire, intention, and so on. So, for example, my going to the fridge and opening the door is explained – at least in part – by my desire to slake my thirst and my belief that there is a bottle of water in the fridge. If I were not thirsty, I would not be going to the fridge; equally, if I did not believe that there is liquid in the fridge that I could use to slake my thirst, I would not be going to the fridge. Of course, not all beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth are made manifest in simple actions such as the one just discussed; some beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth are only made manifest in complicated speech acts; and perhaps some beliefs, desires and intentions are never made manifest in behaviour.

Human beliefs belong to systems or networks. There are at least two different kinds of ways in which network beliefs may relate to one another. On the one hand, because human beings constantly update their beliefs, there are *empirical* relationships between beliefs: the beliefs that a person takes on depend causally upon the beliefs that they already have. On the other hand, because beliefs are properly expressed in certain kinds of sentences that belong to human languages, and because those sentences of human languages themselves stand in normative relations, there are also *normative* relationships between beliefs: the contents of the beliefs that a person has stand to one another in *logical* relations, and *probabilistic* relations, and *explanatory* relations, and so forth.

It is one question how human beings actually update their beliefs; it is a rather different question how human beings ought to update their beliefs; and it is yet another question how an ideal doxastic agent would update its beliefs. Distinguishing these questions allows us to distinguish

different understandings of the question what *reasonable* human belief updating requires.

Much recent work in psychology supports the idea that our minds are well-modelled as being subserved by two different systems: System 1 and System 2. System 1 is fast, effortless, automatic, and involuntary. System 2 is slow, effortful, deliberate and voluntary. Both systems operate whenever we are awake, but, while System 1 is always in full operation, System 2 spends most time passively accepting the outputs of System 1. However, when System 1 encounters problems, System 2 is called into operation, and it then typically determines the final outputs. What System 1 passes onto System 2 are impressions, intuitions, feelings and intentions; those endorsed by System 2 become beliefs and voluntary actions. However, very importantly, System 1 is subject to certain kinds of biases: it makes systematic errors that have been revealed by a large range of clever psychological experiments. Moreover, even careful training does not make people immune to the biases of System 1: we all make erroneous inferences when System 2 is not called into play to correct the mistakes of System 1. We are all prone to, for example, ignore statistical base rates, gauge probabilities by representativeness, substitute plausibility for probability, fail to grasp the connection between correlation and regression, overestimate our own forecasting abilities, and so forth. (See Kahneman (2011) for details.)

In one sense of ‘reasonable’, being a reasonable believer requires that one make the kind of use of System 1/System 2 that is characteristic for human beings. In this sense of ‘reasonable’, reasonable believers typically make many errors due to ignorance of statistical base rate, gauging of probabilities by representativeness, and so forth. Of course, in this sense of ‘reasonable’, there is no guarantee that reasonable believers are keyed to truth; on the contrary, in this sense of ‘reasonable’, reasonable believers often make mistakes that are highly likely to lead them away from the truth.

In another sense of ‘reasonable’, being a reasonable believer requires that one makes the kinds of use of System 2 that human beings *can* make in order to overcome the errors that are generated by the systematic biases of System 1. While it is not possible for human beings to be ‘reasonable’ believers in this sense all of the time, it is possible for human beings to improve this kind of reasonableness with training; it is also possible for human beings to design institutions that have this kind of reasonableness. In particular, it seems plausible to think of scientific

institutions in these terms: part of what the institution of science enables is investigation that overcomes the System 1 biases of individual scientists. Of course, that one makes the kinds of use of System 2 that human beings can make in order to overcome the errors that are generated by the systematic biases of System 1 does not entail that there are no limitations to one's reasoning: all human beings – individually and collectively – have finite memories, limited processing speed, limited processing power, and so forth.

In a third sense of 'reasonable', being a reasonable believer requires that there are no limitations to one's reasoning: one always makes optimal transitions from one global belief state to the next. While there are theories that represent this kind of reasonable believer – for example, the Bayesian agent who always updates by conditionalization on evidence – it is important to observe that we are talking about an idealization that is only very tenuously related to actual human beings. In particular, even if we agree that this is an appropriate idealization for human beings, there is simply no way that we can determine what Bayesian agents would believe on the kind of evidence that we have.

What constraints do normative relationships between beliefs place upon reasonable believing? Suppose, for example, that I have logically inconsistent beliefs. Clearly, if I am reasonable, I have a reason to try to resolve the inconsistency: for, if my beliefs are logically inconsistent, then it cannot be that all of my beliefs are true. Of course, if the inconsistency is between relatively unimportant beliefs – beliefs that don't affect much else of what I believe – then it may not matter very much whether I do try to resolve the inconsistency. But a significant inconsistency – an inconsistency that bears on much else that I believe – is something that, all else being equal, calls for concerted intellectual effort on my part.

Do logical relationships place any other constraints upon my reasonable believing? I don't think so. People sometimes say that a reasonable person ought to believe the logical consequences of what they already believe. But that's clearly wrong. To start with, if I have contradictory beliefs then, given that anything at all follows from a contradiction, this directive would have me believing everything. Moreover, even if I do not have contradictory beliefs, there are other ways in which my beliefs may be sub-optimal – and an examination of the logical consequences of my beliefs may be just what is needed in order to make me aware of this sub-optimality. In other words, whether one ought to believe the logical

consequences of what one already believes depends upon whether one ought to believe what one already believes.

The claims about logical relationships generalize. In general, normative relationships between beliefs have almost no significance for the norms that govern reasonable belief updating. At most, those normative relationships between beliefs can indicate that some belief revision is required, but normative relationships between beliefs have nothing to say about how beliefs should be revised. If your beliefs are normatively inconsistent, then some revision is in order, but, in general, which beliefs should be revised is not something over which the normative relationships between beliefs have any say.

If normative relationships between beliefs have almost no significance for the norms that govern reasonable belief updating, then what does have significance for the norms that govern reasonable belief updating? Two factors seem particularly significant. On the one hand, there are questions about the merits of competing systems of belief between which one is, in effect, choosing: which system of belief, amongst those between which you are effectively choosing, scores best on some appropriate weighting of simplicity, fit with data, explanatory scope, predictive accuracy, and so forth. On the other hand, there are questions about the accommodation of incoming evidence: how should I update my system of belief given that I am in receipt of this evidence, have undergone this course of sensory experience, and so on?

Both kinds of considerations loom large in disputes about religion. On the one hand, there is protracted debate about which worldviews make the best trade-offs between simplicity, fit with data, explanatory scope, predictive accuracy, and so forth. On the other hand, there is no less protracted debate about the role that evidence – roughly, data – should play in disputes about religion. One of the most famous exchanges in philosophy of religion – between William Clifford (1845–1879) and William James (1842–1910) – exemplifies this second kind of debate.

Clifford says: it is wrong, always, everywhere, for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence. According to Clifford's view, if you hold a belief on the basis of certain evidence, taking that evidence to be sufficient reason for the belief, when you ought to have been able to see that the evidence in question is not sufficient reason for the belief, then you do wrong in holding the belief. A ship owner who believes that his ship will make a safe ocean crossing because it has made many such crossings in the past, taking the evidence of successful past crossings as

sufficient reason to hold that it will pass safely once again, when, in fact, an examination of the boat would have revealed that it is not seaworthy, does wrong in believing that the ship will make a safe ocean crossing. According to Clifford, the wrong is moral: for the way that we believe affects the way that other believes, and, even if, on this occasion, the ship makes a safe ocean crossing, someone else who makes a decision based on a like belief may end up responsible for heavy loss of life. Moreover, according to Clifford, the case generalizes: there are almost no cases in which believing on insufficient evidence sets an acceptable example – the few exceptions are fundamental principles required for the assessment of evidence, and the like.

James says: we need to distinguish cases. In matters of science and commonsense, Clifford is right: it is wrong, always, everywhere, for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence. But in other cases – moral, personal, social and religious – that Clifford intends to include within the scope of his principle, James says that we are both permitted and obliged to form beliefs on the basis of what we ought to be able to see, and in many case can see, is insufficient evidence. Perhaps we can grant to James that there are some cases where believing on the basis of insufficient evidence is justified: namely, cases where there is independent reason for supposing that believing something makes it so, or, at any rate, makes it significantly more likely to be so. If the mountaineer who must leap a crevasse in order to survive is more likely to live if he believes that he will leap successfully, then perhaps he has good reason to believe that he will leap successfully, even if examination of his evidence would not bear out the belief. If slightly overrating one's own capacities makes it more likely that one will develop one's capacities to the over-rated level, then perhaps one has good reason to believe the slightly exaggerated view of one's own capacities, even if examination of one's evidence would not bear out this belief. However, at most, this requires only a small adjustment to Clifford's principle: it is wrong, always, everywhere, for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence, except for fundamental principles required for the assessment of evidence, and some claims whose likelihood of truth is considerably enhanced through their belief.

If we accept the adjusted version of Clifford's principle, then, I think, we have good reason to reject James' claims in connection with religion. James seems to think that, because religious belief conduces to psychic health, there is good reason to adopt religious belief. But it is plain that

believing in supernatural entities and/or supernatural structures does not increase the likelihood that there are supernatural entities and/or structures. Moreover, in the absence of other evidence, believing in supernatural entities and/or supernatural structures does not, itself, constitute sufficient evidence for the existence of supernatural entities and/or supernatural structures. Given the revised version of Clifford's principle, holding that beliefs are conducive to psychic health can never be a sufficient reason for adopting those beliefs.

Suppose that we adopt the revised version of Clifford's principle. Do we then need to revise our earlier claims about the possibility of reasonably agreeing to disagree when it comes to matters of religion? I don't think so. Suppose we grant that, on any collection of evidence, there is just one set of beliefs that is supported by that evidence: namely, the set of all of the beliefs for which that evidence is sufficient. Then, if two people have exactly the same evidence, those people should have exactly the same beliefs. But, of course, it is never the case that two people have exactly the same evidence. For any pair of people, it is bound to be the case that each has evidence that the other lacks. Of course, that a pair of people has different evidence does not entail that they are licensed to have different beliefs: there is nothing in our assumptions that says that different evidence requires different beliefs. Nonetheless, commonsense tells us that, typically, it is the case that different people are licensed to believe different things by the different evidence that they have.

Perhaps it might be objected that, in cases where people have different evidence, they can pool their evidence, and so bring about convergence in the beliefs that they are licensed to hold. But I do not think that this is right: no amount of attempting to share evidence can bring it about that people actually do share their evidence. In the first place, we don't keep track of our evidence: often, we form our beliefs, and then forget the evidence upon which they are based. Second, we have so much evidence that we are unable to use language to effectively communicate it to others. Third, perhaps, some of our evidence is not effectively communicable – or, at any rate, not effectively communicable given the communication skills that we happen to have. Moreover, these points apply not just to our total evidence, but also to the sum of the evidence that we have that is relevant to particular subject matters, and, in this more restricted case, there are also limits on our abilities to determine what of our total evidence is relevant to the particular subject matter at hand.

Some may be moved to object that the revised version of Clifford's principle leaves no room for *faith*. Whether this is so depends significantly upon what is understood by 'faith'. Mark Twain has Huckleberry Finn say that faith is believing what you know ain't so. Huck's characterization of faith is clearly contentious. What he seems to be alleging is that faith is a kind of self-deception: at one level you affirm what, at some other level, you deny. The revised version of Clifford's principle might be understood to suggest a weaker conception of faith: faith is believing when you have insufficient evidence to justify believing as you do, and self-conscious faith is believing when you recognize that you have insufficient evidence to justify believing as you do. On this way of thinking about things, what separates Clifford and James is their attitude towards faith, that is towards believing things on insufficient evidence.

While James is happy to concede that religious belief is belief on insufficient evidence, there are many religious believers who are not prepared to make this concession. For this reason, I do not think that it can simply be assumed at the outset of investigation that religious belief must be belief on insufficient evidence. Consequently, I think that we have good reason to be sceptical of the mooted conception of faith. While there is clearly a connection between religious belief and faith, it seems to me that it is possible for some to believe in the tenets of a particular religion, and yet to lack faith. This suggests – to me – that faith is at least partly a matter of attitudes other than belief: hope, trust, desire, and so forth. The claim that a person is one of the faithful in one of the major world religions generates a range of expectations about character and behaviour that goes far beyond expected affirmations of the worldview that underpin the religion.

Should we suppose that evidence is required for reasonable religious belief? As noted above, even Clifford concedes that there must be *some* beliefs that are exempt from evidential requirements. But, if some beliefs are exempt from evidential requirements, then what reason is there to deny that some religious beliefs might be exempt from those requirements? Might it be reasonably maintained, for example, that any properly cognitively functioning person automatically holds a certain range of religious beliefs, either because all properly cognitively functioning people are born with those beliefs, or because those beliefs are acquired by all properly cognitively functioning people who are exposed to universally available environmental triggers? Perhaps all properly cognitively functioning people are born with belief in particular supernatural

agents and/or particular supernatural structures; or perhaps all properly cognitively functioning people acquire belief in particular supernatural agents and/or particular supernatural structures as a result of exposure to certain kinds of universally available environmental triggers.

The data about religious disagreement clearly makes difficulties for any proposal of this kind. Historically, different religions originated in different parts of the world; beliefs in particular supernatural agents and/or particular supernatural structures have highly localized histories. Thus, unless we make very strong assumptions about the lack of proper cognitive functioning in entire human societies over extended periods of time, we have abundant evidence against the claim that people are born with belief in particular supernatural agents and/or particular supernatural structures, and we also have abundant evidence against the claim that there are universally available environmental triggers that lead people to believe in particular supernatural agents and/or particular supernatural structures. But, at the very least, allegations about the lack of proper cognitive functioning in entire human societies over extended periods of time should not be made lightly; there is plenty of room for suspicion that any such allegations are merely the result of unwarranted special pleading.

The data about religious disagreement strongly supports an alternative view about the acquisition of religious beliefs: by and large, people acquire their religious beliefs via testimonial reports from other people, and most often they acquire these beliefs when they are children. Since the testimonial reports that we receive constitute a large part of our total evidence, and since System 1 is automatically disposed towards acceptance of the testimonial reports of others, there are good senses in which the acquisition of religious beliefs is typically both reasonable and evidence-based. Of course, where the religious beliefs are false, the evidence in question is misleading; but there are perfectly good senses in which beliefs formed on the basis of misleading evidence can be reasonable.

The considerations that we have rehearsed reinforce the irenic conclusions that we drew concerning the lack of convergence of expert opinion in the case of worldviews. Individual believers, and groups of believers with shared worldviews, have what we might call evidential and testimonial histories: they have formed their beliefs on the basis of the evidence that they have received, and, in particular, on the basis of the testimony that has been presented to them. Different believers,

and different groups of believers with different shared worldviews, have very different evidential and testimonial histories. Those very different evidential and testimonial histories make the very different beliefs and worldviews reasonable. While the institutions of science have created ways of identifying misleading evidence and misleading testimony across a range of domains, there are no institutions that provide ways of identifying misleading evidence and misleading testimony in connection with the domains in which we are currently interested. Experts in these areas – those who have thought longest, hardest and most seriously about these matters – have no way to disentangle themselves from the possibly misleading evidence and testimony that inform their own beliefs and worldviews.

3

Debate, Reason and Argument

► **Abstract:** *In Anglo-American philosophy, proofs of the existence of God have long been taken to be the centrepiece of philosophy of religion. Against this long-standing dogma, we argue that alleged proofs of the characteristic claims of worldviews – including religious worldviews – are almost always unsuccessful (and, when they are successful, they typically achieve much less than proponents of the alleged proofs might have hoped for).*

Keywords: argument; coherence; debate; derivation; intuition; logical consequence; premise; soundness; theory; validity

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Given that there is widespread disagreement about religion and religious worldviews, it is unsurprising that there is widespread *debate* and *argument* about religion and religious worldviews. While the major world religions vary in the extent to which they support debate and argument with representatives from other worldviews, many of the major world religions support the development and presentation of arguments that are intended to persuade others to accept claims that are fundamental to the worldview of the given religion. Moreover, within many of the major world religions, particular branches of those religions support the development and presentation of arguments that are intended to persuade members of other branches of the same religion to accept claims that are fundamental to the distinctive elements of that branch of the given religion.

An *argument* is a collection of claims – sentences, propositions, assertions, beliefs – one of which is identified as the *conclusion* of the argument, and the rest of which are the *premises* of the argument. If an argument is sufficiently complicated, it may be accompanied by a *derivation*: a series of steps that takes you from the premises to the conclusion, with an alleged explanation or justification provided for each step along the way.

In order to determine whether an argument for a claim that is characteristic of a worldview is good, we need to consider the argumentative context in which it is used. Suppose that Pro believes Claim, but Con rejects it, where Claim is characteristic of Pro's worldview, and the rejection of Claim is characteristic of Con's worldview. Pro offers an argument to Con on behalf of Claim, in which he appeals to a collection of premises, and offers a derivation of Claim from those premises. What is required for the argument that Pro offers to Con to be a successful argument, and what will Con be required to do in the face of a successful argument?

A first requirement, obviously enough, is that Claim must be *supported* by the premises to which Pro appeals. If there is an unjustified step in the derivation, then Con ought not to be persuaded by Pro that the conclusion is supported by the premises. However, if there is an unjustified step in the derivation, it might just be that Pro made a slip. What really matters is whether there *is* a derivation of the conclusion from the premises in which all of the steps are adequately justified: in that case, if Con is sufficiently acute, he will recognize that the conclusion is supported by the premises. In the special case in which the conclusion

of an argument is a *logical consequence* of its premises – that is, where it is logically impossible for all of the premises to be true and the conclusion false – we say that the argument is *valid*.

A second – and final – requirement is that the premises must all be claims that Con *accepts*. We justify this requirement in the following way.

First, if the premises are all claims that Con accepts, then, since Claim is something that Con rejects, there is a black spot in his beliefs. On the one hand, if he is to go on believing all of the premises, he ought also to believe Claim, because Claim is supported by those premises. But, on the other hand, he rejects Claim. If he is to go on rejecting Claim, then he needs to reject at least one of the premises of the argument. If the premises are all claims that Con accepts, then the argument creates a genuine cognitive difficulty for him: all else being equal, he ought to set about repairing the black spot in his beliefs.

Second, if the premises are not all claims that Con accepts, then the argument causes him no difficulty. Sure, if he accepted all of the premises, while continuing to reject Claim, he would be in cognitive strife. But, since he doesn't accept at least one of the premises, then the argument simply has no consequences for his beliefs. In particular, the argument provides him with no reason at all to give up his rejection of Claim.

Perhaps you might think that this account of successful argument makes some unwarranted assumptions.

Suppose, for example, that Con accepts all but one of the premises of the argument presented to him by Pro, and has no prior opinion about the final premise. In that case, you might be tempted to say, it is too quick to claim that the argument has no consequences for his beliefs. For, when he considers that final premise, he might accept it: and then he would be in genuine cognitive difficulty. However, in the imagined case, it is clearly superfluous to requirements to present the argument to Con: it would be sufficient to simply ask him his opinion of the final premise. If he rejects the final premise, then there is no point putting the argument. If he accepts the final premise, but does not otherwise modify his beliefs, then we are back to the case that we considered initially. There is no extension of the account of what makes for a successful argument required by this kind of case.

Suppose that, instead of trying to persuade Con, Pro is trying to persuade Judge, neutral adjudicator. Given that Judge is genuinely a neutral adjudicator, we must suppose that Judge is undecided between

the claims that Pro accepts and Con rejects, and the claims that Con accepts but Pro rejects. But, in that case, quite apart from whether or not Pro accepts all of the premises of the argument that he puts, we are supposing that Con does not accept all of the premises of the argument that Pro puts. So, if Judge is a genuinely neutral adjudicator, Judge is undecided whether or not to accept all of the premises of Pro's argument, and also undecided whether or not to accept Claim. But, if Judge is undecided whether to accept all of the premises of Pro's argument, and undecided whether to accept Claim, then the observation that the premises collectively support Claim simply provides Judge with no reason to accept Claim. Appealing to a neutral adjudicator requires no adjustment to the account of what makes for a successful argument.

So far, we have an account of what makes for a successful argument in a debate between two people. But, in any particular case, the beliefs of the two people may be highly idiosyncratic. That an argument on behalf of Claim is successful for Pro against Con tells us nothing about the wider credentials of that argument for Claim. We could try aggregating the relevant considerations over populations – 56% of those who reject Claim accept all of the premises of Pro's argument – but we would still have to face the objection that the chosen population, at that time, and in that place, is highly idiosyncratic. A better move is surely to idealize.

If we are interested in Claim – where Claim and the denial of Claim are central characteristics of competing worldviews – and if we can identify two parties who contest Claim, then we should start by trying to produce the best versions that we can of the worldviews of the two contesting parties. The best versions of the worldviews that we can produce will be *theories* – collections of claims that can be assessed for simplicity, fit with data, explanatory scope, predictive accuracy, and so forth. When we pit theories against one another, there is a role for argument: for, sometimes, there are black spots in theories that arguments can display. If a theory that rejects Claim also contains claims that collectively support Claim, then that theory is in trouble – and, if there is any doubt, a derivation can be used to show that it is in trouble. However, in many cases, competing theories do not contain black spots, and in those cases, there is no role for argument in the assessment of the claims of those competing theories.

Given the observed distribution of religious belief – and given, in particular, the distribution of peers and superiors across all of the major world religions – it is massively implausible to suppose that the major

world religions contain readily exposed black spots involving the central claims that characterize the worldviews of those religions. If there are black spots of this kind in the worldviews of the major world religions and their secular competitors, it is beyond belief to suppose that those black spots can be exposed in simple arguments. If simple arguments would suffice to expose black spots in the worldviews of the major world religions, then those worldviews would have long since been abandoned.

Despite the facts just noted, it remains the case that, in philosophy journals, and debates, and conversations taking place all over the world, proponents of particular worldviews continue to put forward simple and well-known arguments as allegedly good – perhaps even decisive – arguments against the central characterizing claims of other worldviews. Philosophers – both professional and amateur – continue to write articles – and make presentations in debates and conversations – which state relatively simple arguments, ‘defend’ premises (often by appeal to ‘intuition’), and conclude with ‘replies’ to objections. But a straightforward application of earlier considerations shows that this practice is indefensible.

Suppose that we think of Pro and Con as embodiments of the theories that are the best versions of the worldviews that they embrace. Suppose, as before, that Pro and Con disagree about Claim, and that Pro puts forward a relatively simple argument for Claim, based on premises that Pro accepts, but some of which Con rejects. Given that Pro accepts the premises, it is to be expected that Pro’s ‘intuitions’ favour these premises, and that other claims that Pro accepts stand in ‘supporting’ relations to them. But, equally, given that Con rejects some of the premises, it is to be expected that Con’s ‘intuitions’ do not favour the rejected premises; and it is to be expected that other claims that Con accepts stand in ‘supporting’ relations to the denials of the rejected premises; and it is to be expected that Con’s ‘intuitions’ do not favour the further claims that Pro accepts, and that stand in ‘supporting’ relations to the premises of the presented argument. Since Pro’s exhibition, of ‘supporting’ relations between claims that Pro accepts but some of which Con rejects, provides neither Con nor Judge with a reason to favour the theory that Pro embodies over the theory that Con embodies, there is nothing that Pro’s argument can contribute to decide between those theories.

Where theories are logically inconsistent – or probabilistically inconsistent, or explanatorily inconsistent, or the like – an argument

can exhibit the inconsistency in question. Since theories can be logically inconsistent – or probabilistically inconsistent, or explanatorily inconsistent, or the like – there is a clear role for argument in theory comparison and theory assessment. However, if theories are not logically inconsistent – or probabilistically inconsistent, or explanatorily inconsistent, or the like – there is nothing left for *arguments* to do. Where theories have not taken certain considerations into account, questions can be asked about how those considerations might be accommodated by the theories in question: and the superiority of one theory to another might be demonstrated in the process. But there is nothing to be gained by dressing up the questions as arguments: the argumentative garb adds nothing to the work that the questions can do. Where theories have taken the same range of considerations into account, the only remaining questions concern the relative merits of the theories: which has the smaller range of theoretical commitments, which has the better fit with data, which explains the wider range of phenomena, which makes more accurate predictions about future data, and so forth. Again, there is nothing to be gained by dressing up these questions as arguments: argumentative garb has no bearing on the development of answers to these genuine questions.

It is standard to say that a valid argument in which all of the premises are true is *sound*. I shall say that an argument in which all the premises are true, and in which there is a chain of adequately supported steps from the premises to the conclusion, is *solid*. If people are prepared to argue about whether given claims are true, then they may be no less prepared to argue about whether arguments in which the disputed claims appear are solid. If Claim is not true, then no argument that has Claim as its conclusion is solid. Given that Pro and Con are rational, and given that Con rejects Claim, Con also rejects the claim that the argument that Pro presents that has Claim as its conclusion is solid. If the argument that Pro presents is one in which there is a chain of adequately supported steps from the premises to the conclusion – and Con recognizes that this is so – then Con holds that at least one of the premises in Pro's argument is not true. When Con says to Pro that a given premise in Pro's argument is not true, Pro might be tempted to ask Con for a reason for rejecting that premise. And, if Con is unable to supply a reason that is sufficient to convince Pro to reject the premise, Pro might conclude that 'the argument survives Con's objection' – and then Pro might go on to conclude that his argument is, after all, successful.

But, when Pro concludes that his argument survives Con's objection, all that he can legitimately insist by this is that he remains entitled to believe that his argument is solid. Just as bare disagreement about Claim does not defeat the entitlement of Pro and Con to hold the beliefs about Claim that they in fact hold, so bare disagreement about the solidity of Pro's argument does not defeat the entitlement of Pro and Con to hold the beliefs that they do about the solidity of that argument. But Pro's entitlement to go on maintaining that his argument is solid is simply no justification at all for his believing that his argument is successful. Just as neither Pro nor Con is required to have a reason that ought to be sufficient to get the other to revise opinion about Claim in order to be entitled to believe as they do about Claim, neither Pro nor Con is required to have a reason that ought to be sufficient to get the other to revise opinion about the solidity of Pro's argument in order to believe as they do about the solidity of Pro's argument. However, a successful argument is precisely an argument that does provide a reason to those at whom it is directed to revise their opinion: if Pro's argument were successful, it would give Con a reason to reconsider his rejection of Claim. Presenting what by your lights is a solid argument for a claim that you accept to an opponent who rejects that claim gives that opponent no more reason to accept the contested claim than does your mere assertion of the claim – unless, of course, your opponent accepts all of the premises of the argument that you are presenting.

A simple consequence of the preceding discussion is that there is no straightforward connection between reason and argument. It is sometimes said that reasonable believers must have good arguments for the beliefs that they hold. Not so. Reasonable believers must be reasonable in their believing, and that requires, in part, that their beliefs form a network in which there are many supporting relations that hold between their beliefs. If there are many supporting relations that hold between their beliefs, and if they have the requisite facility, reasonable believers will be able to exhibit chains of reasoning, connecting together claims that they believe, in which all of the steps are adequately supported. But the exhibition of chains of reasoning of this kind, while it may lead to the exhibition of arguments, is evidently not guaranteed to lead to the exhibition of good or successful arguments.

There are many worldviews, including the worldviews of the many denominations of the major world religions, and these worldviews are in considerable disagreement with one another. Given the distribution

of peer and expert opinion, it is a reasonable conjecture that many – if not all – of the widely supported worldviews involve many supporting relations between their constituent claims. But, even if this is not so, it is clear that merely exhibiting *some* supporting relations between *some* of the constituent claims of one worldview provides no reason at all for proponents of other worldviews to reconsider their worldviews. Unless you exhibit *all* of the supporting relations between *all* of the constituent claims of one worldview, and compare this with an exhibition of *all* of the supporting relations between *all* of the constituent claims of another worldview, you are not even well placed to determine whether the former worldview exhibits greater *coherence* than the latter. And, in any case, coherence is only one of the dimensions that ought to be taken into account in the assessment of the comparative virtues of worldviews: while coherence has some connection to simplicity and explanatory breadth, it speaks not at all to fit with data and predictive accuracy.

To illustrate the claims that I have made about reason and argument, suppose that Pro and Con disagree about the claim that natural reality has a cause of its existence. Pro is a theist: Pro thinks that a necessarily existent God created natural reality *ex nihilo*. Con is a naturalist: Con thinks that natural reality has a necessarily existent initial state – ‘the initial singularity’.

Suppose that Pro puts the following argument to Con:

- 1 Whatever began to exist had a cause of its beginning to exist.
- 2 Natural reality began to exist.
- 3 (Therefore) Natural reality had a cause of its beginning to exist.

Can this be a successful argument (for Pro against Con)? Well, the conclusion is entailed by the premises. So the only question is: does Con accept both premises? Clearly, he does not! Since Con thinks that global causal reality is just a natural causal reality, this argument is no more of a challenge to Con than the following argument is to Pro:

- 1 Whatever began to exist has a cause of its beginning to exist.
- 2 Causal reality began to exist.
- 3 (Therefore) Causal reality had a cause of its beginning to exist.

Just as Pro thinks that God – and God’s initial creative state – had no cause, so Con thinks that the initial singularity had no cause. If Pro thinks that whatever began to exist had a cause of its beginning to exist, then Pro thinks that global causal reality did not begin to exist; and if

Con thinks that whatever began to exist had a cause of its beginning to exist, then Con thinks that natural causal reality did not begin to exist. On the other hand, if Pro thinks that global causal reality began to exist, then Pro denies that everything that began to exist had a cause; and if Con thinks that natural causal reality began to exist, then Con denies that everything that began to exist had a cause. Given – as we are assuming – that Pro and Con accept the best versions of theism and naturalism, Pro’s argument is plainly unsuccessful: it provides no threat to Con’s worldview. (In case this isn’t obvious: neither Pro nor Con can accept that causal reality had a cause. By definition, causal reality includes all causes. Yet a cause of causal reality would be a cause that was separate from, and hence not included in, causal reality.)

Part II

Metaphysics

Philosophy of religion generates a range of distinctive metaphysical questions. The worldviews of the major world religions postulate entities that do not feature in either well-established science or commonsense consensus, and they also attribute properties to entities that are not attributed to those entities by either well-established science or commonsense consensus. On the one hand, the worldviews of the major world religions postulate the existence of gods and demons, ancestor spirits, post-mortem realms, cycles of death and rebirth, miraculous events, and so on. On the other hand, the worldviews of the major world religions attribute central roles in grand cosmic melodramas to human beings with much of those roles being played out beyond the span of a single lifetime. These postulations and attributions raise difficult philosophical questions about the relationships that hold between human minds and human bodies, and about what, if anything, is constant across all of the phases of a single human being's history.

4

Science, Nature and Transcendence

Abstract: *We begin with a characterization of naturalism, and an explanation of why naturalism is a 'minimal' worldview. Having noted some competing worldviews – theism, pantheism, panentheism, panpsychism – we canvas reasons that one might have for adopting a more-than-minimal worldview. In particular, we consider whether religious experience and reports of miracles might justify the adoption of a more-than-minimal worldview, and argue for a negative verdict.*

Keywords: divinity; interpretation; miracle; naturalism; pantheism; religious experience; supernatural

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Our revision of the definition of religion proposed by Atran and Norenzayan refers to ‘supernatural agents’ and ‘supernatural structures’. Clearly, in order for the definition to be acceptable, there must be some satisfactory way of making out the implicit contrast between, on the one hand, natural agents and natural structures and, on the other hand, supernatural agents and supernatural structures. Moreover, if there is some satisfactory way of making out this implicit contrast, then perhaps we can use this contrast to characterize a ‘minimal’ worldview that does not refer to the agents and structures that are characteristic of religious worldviews.

Here is a first attempt at making out the distinction between the natural and the supernatural:

Naturalists maintain that there are none but natural causes involving none but natural entities. Many naturalists are *materialists* – who maintain that there are none but material causes involving none but material entities, or *physicalists* – who maintain that there are none but physical causes involving none but physical entities. As these latter terms suggest, some naturalists claim that the *natural sciences* – or the *material sciences*, or the *physical sciences* – are our sole legitimate means of investigating the causal structure of reality: reliable information about what causes what is provided by scientific investigation, and scientific theorizing has no truck with *supernatural*, or *immaterial*, or *non-physical* causes.

Given this characterization of naturalism, there is room for naturalists to dispute the fact about the distribution of minds and mental properties in the universe. Many naturalists suppose that the distribution of minds is late and local: only recently evolved creatures have minds and mental properties, and those minds and mental properties are tied to relatively complex biological structures of the evolved creatures in question. However, it is consistent with the above characterization of naturalism that the distribution of minds – or, at any rate, of particular mental properties – is neither late nor local: for example, *panpsychism* – the view that everything has mental properties – is consistent with the above characterization of naturalism.

Given the above characterization of naturalism, there is also room for naturalists to dispute the facts about the attitudes that it is proper to take towards natural reality – that is towards the totality of natural causes and natural entities – or towards suitable part of natural reality. Many naturalists suppose that it is not appropriate to suppose that natural reality,

or some suitable part of natural reality, is divine, or sacred, or worthy of worship, or the like. However, for example, *pantheism* – the view that natural reality is divine and/or sacred and/or worthy of worship – is consistent with the above characterization of naturalism, as is *panentheism* – the view that each part of natural reality is divine and/or sacred and/or worthy of worship.

I think that a proper characterization of naturalism should not be consistent with panpsychism, pantheism, and panentheism. A proper characterization of naturalism should build in the idea that the distribution of minds in the universe is late and local, and a proper characterization of naturalism should also build in the idea that it is not appropriate to suppose that natural reality, or some suitable part of natural reality, is divine, or sacred, or worthy of worship, or the like. So, I suggest, the kind of naturalism that provides a ‘minimal’ worldview to contrast with properly religious worldviews makes at least the following three claims: (1) there are none but natural causes involving none but natural entities; (2) the distribution of minds in the universe is late and local: only recently evolved creatures have minds and mental properties, and those minds and mental properties are tied to relatively complex biological structures of the evolved creatures in question; and (3) there is nothing in the natural world that is divine, or sacred, or worthy of worship.

Naturalism, as I have characterized it, is ‘minimal’ – in comparison with religious worldviews – in the following sense: every worldview is committed to the existence of natural causes involving natural entities, and every worldview is committed to late and local minds: every worldview accepts that *our* minds and mental properties are *somehow* connected to *our* neural properties. Thus, every worldview is committed to what the naturalist is committed to, but other worldviews are committed to more as well. Some other worldviews are committed to supernatural causes involving supernatural entities. Some other worldviews are committed to minds that are neither late nor local. Some other worldviews are committed to things that are divine, or sacred, or worthy of worship.

Of course, that naturalism is ‘minimal’ in comparison with religious worldviews is not an overwhelming reason to suppose that naturalism trumps religious worldviews. It is true that, when we compare worldviews, ‘minimality’ is one of the considerations that can count in favour of one worldview over another. If all other considerations are equal, then more ‘minimal’ worldviews are preferable to less ‘minimal’ worldviews

because, if all other considerations are equal, then there is *no* reason to believe in the additional things postulated by the less ‘minimal’ worldviews. But, in order to determine whether all other things are equal, we need, first, to determine what those other things are, and then, second, to determine whether religious worldviews have advantages over naturalism when it comes to those other things.

What else should be taken into account when one weighs worldviews? At the very least, apart from considerations about simplicity – ‘minimality’ of theoretical postulates, ‘minimality’ of amounts and kinds of entities postulated, and so forth – one needs to take into account: goodness of fit with data; predictive accuracy; explanatory scope; and fit with well-established knowledge. Where we have evidence or data, and all else is equal, we should prefer the worldview that makes the best fit with the data. Where we can trade off simplicity against fit with data, and all else is equal, we should prefer the worldview that makes the best tradeoff between simplicity and fit with data. Where all else is equal, we should prefer the worldview that gives us the most accurate predictions of future data. Where all else is equal, we should prefer the worldview that provides the widest explanatory framework, that is which provides the broadest reaching account of reality. Where all else is equal, we should prefer the worldview that makes the best fit with well-established knowledge, including, well-established science and well-established commonsense.

What kinds of considerations might we appeal to in order to argue that there are religious worldviews that trump naturalism, and how might we prosecute the case? Given that naturalism has the advantage of ‘minimality’, there is a clear method of arguing for the superiority of naturalism: examine all of the relevant data, piece by piece, and argue that there is no bit of data that favours any religious worldview over naturalism. Of course, filling out the argument is not straightforward, but, at least in principle, it is clear how it would proceed. But, on the assumption that, at least sometimes, the data favours some religious worldviews over naturalism, what principle can we then appeal to in order to reach the conclusion that naturalism is trumped by those religious worldviews? In cases where we are trading off simplicity against fit with data, there is no universally acknowledged algorithm for making the trade: there just is no uncontroversial way of making out the argument. I suppose that it might turn out that there is so much data that tells against naturalism that it would be incredible to suppose that naturalism is tenable, but,

even in that case, there would still be a non-algorithmic judgement to be made.

Where might we look for data that decides between naturalism and religious worldviews? We might start with the reasons and evidence that lead us to our well-established scientific and commonsense beliefs. However, it seems improbable to suppose that the reasons and evidence that we have for well-established scientific and commonsense beliefs are suffice to establish particular religious worldviews. Of course, given that naturalism is a 'minimal' worldview, there is nothing in well-established scientific and commonsense belief that is in conflict with naturalism. But, equally, there is nothing in well-established scientific and commonsense belief that mandates any move beyond naturalism. For example, one looks in vain, in scientific textbooks sanctioned by the leading scientific academies of the world for the postulation of anything beyond natural causes involving natural entities, or for the postulation of anything beyond late and local minds. Similarly, one looks in vain, in the *consensus* of intelligent commonsense opinion across the globe, for the postulation of anything beyond natural causes involving natural entities, or for the postulation of anything beyond late and local minds. Everyone who is sufficiently intelligent and sufficiently well-informed recognizes basic facts of physics, and chemistry, and biology, and geology, and psychology, and economics, and so forth, but only some intelligent and well-informed people believe in gods or God, and only some intelligent and well-informed people believe in reincarnation, and only some intelligent and well-informed people believe in the divinity of the earth, and only some intelligent and well-informed people believe in ancestor spirits, and so on.

Where else might we look for data that decides between naturalism and religious worldviews? Perhaps we might think to consult religious histories, or religious traditions, or religious scriptures, or religious authorities, or religious experience. However, even before we begin to consider details, we need to remember that the sources do not speak with a unified voice. If you belong to a particular religious community, it is very likely that your religious beliefs are grounded in religious history, religious tradition, religious scripture, religious authority and religious experience. But it is also true for those who belong to other religious communities that their religious beliefs are grounded in religious history, religious tradition, religious scripture, religious authority and religious experience. And because differences in religious beliefs and religious

worldviews are themselves grounded in differences in religious history, religious tradition, religious scripture, religious authority and religious experience, it seems implausible to suppose that one can appeal to considerations drawn from religious history, religious tradition, religious scripture, religious authority and religious experience in order to decide between competing religious worldviews.

Consider the case of *reports of miracles*. There are numerous reports of miracles associated with all of the major world religions. Here are some examples. In the *Pali Canon*, Buddha commands flood waters to recede and walks between the parted waters on dry ground; levitates while fire and water stream from different parts of his body; and divides his body into pieces before reuniting the separated pieces. In the *Mahabharata*, Krishna straightens a woman's curved spine, and lifts the mountain Govardhana in order to save the village Vrindavan from torrential flooding. In the *Old Testament*, Moses divides the waters so that the Israelites can escape from Egypt into the Promised Land. In the *New Testament*, Jesus walks on water in Galilee, raises Lazarus from the dead, and feeds a multitude with five loaves and two fish. In the *Hadith*, Muhammad ascends into heaven from Jerusalem, splits the moon in order to convince non-believers, produces food and water in the desert, and blinds an opposing army with a handful of dust. Seventeenth-century documents report that, in Calanda, Spain, in 1640, Miguel Juan Pellicer's amputated leg regenerated as a result of the intercession of the Virgin of the Pillar. Nineteenth-century documents report that Sarkar Waris Pak waded across the flooded Ghanghra River, and that his feet never showed any sign of dirt even though he always went barefoot. Twentieth-century documents report that perhaps as many as 100,000 people witnessed the sun plummeting towards the earth in a zigzag pattern in October 1917 in Fátima in Portugal.

There are, of course, also numerous reports of anomalous entities and phenomena that have no immediate and direct connection with the major world religions. Here is a partial list: astrological influences, alien abductions, channelling, clairvoyance, cryptids (Bigfoot, bunyips, chupacabras, hoop snakes, levitation, Loch Ness Monster, man-eating trees, mermaids, Mothman, werewolves, will-o-the-wisps, yeti), demons, dowsing, ESP, fairies, fortune-telling, ghosts, goblins, out-of-body experiences, telekinesis, telepathy, UFOs, and witchcraft. Reports of anomalous entities and phenomena also play a significant role in alternative medicine and 'spiritual healing'; consider, for example, apitherapy, Bach

flower remedies, Bates method, chiropractic, chromotherapy, crystal healing, cupping, ear candling, energy therapies, homeopathy, iridology, magnotherapy, naturopathy, orgonomy, osteopathy, reflexology, reiki, rolfing, thalassotherapy, and urine therapy.

When we think about the role that reports of miracles might play in deciding between naturalism and religious worldviews, we should also think about the significance of these other reports of anomalous entities and phenomena. We *all* know that there are many things that *some* believe that are either inconsistent with well-established scientific and commonsense beliefs, or else plainly not supported by the reasons and evidence that support well-established scientific and commonsense beliefs. We *all* know that the field of anomalous entities and phenomena is rife with knavery and folly: most alternative medicine and spiritual healing is exploitation of human frailty, and most belief in connection with anomalous entities and phenomena has similar origins. And – unless we are religious pluralists of a Hickean stripe – we *all* know that the various miracles urged in connection with *almost all* of the major world religions are struck from the same stock. If we have a religious worldview, we may make an exception in the case of the miracle reports of our own religion; however, if we are a naturalist, we will not make any exceptions.

The point being made here is *not* that one must be irrational in order to accept the miracle reports of one's own religious tradition. Rather, the point being made here is that it is implausible to suppose that appeal to miracle reports can play a significant role in deciding between naturalism and religious worldviews. The miracle reports of the major world religions have very similar credentials; most are supported only by ancient textual evidence of highly uncertain provenance. If there were nothing else to go upon, it is incredible to suppose that the miracle reports of one of the major world religions would provide decisive grounds to favour it above naturalism and all of the other major world religions.

Consider the case of *religious experience*. There are various different kinds of things that might be called 'religious experiences'. There is, to begin with, the experience of manifestations of religion – experiences of participating in religious practices, experiences of belonging to religious organizations and religious traditions, experiences of having religious beliefs, and so forth. Experiences of having religious beliefs are related to experiences that involve 'seeing' the world in religious terms – 'seeing' a flower as God's handiwork, and so forth. Other things that could be

described as religious experiences include collective witnessing of miracles, and the undergoing of dreams and visions with religious content. However, the category upon which we shall focus here is the category of ‘mystical’ – ‘spiritual,’ ‘sacred’ – experiences.

There are several different kinds of reported ‘mystical’ experiences. There are, at least, (1) ‘mystical’ *possession*, characterized by ecstasy and enthusiasm; (2) ‘mystical’ *encounter*, characterized by fear, compulsion, and awe; and (3) ‘mystical’ *tranquillity*, characterized by evanescence, ineffability, and passivity.

Assessment of the evidential value of these kinds of experiences is fraught. Ecstatic, numinous and unitive ‘mystical’ experiences are part of the common heritage of humanity: these kinds of experiences are reported by members of all of the major world religions, as well as by naturalists. But the *interpretation* that is placed upon these kinds of experiences is highly sensitive to place, culture, and a host of other variables.

What reasons might we have to deny that ‘mystical’ experiences are evidence for the worldview of just one of the major world religions?

Well, to begin with, we *all* know that there are many conditions that predispose towards these kinds of experiences: *mental illnesses* – depression, schizophrenia, epilepsy, stroke; *ingestion of ‘mind-altering’ drugs* – mescaline, psilocybin; *bodily insults* – starvation, mortification, extreme exercise, extreme sexual activity, near-death experience, other kinds of serious physical and psychological stress; *‘rhythmical’ activities* – meditation, prayer, trance, music, dance, chant; and so forth. These conditions are not noted for their cognitive reliability in other domains: mental illness, ingestion of ‘mind-altering’ drugs, bodily insult and ‘rhythmical’ activity are not positively correlated with performance on standard reasoning and inference tasks. Indeed, mental illness, ingestion of ‘mind-altering’ drugs and bodily insult are all very strongly *negatively* correlated with performance on standard reasoning and inference tasks. If ‘mystical’ experiences arise from these kinds of conditions, then it seems reasonable to suppose that they are not good evidence for any worldview.

What about ‘mystical’ experiences that come in the absence of the kinds of conditions? What if these experiences come when I am simply sitting quietly, and correctly take myself to be in good physical and psychological shape? In this case, it is important to note that there is a wide range of hard-to-interpret experiences – shivers down the spine, variations in mood and affect, feelings of being watched, and so forth – that we all

experience but typically do not take as evidence for the existence of a transcendent reality. Given that there is this range of hard-to-interpret experiences, we do well to seek a unified psychological account of the full body of hard-to-interpret experiences.

A considerable body of recent psychological research supports the idea that System 1 is strongly prone to over-attribution of patterns: we are all disposed to suppose that we have detected patterns when in fact there are none. One way that this may happen is as a result of inference from the evidence of internal states that are appropriately triggered by certain kinds of patterns, but which are themselves inclined to overproduction. But, if we have these over-produced internal states, then, no matter what our inclinations may be, in the absence of any natural candidates, we do *not* do best to attribute these states to a transcendental source. Almost always, when I seem to hear unexpected noises coming from my kitchen late at night, I do better *not* to suppose that there is an intruder who has broken into my house, and to suppose, instead, that my mind is playing tricks on me.

The upshot of our discussion is, I think, that it is very implausible to suppose that data about 'mystical' experience favours one of the major world religions over its competitors, that is over naturalism and the rest of the major world religions. There is no denying that there are hard-to-interpret experiences of ecstasy and enthusiasm, that there are hard-to-interpret experiences of fear, compulsion and awe, and that there are hard-to-interpret experiences of evanescence, ineffability, and passivity. But there is also no denying that there are many other hard-to-interpret experiences which no one is inclined to interpret as evidence for the transcendent. Even ignoring the difficulties involved in tying 'mystical' experiences to the content of just one of the major world religions, there are good reasons for thinking that it is much more plausible to suppose that cognitive science will ultimately deliver a unified account of the full range of hard-to-interpret human experiences that is much more satisfying than the supposition that some hard-to-interpret human experiences are evidence for transcendence.

Given our discussion of miracles and religious experience, we can give short shrift to considerations about religious histories, and religious traditions, and religious scriptures, and religious authorities. In the absence of other considerations that decide in favour of one of the major world religions, it is simply implausible to suppose that considerations about religious histories, and religious traditions, and religious scriptures, and

religious authorities decide in favour of one of the major world religions. If, as we have argued previously, well-established science and common-sense, reports of miracles and religious experience are unable to provide a decision in favour of one of the major world religions, then it is very hard to see what kinds of considerations could provide a decisive reason to advance beyond naturalism.

5

Mind, Body and Spirit

Abstract: *We begin with a naturalistic account of the identity conditions over time for human beings, and of the way in which mind and body are related. We then consider ways in which this naturalistic account might be challenged by proponents of religious worldviews, and the significance of these challenges for other metaphysical and ethical issues, including cosmic justice and life after death.*

Keywords: body; continuity; death; Descartes; identity; immortality; mind; substance; transcendence

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Science and commonsense consensus give us the following. For each human organism, there was, in the past, a fusion of a human sperm and a human egg that grew to become that human organism. Pre-birth development witnessed the development and switching on of various biological systems necessary for the continued existence of human organisms. These systems include a range of neural systems that continue to develop for many years after birth and are essentially connected to the cognitive systems of human organisms. Eventually, however, for each human organism, there is death, and when death comes, all of the biological systems necessary for continued existence of human organisms are switched off, never to be switched back on again. Moreover, death is followed by biological decay: eventually, there is nothing that counts as the 'mortal remains' of a given human organism.

Naturalists suppose that this scientific and commonsense consensus is the *full* story about all of the human beings who have ever lived. Human beings are just human organisms; human cognitive systems are essentially connected to – perhaps even identical with – human neural systems, functioning when, and only when, the connected human neural systems are functioning. On the naturalist picture, the existence of a particular human being begins when all of the biological systems necessary for the continued existence of a particular human organism are switched on, and ends when all of the biological systems necessary for the continued existence of that very same human organism are finally switched off.

Most religious worldviews deny that the scientific and commonsense consensus is the *full* story about the existence of human beings. According to some religious worldviews, the very same human being, or, more generally, the very same sentient being, can be identical with a succession of human organisms, or, more generally, with a succession of sentient organisms. On these kinds of religious worldviews, human beings may have a succession of earthly lives, or they may have an embodied afterlife in some place rather different from the earth that is our current home. According to some – possibly, but not necessarily, *other* – religious worldviews, the very same human being can continue in existence without being tied to, or supported by, a human organism. On these kinds of religious worldviews, human beings are typically supposed to be non-physical, non-material, 'spiritual' beings that have merely contingent ties to human organisms, and may have non-terminating existence – either separately, or as a merged part of some much grander entity – in some

other non-physical, non-material, 'spiritual' realm. Thus, there are two major areas on which religious worldviews may depart from naturalism in connection with the full story about the existence of human beings: on the one hand, they may tell a different story about the *identity conditions* for human beings over time, or through change; on the other hand, they may tell a different story about the way in which *mind and body* are connected.

There are two significantly different stories that naturalists might tell about the identity conditions for human beings over time. (In the next few paragraphs, 'over time' stands for 'over time or through change'.)

First, they might tell a story that adverts simply to the identity conditions for human organisms: a human organism begins from a particular sperm and egg, and forms a *bodily continuous* entity over time. Most likely, a story of this kind will advert to *causal* and *spatiotemporal* continuity: while human organisms can survive certain kinds of minor spatiotemporal discontinuities – for example, the loss of limbs – and while human organisms are constantly in minor flux – exchanging materials with their external environment via ingestion and excretion – no actual human being survives major spatiotemporal discontinuities – for example, being chopped up into little pieces – or major flux – exchange of the majority of body mass all at once with the external environment.

Second, they might tell a story that adverts to the *psychological* properties of human organisms: on this kind of approach, if there is a sufficiently large disruption to the psychological functioning of a human organism, then we might say that there is now a different human being associated with that human organism. So, for example, if a human organism undergoes a frontal lobotomy, we might be tempted to say that the human being present after the frontal lobotomy just isn't the same human being who was present before the frontal lobotomy, because there is too much abrupt discontinuity in their psychological properties. Similarly, when confronted with someone in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease, some of us may be tempted to say that the human being that we once knew has ceased to exist.

On either of these stories, bodily continuity plays a very significant role: in the first story, bodily continuity is what makes for human identity; in the second case, bodily continuity sets a bound to human identity – while a given human organism might, sequentially, be host to more than one human being, it is never the case that a single human being is, sequentially, hosted by more than one human organism.

Accounts of human identity that give bodily continuity such a significant role face certain kinds of objections. It seems conceivable that a human organism might undergo *fission* – in the way that amoeba do – or that a human organism might undergo *duplication* – as by a kind of biological analogue of the photocopier – or that a human organism might undergo disintegration and reconstitution – as in the kind of *teletransportation* featured in *Star Trek*. It also seems conceivable – on the assumption that there is a suitable analogy between, on the one hand, computers and computer programs, and, on the other hand, human organisms and human beings – that a human being might be *downloaded* from one human organism and *uploaded* onto a different human organism. These and other similar cases might be taken to present challenges to the idea that it could never be the case that a single human being is, sequentially, hosted by more than one human organism.

While it cannot be denied that these kinds of cases are conceivable – imaginable – a naturalist might well deny that there are *possible*: it simply cannot happen that human organisms undergo fission, or duplication, or teletransportation, or uploading and downloading. Moreover, even if a naturalist supposes that these are possible, that naturalist might still go on to deny that this gives any comfort to those religious worldviews that maintain that the very same human being, or, more generally, the very same sentient being, *is* identical with a succession of human organisms, or, more generally, with a succession of sentient organisms. After all, none of fission, duplication, teletransportation, or uploading and downloading provides a plausible explanation of how the very same human being, or, more generally, the very same sentient being, *comes to be* identical with a succession of human organisms, or, more generally, with a succession of sentient organisms. In particular, it is important to observe that fission, duplication, teletransportation and uploading and downloading would all be expected to preserve the psychological properties – including the memories and personalities – of the organisms that undergo them; yet those religious worldviews that maintain that the very same human being, or, more generally, the very same sentient being, *is* identical with a succession of human organisms, or, more generally, with a succession of sentient organisms typically *deny* that psychological properties, such as memory and personality, are preserved across transition from one human or sentient organism to the next.

There are various different stories that naturalists might tell about the way in which mind and body are related. Some naturalists – *eliminativists*

– suppose that ordinary, everyday ‘mental’ talk is misconceived; in the fullness of time, when the ‘sciences of the mind’ have matured, we shall have abandoned our current ordinary, everyday ways of talking about ourselves in favour of ways of talking about ourselves that are underwritten by relevant neuroscience. Some naturalists – *identity theorists* – suppose that our minds are just our brains: our mental states – our beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth – are just among our neural states. Some naturalists – *reductionists* – suppose that our minds are necessarily related to our brains, but by a relation that is weaker than identity: our mental states – our beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth – are necessarily related to our neural states, but by a relation that is weaker than identity. Some naturalists – *non-reductionists* – suppose that at least some aspects of our minds are merely contingently related to our brains: some of our mental states – perhaps some of our experiential states – are only contingently connected to our neural states, so that it could have been the case that we had those neural states without having the accompanying mental states.

Whatever story a naturalist adopts, there are certain things that naturalism rules out. In particular, naturalism rules out the existence of minds in the absence of bodies: according to naturalism, there can be no such thing as an unembodied, or disembodied, mind. There are at least two kinds of challenges that naturalism faces.

On the one hand, there are philosophical arguments for the possibility of unembodied, or disembodied, minds. Most famously, there is Rene Descartes’ (1596–1650) argument for a ‘real distinction’ between mind and body. Descartes argues that, since he can coherently – ‘clearly and distinctly’ – conceive of his mind existing without his body, but he cannot coherently – ‘clearly and distinctly’ – conceive of his body existing without his body, it must be that his mind and his body really are distinct things, and that his mind is capable of existing independently of his body. On the other hand, there are more or less empirical considerations that some suppose establish the possibility of unembodied, or disembodied, existence. In particular, some people suppose that there are trustworthy reports of out-of-body experiences, including certain kinds of near-death experiences, which strongly support the claim that it is possible for our minds to operate independently of our bodies.

The key question for Descartes’ argument is whether his premise provides us with reason to suppose that it is possible for our minds to exist in the absence of our bodies. While Descartes claims that he can

coherently – ‘clearly and distinctly’ – conceive of his mind existing independently of his body, and that this provides us with sufficient reason to conclude that our minds can exist independently of our bodies, these claims can be contested. If we suppose that coherent – ‘clear and distinct’ – conception is a relatively weak constraint, then it seems that there are all kinds of impossibilities that are coherently – ‘clearly and distinctly’ – conceivable: in sufficiently weak senses, I can coherently – ‘clearly and distinctly’ – conceive that water is not H_2O , that mathematics is decidable, that mathematics is reducible to logic, that red light has a longer wavelength than yellow light, and so forth, even though there are very good reasons for denying that any of these claims is really possible. On the other hand, if we suppose that coherent – ‘clear and distinct’ – conception is a relatively strong constraint, then it seems that there are all kinds of cases in which I can be mistaken about whether I have a coherent – ‘clear and distinct’ – conception: I can mistakenly suppose that I coherently – ‘clearly and distinctly’ – conceive that water is not H_2O , that mathematics is decidable, that mathematics is reducible to logic, that red light has a longer wavelength than yellow light, and so forth. Since the claim that the mind is not the body – that mental states are not neural states – seems on all fours with such claims as that water is not H_2O and that red light does not have a longer wavelength than yellow light, it seems pretty clear that Descartes’ argument is insufficient to decide between those worldviews that maintain that mind cannot exist independently of body and those worldviews that maintain that mind can exist independently of body.

The key question for empirical arguments for the possibility of unembodied, or disembodied, existence is whether there are any trustworthy reports of the kind in question. I think that the answer to this question is clearly negative. It is not in question that the overwhelming majority of reports of out-of-body experiences do not bear marks that make for trust: the reports emerge long after the fact, have no more than one independent witness, are lacking in key details that would aid attempts at independent confirmation, and so forth. But, given that the well is so overwhelmingly poisoned – and given the abundant evidence of knavery and folly attendant upon the domain to which these reports belong – we all have the very best of reasons not to trust any of these kinds of reports, or, at the very least, to concede that we can hardly expect to use these reports in order to decide between worldviews that take divergent positions on the question of the relationship between mind and body.

Along with questions about whether differences amongst worldviews on identity over time and relations between mind and body provide sufficient grounds for choosing between worldviews, there are also questions about the significance of these differences between worldviews for other questions in metaphysics and ethics. We conclude with a discussion of some of these kinds of questions.

It is agreed on all hands that there is *change*, if only because it is agreed on all hands that there is *appearance* of change. However, there is disagreement about whether change is fundamental. On some worldviews, change is entirely superficial: there is an underlying reality that is utterly unchanging. On other worldviews, change is less superficial: there is an underlying reality that has more or less unchanging elements – some things never change, and other things have unchanging features that persist while other features change. On yet other worldviews, change is deep and ubiquitous: there is no underlying unchanging reality, and there are no things that have unchanging features that persist while other features change. These disagreements about change are reflected in disagreements about personal identity. On some views, what I have been calling ‘human beings’ are chains of fleeting states that bear only external relations to one another: what makes an earlier state one of mine rather than one of yours is that my current fleeting state belongs to a chain that is appropriately causally connected to that earlier state in a way that your current fleeting state is not. On other views, what I have been calling ‘human beings’ are *substances* that are subjects of change: what makes an earlier state one of mine rather than one of yours is that the very substance that I am was previously in that earlier state whereas the very substance that you are was not.

It is sometimes claimed that the divide between substantial and insubstantial views of the self has important metaphysical and moral implications. Thus, for example, it is sometimes claimed that the insubstantial view is less ‘selfish’: there is less that separates our current fleeting states if, rather than belonging to distinct substances, they merely belong to distinct chains of fleeting states. But, of course, whether this is really so depends upon the other metaphysical and moral assumptions that we make. If the primary task for my current state is to do whatever will most conduce to the overall value of the chain of fleeting states of which it is a part, then there is a good sense in which the view is ‘selfish’; the same is true if the primary task for my current state is to do whatever will most conduce to the overall value of the substance of

which it is a state. On the other hand, if the primary task for my current state is to do whatever will conduce most to the overall value of all of the chains of fleeting states that there are, then there is a good sense in which the view is not 'selfish'; the same is true if the primary task for my current state is to do whatever will most conduce to the overall value of all of the substances relevantly like me that there are. As far as I can see, the metaphysics of identity over time *alone* has no direct tie to any significant moral consequences.

How things stand with the metaphysics of the relationship between mind and body is perhaps less clear. On some worldviews, the separability of mind and body – the possibility that my mind might exist in the absence of my body – is essential to the demands of cosmic justice: since it is clear that not everyone gets what he or she deserves in the present life, past and/or future lives are needed if everyone is ultimately to get what he or she deserves. On some – not necessarily distinct – worldviews, the separability of mind and body is essential for personal immortality: since it is pretty clear that no one lives forever in our universe, continuation of existence in some radically disconnected domain is required for personal immortality. Of course, on naturalism, it is not true that everyone gets what he or she deserves, and it is not true that at least some people live forever; on naturalism, some people get away with murder, and most people get not much more than three score and ten years in existence. For some proponents of other worldviews – and perhaps even for some proponents of naturalism – these consequences of naturalism are deplorable. However, the mere fact – if, indeed, it is a fact – that these consequences of naturalism are deplorable should not be mistaken for a reason for supposing that naturalists are mistaken in their views about the relationship between mind and body. It would be the worst kind of wishful thinking to maintain that, because personal immortality and cosmic justice are highly desirable, naturalists must be mistaken in their views about the relationship between mind and body.

Perhaps it is worth noting that at least some naturalists wonder whether personal immortality and cosmic justice *are* desirable. True, at first blush, both sound highly desirable. But, on the one hand, it is far from obvious that we are well equipped to live forever: we have finite memories, finite capacities, finite satiation thresholds, finite boredom thresholds, and so forth. And, on the other hand, it is not entirely

obvious whether a system of cosmic justice would undermine our sense of the significance and importance of some of the ethical and moral decisions that we make: if there is guaranteed cosmic justice, then it seems that there is no point in doing *more* than the minimum that cosmic justice requires.

6

Cause, Freedom and Responsibility

Abstract: *We begin with considerations about causality, chance, and determinism. Next, we turn to consider some questions about agency, freedom, responsibility and fate that are prompted by reflections upon causality, chance and determinism. Finally, we consider arguments against both compatibilism and incompatibilism. We conclude that there is considerable overlap between the range of naturalist opinion and the range of religious opinion on these matters.*

Keywords: agency; cause; chance; compatibilism; determinism; fate; freedom; responsibility; spontaneity; van Inwagen

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We defined ‘naturalism’, in part, as the view that natural causal reality – as it is conceived by naturalists – is all of causal reality. Other worldviews will typically claim that what naturalists take to be purely natural causes have some degree of supernatural entanglement. As we have already noted, some other worldviews claim that there are things of purely supernatural provenance – for example, miracles – that are woven into the web of what naturalists suppose is a network of purely natural causes. More interestingly, some other worldviews claim that everything that the naturalist takes to belong to natural causal reality is supported in its existence by supernatural causes, and that everything that the naturalist takes to happen in natural causal reality happens at least in part as the result of supernatural causes. If there is a conception of natural causal reality that is available on other worldviews, it is very different from the conception of natural causal reality that is held by naturalists.

Suppose that we focus our attention on worldviews that hold that there is a global causal reality: there is a global network of causes to which all causal beings belong. (We set aside worldviews on which there are many completely isolated causal domains, and we set aside worldviews which deny that there are instantiated causal relations. In setting the latter worldviews aside, we do not set aside prominent worldviews amongst the major world religions; in setting the former worldviews aside, we remove certain complexities that figure in many contemporary worldviews, but which are irrelevant to the topics that we are about to investigate.)

When we think about global causal reality, there are two different conceptions of causal relations that might be invoked. On the one hand, we might suppose that causes are *sufficient* for their effects: necessarily, if you have the cause, then you get the effect. On the other hand, we might suppose that causes are *merely sufficient for there being some effect from a given range*; necessarily, if you have the cause, then you get one from a range of possible effects, but there is nothing in the cause that determines which of the effects you actually get. The first view of causes is *deterministic*: causes determine their effects. The second view of causes is *chancy*: causes come with chance distributions of possible effects, and the selection of actual effects from the range of possible effects over which chance distributions range is dependent upon the chance distributions. Of course, in the most general case, you might suppose that global causal reality involves relations of both kinds: some causal relations are deterministic, while other causal relations are chancy.

If we suppose that all causal relations are deterministic, and if we suppose that the initial state of global causal reality is necessary – that is, that the initial state of global causal reality had to obtain with exactly the properties that it actually has – then it follows that every state of global causal reality is necessary – that is, that every state of global causal reality had to obtain with exactly the properties that it actually has. Similarly, if we suppose that all causal relations are deterministic, and we suppose that there is no initial state of global causal reality (because there is an infinite regress of states), and we suppose that some infinite initial segment of global causal reality is necessary, then it follows that every state of global causal reality is necessary. Perhaps you may think that there is something incoherent in the supposition that there can be genuine dependence relations between distinct necessarily existent things. After all, if something is necessary, then it is true no matter what; if it is true no matter what, then it is true independently of anything else. But, even if this line of reasoning is cogent, the view that every state of global reality is necessary would remain on the map: all that would disappear from the picture is the idea that the global states stand in causal relations to one another.

If we suppose that all causal relations are deterministic, but further suppose that the initial state of global causal reality is contingent – either because the properties of that initial state are contingent or because the existence of an initial state is contingent – then it seems reasonable to suppose that all of the states of global causal reality are contingent. Similarly, if we suppose that all causal relations are deterministic, and we suppose that there is no initial state of global causal reality (because there is an infinite regress of states), and we suppose that some state of global causal reality is contingent, then it seems reasonable to suppose that every state of global causal reality is contingent. And, if all of states of global causal reality are contingent, then the worry that we discussed in the previous paragraph clearly does not arise: we do not then have genuine dependence relations between distinct necessarily existent things. So here is a second view that belongs on the map: causation is everywhere deterministic, but everywhere connects contingently obtaining states.

If we suppose that not all causal relations are deterministic, then there is a range of views that we might adopt: there may, or may not, be an initial state of global causal reality; if there is an initial state of global causal reality, it may be necessary or it may be contingent; and there may, or may not, be some causal relations that are deterministic. I shall

suppose that all of this range of views may be subsumed into a single family that belongs on the map: causation is at least somewhere chancy.

Global causal reality includes all causes, and everything that is involved in those causes. So, in particular, all agents belong to global causal reality: all agents are located within the network of causes and effects. While, on some worldviews, some agents – for example, gods – are involved only in causes and never in effects, it is clear that human agents are involved both in causes and effects: human agency is both cause and effect. But, given that human agency is both cause and effect, immediate questions arise about *freedom* and *responsibility*: in particular, if human agency is effect, then is it proper to suppose that human agency is free, and is it proper to suppose that human beings are genuinely responsible for the actions that they perform?

How worldviews respond to these questions depends upon the conception of freedom that they adopt. There are two broadly different conceptions of freedom that may be taken up. On the one hand, according to *compatibilists* – that is, according to those who suppose that freedom is compatible with determinism – freedom is primarily a matter of acting on one’s normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth in the absence of relevant defeating factors: one is not imprisoned against one’s will, brainwashed, under the influence of mind-altering substances, in the grip of certain kinds of mental illnesses, under certain kinds of duress – for example, having a gun to one’s head – and so forth. On the other hand, according to *incompatibilists* – that is, according to those who suppose that freedom is not compatible with determinism – freedom is primarily a matter of having the ability to do something else in the very circumstances in which one acts: holding fixed the causal history that precedes one’s action, it is possible that one does something other than the thing that one actually does.

On the compatibilist view of freedom, freedom is compatible with determinism because it is allowed that one can act freely even if one’s actions are causally determined by one’s normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth. Of course, compatibilists need not suppose that one’s actions ever actually *are* causally determined by one’s normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth: compatibilists might suppose that there is always a chance distribution associated with one’s total internal state that leaves a very small chance that one might have done something else. The key point is that compatibilists do

not suppose that the presence of such a chance distribution is necessary for freedom of action.

On the incompatibilist view of freedom, freedom is incompatible with determinism precisely because, in circumstances in which there is causal determination, holding fixed the causal history that precedes one's action, there is only one thing that it is possible for you to do in those circumstances. Of course, incompatibilists need not suppose that one's actions ever actually are free: incompatibilists may be determinists who hence conclude that no actions – of human or other agents – are free. However, if incompatibilists do suppose that human actions are sometimes free, then they will be *libertarians*: they will suppose that there is sometimes a chance distribution associated with a human being's total internal state that leaves at least some chance that human being might have done something other than what they actually did. (Some philosophers say that there is a special kind of causation – *agent causation* – that is characteristic of agents. According to these philosophers, what is special about agent causation is precisely that the total state of the agent prior to action does not determine what the agent does: there is a certain kind of *spontaneity* that characterizes the behaviour of agents. Since it seems to me that this 'spontaneity' is clearly best thought of in terms of a chance distribution associated with an agent's total internal state, I prefer to avoid what I take to be a needless proliferation of kinds of causation.)

All of the views that we have distinguished make similar claims about the connection between freedom and responsibility. On any view, if you do not act freely in performing a certain action, then – perhaps given the satisfaction of certain further conditions – you are not morally responsible for the consequences of that action. If, for example, you have been brainwashed, or unwittingly drugged, or tortured until you are broken, then all parties agree that you are not morally responsible for the things that you do. However, if you freely perform certain actions that lead to your being in a state in which you are no longer capable of acting freely – say, for example, by consuming a large quantity of alcohol – then at least some parties insist that you are morally responsible for the things that you do: not because you freely chose to do them, but because you freely chose to get yourself into a state in which your capacity to make free decisions was dangerously impaired.

All of the positions that we have distinguished are represented in the worldviews of the major world religions and their competitors.

Some naturalists are determinists and incompatibilists: they maintain that there is no such thing as freedom, and so no such thing as genuine responsibility. Some naturalists are determinists and compatibilists: they maintain that there is freedom and genuine responsibility even though all actions are causally determined. Some naturalists are indeterminists and compatibilists: they maintain that there is freedom and genuine responsibility, that our actions are not causally determined, and that there would still have been freedom and genuine responsibility even if our actions were causally determined. Some naturalists are indeterminists and libertarians: they maintain that there is freedom and genuine responsibility, that our actions are not causally determined, and that there would not have been freedom and genuine responsibility if our actions were causally determined.

All of the positions that are adopted by naturalists are adopted by some adherents of the major world religions, except, perhaps for the combination of determinism and incompatibilism. Some of the branches of the major world religions teach *fate* and *predestination*: every non-initial state of global causal reality is at least causally determined – if not necessary – but agents are, nonetheless, free and genuinely responsible for their actions. Some of the branches of the major world religions teach *openness*: at the very least, the actions of agents are not causally determined, but agents are, nonetheless, free and genuinely responsible for their actions.

Here is a well-known objection to compatibilism (due to Peter van Inwagen). It seems reasonable to accept the following general principle: *if it is not up to an agent X whether or not that A, and it is necessary that if A then B – that is if A entails B – then it is not up to an agent whether or not that B*. Suppose that determinism is true. Then the laws that govern the evolution of the universe, in conjunction with any long distant prior state of the universe entail all of the subsequent states of the universe. Suppose that X performs some action B at some time: perhaps, for example, X mowed his lawn last weekend. It is not up to X what the laws are that govern the evolution of the universe. It is not up to X what were long distant prior states of the universe. But, since the laws that govern the evolution of the universe, in conjunction with any long distant prior state of the universe entail all of the subsequent states of the universe, the laws that govern the evolution of the universe, in conjunction with some long distant prior state of the universe entail that X mowed his lawn last weekend. Whence, by the plausible general principle, it was

not up to X whether or not to mow the lawn last weekend. But if it was not up to X whether or not to mow the lawn last weekend, then surely X did not freely mow his lawn last weekend. And, of course, our argument is perfectly general: for any action B that X performs, a similar chain of inference establishes that it was not up to X whether or not to perform B; and, for any agent other than X – who is subject to the laws and downstream from long distant prior states – for any action that that other agent performs, a similar chain of inferences establishes that it was not up to that agent whether or not to perform that action. In short: if determinism is true, no one ever acts freely.

I think that compatibilists should make the following response to this argument. The general principle is not acceptable to compatibilists. If X mowed his lawn last weekend, acting on his normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth in the absence of relevant defeating conditions, then X acted freely when he did so. Moreover, if X acted freely when he mowed his lawn last weekend, then it was up to him that he mowed, that is ‘whether or not he mowed’: his mowing was a consequence of his having the normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth that he had in the absence of relevant defeating conditions. Since, however, neither the laws governing the evolution of the universe nor long distant prior states of the universe are consequences of X’s having normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth in the absence of relevant defeating conditions, it is true that neither the laws governing the evolution of the universe nor long distant states of the universe were, or are, up to X. But the conjunction of the laws governing the evolution of the universe and any long distant state of the universe entail that X mowed his lawn last weekend. So we have a *counterexample* to the general principle: by compatibilist lights, the principle is evidently false.

Here is a well-known objection to libertarianism. It seems reasonable to suppose that what we care about when we insist on the importance of freedom of action is that our actions should be *our* actions: we act freely when *we* are responsible for what we do. That an action is produced by my normally acquired beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth in the absence of relevant defeating conditions seems to be exactly what is required to make my actions *mine*: they are caused by *my* beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth in the right kinds of external circumstances. Weakening the connections between my beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth, and my actions – making the connections chancy rather than

necessary – surely threatens to undermine the reasons that I have for saying that my actions are truly *mine*: for, to the extent that chance has a role, there is something external, something beyond my control, that sits between my beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth, and the actions that I perform.

I think that libertarians might make the following response to this argument. Perhaps we can grant that there is some sense in which, to the extent that chance has a role, there is something external, something beyond my control, that sits between my beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth, and the actions that I perform. But it is quite unclear why we should be more worried about this than we are about the fact that, even though my beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth have been ‘normally acquired’, nonetheless, the acquisition of those beliefs, desires, intentions, and so forth, was also subject to chance, or to things external, or to things beyond my control. When we try to think about what it would take to make my beliefs, desires, intentions and so forth truly *mine*, the force of the objection to libertarianism seems to weaken – or so, at least, one might think.

There are, of course, many other considerations for and against compatibilism and libertarianism: disputes about freedom and determinism figure amongst the perennial philosophical debates. However, setting aside the thought that there might be considerations that resolve those perennial philosophical debates to the satisfaction of all, I conclude with the observation that while there is only limited overlap between the range of naturalist opinion and the range of religious opinion in debates about mind, body and identity, there is very considerable overlap between the range of naturalist opinion and the range of religious opinion on questions about cause, freedom and responsibility.

Part III

Ethics

Philosophy of religion generates a range of distinctive ethical questions. There are questions about the role that religion can – or must – play in human flourishing: perhaps, for example, only the religious can be truly virtuous, or truly happy, or truly good. There are also questions about the way in which religion divides humanity into ‘in-groups’ and ‘out-groups’: perhaps, for example, religion leads more or less inevitably to distrust, intolerance, oppression and violence. And there are big questions about purpose and the meaning of life: perhaps, for example, only the religious can lead truly meaningful lives because only the religious suppose that there is a meaning to life and the universe.

7

Flourishing, Virtue and Happiness

Abstract: Our main topic is the connection between religion and human flourishing. We begin with Aristotle's account of flourishing, and consider ways in which it might be adjusted. We then argue that, while the relationship between worldview and flourishing is complicated, there are no compelling reasons for supposing that religious worldviews are more conducive than naturalistic worldviews to flourishing, and there are no compelling reasons for supposing that naturalistic worldviews are more conducive than religious worldviews to flourishing.

Keywords: Aristotle; demographic data; flourishing; stereotypical thinking; Strawson; virtue

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Our definition of religion provides the following picture: religious worldviews stand in mutually reinforcing relationships both with passionate, hard-to-fake, communal displays of costly commitments and with mastering of people's existential anxieties. Holding a religious worldview provides a mechanism for mastering existential anxieties about death, deception, disease, catastrophe, pain, loneliness, injustice, want, loss, and so forth, and provision of a satisfying mechanism for mastering existential anxieties generates motivation for holding a religious worldview. Moreover, holding a religious worldview provides motivation to engage in passionate, hard-to-fake communal displays of costly commitments, and engaging in passionate, hard-to-fake communal displays of costly commitments underwrites continued acceptance of a religious worldview. Finally, holding a religious worldview goes along with participation in ritualized, rhythmic, sensory coordination of these mutually reinforcing relationships in communion, congregation, intimate fellowship, and so forth.

Religions differ in the significance that they attribute to public affirmations of creedal formulations of (central aspects of) their worldviews. In some religions – for example, Christianity – public affirmation of creedal formulations is very important: in these religions, public affirmation of the truth of these creedal formulations is taken to be a central marker of religious commitment. In other religions – for example, Hinduism – little or no significance is attached to public affirmation of creedal formulations of (central aspects of) their worldviews: acceptance of the worldview is implicit in the rites and rituals of the religion, and it is participation in those rites and rituals that is taken to be of paramount importance. Nonetheless, in all religions, there is a complex interaction between direct mastery of existential anxiety by way of acceptance of worldview and indirect mastery of existential anxiety by way of participation in communion, congregation and intimate fellowship.

There are several different perspectives from which to examine the question of the ways in which religion is connected to individual human *flourishing*, or to the lack thereof. First, of course, there is the internal perspective of the adherent of a given religious worldview. Religious worldviews always include accounts of what human flourishing consists in; religious worldviews always contain at least implicit accounts of the good life for human beings. Second, there is the external perspective of the (social) scientist: sociologists, psychologists, demographers and others collect data – and produce theories – that should be taken into

account in any attempt to relate religion to individual human flourishing. Third, there is the perspective of the philosopher: at least since the time of the ancient Greeks, philosophers have tried to give accounts of the nature of, and the requirements for, human flourishing.

According to Aristotle (384–322 BCE), a flourishing human being belongs to a community that attempts to provide for the flourishing of its members. On his account, a human being flourishes just to the extent that that person exercises *virtue*. In particular, he says, a flourishing person has genuine friends and, in the pursuit of worthwhile ends, acts with – among other things – wit, wisdom, patience, courage, self-control, magnanimity, justice, liberality, sincerity, amiability and munificence. Finally, a flourishing human being is not subject to certain kinds of hardships: a flourishing human being is not poor, or sick, or bereaved, or the like.

Other ancient and medieval accounts of human flourishing – for example, those provided by Confucius, Buddha, and the Hindu sages – run along broadly similar lines. While there was disagreement about what exactly should be on the list of the virtues – for example, Aquinas adds hope, faith and charity to the list – the broad contours of the Aristotelian account continued to be – and still continues to be – widely accepted. However, there are at least two ways in which Aristotle's account can be questioned.

First, even in ancient times, some philosophers – such as, Plato and the Stoics – maintained that flourishing is primarily a matter of self-control, and so independent of misfortune, and other philosophers – such as, the Epicureans – maintained that flourishing is primarily concerned with the obtaining of modest pleasure and the avoidance of pain. For these philosophers, Aristotle either overestimated or underestimated the significance of subjection to hardships for human flourishing, and this remains a contentious question for contemporary accounts of human flourishing.

Second, some philosophers have denied that there is a unified conception of human flourishing that captures all of the ideals of human flourishing that we might seriously approve. Aristotle supposes that human flourishing requires exercise of all of the virtues, but we might prefer to think that there are different modes of human flourishing that require exercise of different subsets of the things that we ought to regard as virtues. Following Strawson (1919–2006), we can note the variety among, and opposition between, ways of life that can present themselves

to people as uniquely satisfactory: self-obliterating devotion to duty or the service of others; personal honour and magnanimity; asceticism, contemplation and retreat; action, dominance and power; cultivation of an exquisite sense of the luxurious; human solidarity and cooperative endeavour; refined complexity of social existence; constantly maintained and renewed sense of affinity with natural things; and so forth.

In the light of this second kind of objection, perhaps the best we can do is to provide a set of rules of thumb that apply to human flourishing. By and large, flourishing people are engaged in worthwhile pursuits, and are recognized by other people as being engaged in worthwhile pursuits. By and large, flourishing people belong to communities of flourishing people, and have meaningful relationships with people in those networks. By and large, flourishing people have appropriate emotional responses to themselves and to others. By and large, the behaviour of flourishing people is both virtuous and morally appropriate. By and large, flourishing people do not have fantastic – wildly irrational – ideas about themselves and the world in which they live. By and large, flourishing people do not engage in self-destructive behaviour and excessive risk-taking. By and large, loneliness, stress, low self-esteem, lack of self-control, ignorance and poverty all count against flourishing.

Given these rules of thumb, we can see that there are some aspects of human flourishing to which religion – or lack of religion – is largely irrelevant. Both the religious and the non-religious can engage in worthwhile pursuits, belong to communities of flourishing people and have meaningful relationships with people in those communities, behave in ways that are both virtuous and morally appropriate, and so forth. Of course, it may be that the religious belong to *religious* communities of flourishing people and have meaningful relationships with people in those communities – but it is belonging to community that is essential to these aspects of flourishing, not the religious nature of the community.

The claims that I have just made are sometimes denied. Some religious people claim that the non-religious, and even those who belong to other religions, are incapable of flourishing. Perhaps, for example, they may claim that those *other* people are wicked, or immoral, or lacking in virtue, or irrational, or ignorant, or lacking in self-control, or self-destructive, and so forth. Similarly, some non-religious people claim that the religious are incapable of flourishing. Perhaps, for example, they may claim that those *other* people are ignorant, or irrational, or immoral, or lacking

in self-esteem, or undone by poverty and loneliness, or lacking in virtue, and so forth.

I think that there is abundant evidence that counts very strongly against the kinds of claims mentioned in the preceding paragraph. I think, too, that it is obvious on its face that flourishing – along with happiness, and wisdom, and self-control, and virtue, and self-esteem, and moral propriety, and intelligence, and so forth – is distributed pretty uniformly over the sub-populations that are of interest to us. Fortune and misfortune, success and failure, happiness and misery, fall upon the religious and the non-religious alike. However, if you don't find this obvious on its face, then I invite you to consider the following line of thought.

There is extensive demographic data that is collected in national censuses and similar instruments the world over, and that is analysed to very small levels of population: counties, suburbs, postcodes, and the like. This data tells us where there are concentrations of people who belong to particular religions, or particular denominations of particular religions, or to no religion. Moreover, this data tells us about how, *on average*, people's lives go: divorce rates, teen pregnancy rates, rates of alcohol and drug dependency, murder rates, assault rates, rape rates, burglary rates, child sexual abuse rates, copyright violation rates, suicide rates, rates of obesity, rates of mental illness, rates of fatal motor vehicle accidents, income levels, levels of educational attainment, life expectancy, and on and on. Scrutiny of this data – and in particular, cross-checking of data that reveals societal dysfunction against data that indicates concentration of religiosity of one or another kind – confirms the claims that I made in the preceding paragraph: there is largely no correlation at all between religiosity and societal dysfunction within nations, or across nations of broadly similar economic standing. True enough, there are *some* apparent correlations: religious belief appears to be positively correlated with higher self-reported levels of happiness, with a greater propensity to make donations (in particular to religious organizations), and with some kinds of improved health outcomes; absence of religious belief appears to be positively correlated with higher levels of intelligence, income and educational attainment, and with lower levels of incarceration. But, overwhelmingly, on matters that are clearly connected to human flourishing – divorce rates, murder rates, rape rates, rates of alcohol and drug dependency, child sexual abuse rates, rates of obesity, suicide rates, rates of mental illness, and so forth – there is no demonstrable statistically significant correlation with broadly religious affiliation, or with particular denominational affiliation.

Even if it is accepted that there are some aspects of human flourishing to which religion – or lack of religion – is largely irrelevant, there are clearly other aspects of human flourishing that have a more complex relationship with religion. On the one hand, it is clear that religions and religious institutions *can* make positive contributions to some aspects of human flourishing; on the other hand, there is room for debate about whether religions and religious institutions more frequently make negative contributions to some aspects of human flourishing.

As we have already had occasion to note, recognition of engagement in worthwhile pursuit, belonging to communities of flourishing people, having meaningful relationships with other flourishing people, and not falling prey to loneliness, lack of self-control, excessive risk-taking and self-destructive behaviour are all, by and large, elements of a flourishing life. Since most of these things depend upon belonging to, and participating in, human communities, most of these things can be found in belonging to, and participating in, *religious* communities. Moreover, for some people, there may be no other communities open to them – and, in those cases, there is a sense in which religious communities become essential to their flourishing. However, in all of these kinds of cases, there is no reason to suppose that it is the *religious* nature of the community that is essential to the human flourishing that it underwrites: the same goods are available to, and taken advantage of by, those who belong to non-religious communities.

Other aspects of human flourishing seem amenable to similar treatment: engagement in worthwhile pursuits, raising of self-esteem, overcoming of poverty and ignorance, promotion of appropriate emotional responses to self and others, and overcoming of wildly irrational ideas are further elements of human flourishing that *can* be found through participation in religious communities. In these cases, too, there is no reason to suppose that the religious nature of the community is essential to the human flourishing that is underwritten: the same benefits are available to, and taken advantage of by, those who belong to non-religious communities. Religious communities offer opportunities for participation in both religious and secular organizations, and either kind of participation can support worthwhile pursuits, contribute to raised self-esteem, and so forth.

Of course, there are some irreligionists who deny part of what I have written in the preceding couple of paragraphs. In their view, because participation in religion is not in itself a worthwhile activity – perhaps, even more

strongly, because participation in religion is participation in something that is intrinsically bad or pernicious – participation in religious organizations cannot contribute to human flourishing. Those who suppose that properly religious ideas are, *ipso facto*, wildly irrational, and those who suppose that religion is one of the principal causes of poverty, ignorance, and other deplorable features of the human condition, will insist that what looks like flourishing in religious communities is really only *faux* flourishing. Aristotle himself thought that genuine flourishing required that one not have wildly *false* beliefs about oneself and the world in which one lives; if one takes seriously the idea that most religious worldviews are pretty wildly false, then agreeing with Aristotle on this requirement for flourishing would seem to rule out genuine flourishing in most religious communities.

I think that we should just reject Aristotle's suggestion that one cannot flourish if one has wildly false beliefs about oneself and the world in which one lives. Perhaps it is true that flourishing is inconsistent with having certain kinds of wildly false beliefs about oneself and the world in which one lives, but, given that we are going to count false religious beliefs as wildly false, it seems to me more plausible to conclude that flourishing is consistent with the possession of at least some kinds of wildly false beliefs. Beyond this, I think that we should just deny the further claims of the irreligionists adverted to in the preceding paragraph. It just isn't true that properly religious ideas are, *ipso facto*, wildly irrational; it just isn't so that religion is one of the *principal* causes of poverty, ignorance, and other deplorable features of the human condition. Of course, it is true that, *sometimes*, religions do make significant contributions to poverty, ignorance, and other deplorable features of the human condition, but it seems to me to be utterly misguided to suppose that the mere disappearance of religion from our planet would bring about dramatic improvements in connection with poverty, ignorance, and those other deplorable features of the human condition.

Some people think that a disposition towards religious belief is written into human nature: human beings are naturally disposed towards religious belief and religious practice. Going further, some people think that a disposition towards religious belief is written into our biological evolutionary heritage. Other people think that a disposition towards ethical belief is written into human nature: human beings are naturally disposed towards ethical belief and ethical practice. Going further, some people think that a disposition towards ethical belief is written into our biological evolutionary heritage.

These claims strike me as both incautious and improbable. The cash value of claims about 'human nature' is not exactly clear. Moreover, while it is true enough that religion and ethics are more or less universal in human societies, it is not clear what role evolved cognitive structures play in the explanation of this universality. Rather than postulate dedicated, selected cognitive structures that subserve our religious and ethical behaviour, it seems to me to be more plausible to suppose that religious and ethical behaviours are supported by cognitive structures that originally evolved to serve other purposes, and to suppose that much of the explanation of our religious and ethical behaviour is cultural rather than biological.

Of course, even if these speculations are accurate – that is, even if religion and ethics are primarily cultural products that have contributed to the long-term survival of human societies – it does not follow that religion and ethics are good for us. In particular, even if it turns out that religion is a cultural product that has contributed to the long-term survival of human societies, it may, nonetheless, be true that religion now does more harm than good. We may look to our biological and cultural evolutionary heritage for constraints upon the kinds of lives that can be led by flourishing human beings, but we should not expect to be able to read off a recipe for human flourishing from our biological and cultural evolutionary heritage.

Some people think that there is a close connection between religious beliefs and ethical beliefs: in some sense, ethical beliefs have their foundation in religious beliefs; but for the religions of the world, people would have no ethics. There are various reasons for thinking that this is improbable. First, there is very significant convergence in the ethical and moral codes that people have adopted: the similarities between the ethical and moral codes adopted by diverse human societies vastly outweigh the differences. For instance, all human societies repudiate murder, rape, theft, cheating, lies, and so forth, and all human societies encourage treating others as one would have oneself treated. Second, as we noted above, there is more or less no detectable ethical or moral difference between those who have religion and those who do not have religion in contemporary societies, at least according to measures of societal dysfunction and the like. While some religious believers are wont to declare that their religious beliefs are all that stand between them and lives of license and debauchery, the evidence suggests that these claims are products of ignorance or self-deception, except in those

rare cases where the religious believers in question actually are psychopaths – for the evidence concerning religiosity and societal dysfunction suggests that unbelievers are no more likely to go in for lives of license and debauchery than are believers. Third, there is the evidence of several thousand years of ethical philosophy by philosophers who belong to no religion: the explicit ethical and moral codes of non-religious philosophers have often been superior to the explicit ethical and moral codes of their religious contemporaries. There have been many important ethical and moral advances – abolition of slavery, abolition of child labour, fixed working week, universal suffrage, opposition to unjust wars, recognition of the equal rights of women, repudiation of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, advancement of the rights of non-human animals, and so forth – for which non-religious philosophers were in the vanguard. Fourth, there is evidence that some primitive tit-for-tat morality is innate: even very young babies approve of the punishment of those who fail to cooperate with others where cooperation would be to the benefit of all and everyone else is cooperating. Of course, this innate tit-for-tat morality falls short of the more sophisticated ethical and moral behaviour of socialized adults; the point is that it is hard to see how, given these facts about very young babies, human beings could collectively fail to have any ethics or morality at all.

Despite the readily available considerations advanced in this chapter, it is doubtless the case that many non-believers will continue to insist that believers are incapable of full human flourishing, and that many believers will continue to insist that non-believers are incapable of full human flourishing. Setting all other considerations aside, part of the explanation of this is the role that stereotypes play in our thinking. If – as is the case for many non-believers – your stereotypes of religious people are suicide bombers, corrupt televangelists and paedophile priests, it is understandable why you might think that religious people are incapable of full human flourishing. If – as is the case for many believers – your stereotypes of non-religious people are communist tyrants, condescending intellectuals and debauched hedonists, it is understandable why you might think that non-religious people are incapable of full human flourishing. But, on both sides, the flaw is the same: most people simply do not fit the stereotypes into which stereotypical thinking casts them.

8

Trust, Violence and Power

Abstract: *We begin with an observation of the divisive in-group/out-group structure of religion. We go on to consider some of the complex relations that hold between religious worldviews and violence, oppression, intolerance, and mistrust. Next, we consider the significance of secular government and the separation of the state and religious institutions. Finally, we conclude with some observations about offence, freedom of expression, and freedom of opinion.*

Keywords: division; intolerance; offence; power; trust; violence

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One of the most obvious features of religion is that it *divides* people. In religions, there are *in-groups* and *out-groups*: the in-groups are those who belong to the religions in question – or, if matters of denomination are relevant, to the denominations of the religions in question, and the out-groups are those who belong to no religion and those who belong to other religions – or, if matters of denomination are relevant, to other denominations of the religions in question. Where people belong to different religions – or to different denominations within a single religion – they have different worldviews that stand in mutually reinforcing relationships to different ways of mastering existential anxieties, different kinds of passionate, hard-to-fake, communal displays of costly commitments, and different kinds of communion, congregation and intimate fellowship.

Of course, it is not only religious worldviews that divide people in these ways. Some – but not all – non-religious worldviews are also in the business of mastering existential anxieties and demanding participation in passionate and hard-to-fake communal displays of costly commitments – consider, for example, the history of fascism in Germany and Italy, and the history of communism in the Soviet Union and its satellites. What distinguishes religious worldviews from these otherwise similar non-religious worldviews is that religious worldviews require costly commitments to *supernatural agents* and/or in aid of the overcoming of and escape from *supernatural structures*, whereas the otherwise similar non-religious worldviews require passionate, hard-to-fake, communal displays of more or less costly commitments to particular *secular states*, or particular *secular populations*, or particular *imagined secular futures*, or the like.

Where in-group/out-group distinctions are connected to different ways of mastering existential anxieties, different kinds of passionate, hard-to-fake communal displays of costly commitments, and different kinds of communion, congregation and intimate fellowship, there are various possible consequences.

First, because of the things to which the in-group/out-group distinctions are tied, it may be that the *mere existence* of the distinctions contributes towards social conflict and social disharmony. In particular, given that the commitments are *costly*, and the displays are *communal*, there is room for argument over allocation of scarce communal resources to these costly communal commitments, and there is perhaps also reason for concern that the example of those who are not prepared to make

certain kinds of costly commitments will undermine the motivation of those who would otherwise be prepared to share in those costly commitments. Moreover, in view of the social role assigned to the mastery of existential anxieties, arguments about these kinds of considerations clearly have the potential to become acrimonious.

Second, given the just noted ways in which arguments over scarce communal resources can be perceived as direct threats to given 'in-groups', it may be the case that certain kinds of *senses of entitlement* are underwritten by the worldviews associated with those 'in-groups'. In particular, the worldview of a particular 'in-group' may well provide for aggressive action against perceived threats to its own mandated costly communal displays, and so on. If, as suggested above, mere refusal to take on certain kinds of costly commitments can be viewed as a direct threat, then it seems predictable that conflict between groups with different costly commitments will often be not too far away – and it also seems that, once antagonism between such groups has arisen, it may not be easy to keep it in check.

Third, depending upon the details of the mastery of existential anxieties, and so on, it may be that, in some cases, it is part of a worldview that all people ought to be brought to subscribe to that worldview, and that various kinds of more or less aggressive practices are mandated in pursuit of the goal of bringing all to subscribe to the worldview. Here, the point is not just the relatively trivial observation that, if you hold a given worldview, you will think that other people ought to agree with you, because belief aims at truth and you would not hold your worldview unless you thought it was true. Rather, the point is that, on some worldviews, there is going to be active intolerance of disagreement – perhaps even to the point of trying to wipe out those who will not consent to taking on the worldview in question.

When we consider the history of relationships between human groups with diverse religious and secular worldviews, we plausibly discern all of the things just noted. It is beyond doubt that, throughout history, religions have been intimately connected to violence, oppression, intolerance, and mistrust. For example, religion and religious belief were significantly implicated in the Judaeo-Roman Wars, the Islamic wars of expansion, the Christian Crusades, the European Wars of Religion, the Taiping Rebellion, post-partition conflict in the Punjab, the breakup of Yugoslavia, and numerous other cases. And religion and religious belief are significantly implicated in contemporary African conflicts in Nigeria,

Sudan and Ethiopia; contemporary Asian conflicts in Sri Lanka and East Timor; contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts in Palestine, Iran and Iraq; contemporary Near Eastern conflicts in Chechnya, Armenia and Azerbaijan; and many other cases as well. Religion and religious belief have also been significantly implicated in human sacrifice (in most parts of the ancient world), torture and execution (as in the Inquisition), group suicides (as in Heaven's Gate and Jonestown), urban terrorism (as in the Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, and the bombing of abortion clinics), self-immolations, suicide bombings, and so forth. Less dramatically, religion and religious belief are significantly involved in mutual distrust between sub-groups in contemporary societies: for example, recent studies at the University of Minnesota (2010) and the University of British Columbia (2012) show that those who reject the supernatural elements of religious worldviews are the least liked – because they are the least trusted – people anywhere in the world where there is a religious majority.

Of course, discerning the precise involvement of religion in actual cases of violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust is not straightforward. Conflicts between human groups are often tangles of social, economic, political and historical factors; religious considerations may turn out to be more rationalization than rationale. Moreover, when religion does play a significant role in violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust, it may be hard to tell whether the violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust are uncontroversially sanctioned by religious worldview; or, at best, controversially sanctioned by religious worldview; or sanctioned by religious worldview only if the facts of external threat and external aggression are appropriately disposed; or not sanctioned by religious worldview but, nonetheless, supported by other elements of religion, such as religious institutional authority; or merely convergence of opinion amongst the broad body of believers for reasons that are at best only tenuously connected to religious worldview.

Questions about whether violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust are sanctioned by religious worldviews are tricky quite apart from application to particular cases. In the texts of most of the major world religions, there are both *denunciations* of violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust and *exhortations* to violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust. Moreover, for most of the major world religions, there are no straightforward interpretative principles that privilege denunciations of violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust above

exhortations to violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust: it is not, for example, that exhortations to violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust are older, and so plausibly trumped by more recent denunciations of violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust; nor is it the case that only exhortations to violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust are constrained by contextual factors that would give them merely local historical significance. Further compounding these difficulties, in many of the texts of the major world religions, there is no straightforward way of determining the content of many denunciations and exhortations: on the one hand, it is not clear whether they are directed only at 'in-group' members, and, on the other hand, it is not clear whether their content extends only as far as 'in-group' members. (Does the obligation to look after one's neighbours extend only to members of the 'in-group'? Do only members of the 'in-group' count as one's neighbours?)

It is simply a fact of history that the very same religions that proclaim themselves to be proponents of peace, tolerance and trust have sometimes been systematically engaged in, and have sometimes officially supported, violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust. Moreover, this is not merely a fact of *history*: these same religions continue to be, at least on occasion, systematically engaged in, and officially supportive of, violence, oppression, intolerance and mistrust – while, at all times, also being systematically engaged in, and officially supportive of, efforts to oppose violence, and to promote tolerance and trust. There is nothing paradoxical about this. Religious institutions depend upon 'in-group' loyalty for their survival, and consequently act in what is – perhaps mistakenly – taken to be the interests of the 'in-group'. But, at least on occasion, such action turns out to be entangled in violence towards, and oppression, intolerance and mistrust of, 'out-groups' even though the 'in-group' message is all about peace, tolerance and trust.

Despite the history of violence, oppression, intolerance and mutual mistrust between religious groups, there are now – and have been even in the quite distant past – some parts of the world that maintain stable societies in which a variety of religious groups live more or less harmoniously. In particular, there are many contemporary societies with secular governments that act in ways that, by and large, do not favour particular religions above others and that, by and large, do not favour those who have religion above those who do not have religion (or vice versa).

Rationale for this kind of political arrangement – that is, for having secular government that, by and large, does not favour particular religions

above other religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa) – is not hard to find. There is ample historical evidence that, in the absence of secular government that acts in ways that, by and large, do not favour particular religions above other religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa), religious differences are drivers of mistrust, intolerance, oppression and violence. In cases where religious difference is stably absent, the rationale for having secular government that, by and large, does not favour particular religions above other religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa) lapses: but, in the twenty-first century, there are no parts of the world from which religious difference is stably absent. And, in cases where religious difference is not stably absent, the genuine threat of mistrust, intolerance, oppression and violence driven by religious difference is sufficient justification for having secular government that, by and large, does not favour particular religions above other religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa).

It is perhaps worth noting that, in many actual cases, it is only *by and large* that secular government does not favour particular religions above other religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa). For example, in the UK, in the House of Lords, in a total of 760 seats, there are 26 bishop seats. In practice, the votes of the bishops rarely make a difference: the 26 bishop seats are primarily a symbolic reminder of an earlier time when the Anglican Church had genuine political power. And, of course, many other European nations also have vestigial State Churches: in practice, these Churches have very little political power, and, by and large, in these nations, there is secular government that does not favour particular religions above other religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa).

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States declares that *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*. While the interpretation of the First Amendment is not entirely straightforward, it has come to be taken to entail, at least, that Congress may not be co-opted to carry the messages of, or otherwise differentially advance the interests of, particular religions or religious denominations. In at least this sense, the First Amendment enforces a *separation of Church and State*: given the First Amendment, there cannot be an analogue of the Anglican Church in the United States.

Given that the primary motivation, for having secular government that, by and large, does not favour particular religions above other

religions, or religion above irreligion (and vice versa), is to ameliorate the threat of mistrust, intolerance, oppression and violence driven by religious difference, it is to be expected that secular government should also take an interest in other ways in which religious difference may increase the likelihood of mistrust, intolerance, oppression and violence. In particular, if certain kinds of public religious speech and public religious practice are likely to lead to mistrust, intolerance, oppression and violence, then questions arise about whether and how government might choose to regulate those kinds of public religious speech and public religious practice.

There are complicated issues here. On the one hand, the pressure for regulation increases with the severity of the likely response: the threat of serious violence might warrant regulation that the threat of relatively minor intolerance would not. On the other hand, the appropriateness of responding with mistrust, intolerance, oppression or violence is also important: if the speech or practice in no way merits these responses, then it seems implausible to suppose that *it* requires regulation. Moreover, there are other significant goods – including freedom of public expression and freedom of public practice – that also need to be taken into account. All else being equal, we think that freedom of public expression and freedom of public practice should be untrammelled; all else being equal, people should be free to say and do as they wish in the public sphere. A plausible principle that perhaps captures the underlying thought here is something like this: that *each* has a right to the maximum amount of freedom of public expression and public practice that is consistent both with granting that same amount of freedom of public expression and public practice to *all*, and with making similar grants in respect of all of the other rights that everyone has.

Suppose that some *properly* find the public religious speech and public religious practice of others *offensive*. Could this be a good reason for government to regulate that public religious speech and public religious practice? First, taking offence is the kind of thing that we all expect to experience with reasonable frequency in the course of our lives: it seems implausible to suppose that offence taken should even license threat of minor intolerance, let alone threat of serious violence. Second, this remains true even of cases in which offence is properly taken: it seems implausible to suppose that offence properly taken should even license threat of minor intolerance, let alone threat of serious violence. Third, there may be good reasons for supposing that freedom of public

expression and freedom of public practice should not be limited by considerations of non-personal offence. Granted, there is an obvious role for laws of slander and libel that regulate the giving of personal offence: a person's social reputation can be destroyed by offensive public accusations. But, in those venues that are proper forums for the public exchange of opinion, there is value in the airing of non-personal opinions offensive to the sensibilities of some: for opinions are hardly likely to change if they are not exposed to examination and criticism, whence it is actually in the interests of those who find the opinions offensive to have them aired. Fourth, even if government does have an interest in reducing or eliminating certain kinds of offence given and taken in public debate, it seems unlikely that regulation – that is, legislation – is the best means for government to pursue this end. Far more is likely to be achieved through, for example, cooperative modelling by educators and relevant public figures – religious leaders, talk show hosts, and the like.

Imagine, for example, that the leading local figures of some major religions, in the course of appearances on public television, make remarks that properly cause offence to a particular group in society: career women, or homosexuals, or members of some other religion, or apostates, or non-believers, or the like. Suppose, further, that the remarks in question are drawn verbatim from the central religious texts of those religions. In this case, it seems to me, the remarks of the religious leaders clearly invite criticism of various kinds: the authority of the texts is highly doubtful, their interpretation of those texts is far from mandatory, their motives for making such remarks on this particular occasion are highly questionable, and so forth. Moreover, if, in the face of these kinds of criticisms, the religious leaders claim to take offence, it will be perfectly appropriate to point out to them that their offence is not properly taken because their claim to offence is in violation of the principle that *each* has a right to the maximum amount of freedom of public expression and public practice that is consistent both with granting that same amount of freedom of public expression and public practice to *all*, and with making similar grants in respect of all of the other rights that everyone has. However, despite these observations, it seems clear to me that none of the targets of the remarks of the religious leaders should want a legislation that outlaws the making of such remarks by religious leaders (and the making of the kinds of responses that are properly made to such remarks on the part of those targeted by them): all should agree

that, all things considered, it is better that the opinions of the religious leaders are opened to public scrutiny and public criticism.

Some critics of religion claim that there is no proper place for religion in public life: in effect, religious opinion should play no role in public debate and deliberation. I think that this position is indefensible. Sure, if you hold a non-religious worldview, you will think that policy grounded in merely religious considerations is likely to be misguided, or worse. But, as a proponent of one worldview among many, you have to accept that political processes won't always deliver the outcomes that your worldview approves. The requirement that, by and large, government does not favour particular worldviews above others would be breached if government sought to exclude religious viewpoints from public life. However – contrary to the strident claims of some proponents of particular religious worldviews – it is not, in fact, the case that contemporary Western governments do seek to exclude religious viewpoints from public debate. Where there is properly secular government, even widespread religious opinions simply compete on an equal footing with other opinions, and – perhaps in contrast to ages past – are often subject to political defeat.

9

Meaning, Understanding and Narrative

► *Abstract: Many people have claimed that, on naturalistic worldviews, life is meaningless. Here, we consider six different ways in which naturalistic worldviews might be thought to entail that life is meaningless, and argue that none can be sustained. We then argue that, even if all of the six different considerations are added together, it still remains that they fail to establish that naturalistic worldviews entail that life is meaningless. We conclude with some speculations about ways in which religious belief may make life less meaningful than it would otherwise be.*

Keywords: afterlife; annihilation; meaning; melodrama; understanding

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One of the principal advantages that religious believers claim for religious worldviews is that, without commitment to a religious worldview, life is *meaningless*. Of course, the point here need not be to claim that this consideration about meaning provides a doxastic *reason* to accept one or another religious worldview: at the very least, to proceed in that way would be to fall prey to a pernicious kind of wishful thinking. Rather, the point is merely to observe that there is something unlivable, or, at the very least, highly unattractive about non-religious worldviews, and, in particular, about naturalistic worldviews. In fact, there are *many* different ways in which naturalistic worldviews might be thought to be unlivable or unattractive in virtue of considerations about meaning; it will repay our efforts to try to disentangle these different dimensions of *meaningfulness*.

A first thought is that those who do not have religious worldviews lead meaningless lives because they are incapable of human flourishing. We only need to recall our earlier discussion of the Aristotelian good life to see how implausible this is. It is about as obvious as anything can be that those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – enter into meaningful familial relationships and meaningful friendships, can – and do – perform meaningful exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, can – and do – engage in intrinsically rewarding meaningful individual and collective pursuits, and so forth. It is about as obvious as anything can be that some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in self-obliterating devotion to duty and the service of others; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in personal honour and magnanimity; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in asceticism, contemplation and retreat; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in action, dominance and power; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in cultivation of an exquisite sense of the luxurious; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in human solidarity and cooperative endeavour; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in the refined complexity of social existence; and some of those who do not have religious worldviews can – and do – find meaning in a constantly maintained and renewed sense of affinity with natural things; and so on. Moreover, it is hardly any less obvious that there is no general difference between the capacity of

those who have religious worldviews and those who do not have religious worldviews to find these kinds of meaning: to have familial relationships and friendships, to perform exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, to engage in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so forth. Recall the data about societal dysfunction: if those who do not have religious worldviews were unable to sustain familial relationships and friendships, and unable to perform exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, and unable to engage in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, then it seems undeniable that these failings would register clearly in the data concerning societal dysfunction – there would, for example, be much higher rates of depression amongst those who do not have religious worldviews than amongst those who do have religious worldviews – yet there is no such clear registration of these failings in that data. To the extent that we think that meaning can be found in something like the Aristotelian good life, we have no reason at all to suppose that those who do not have religious worldviews are somehow cut off from this kind of meaning.

A second thought is that those who do not have religious worldviews do not – and cannot – have available to them a conception of meaning and purpose on which their lives are imbued with meaning and purpose. However, we need to only look back to our discussion in the previous paragraph to see how implausible this is. Those who do not have religious worldviews can certainly accept the story that Aristotle tells about the good life: they can believe that, by and large, meaning is to be sought and found in such things as familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on. Moreover, those who do not have religious worldviews can also maintain, with considerable plausibility, that, if you do not – and cannot – find meaning in such things as familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on, then you will not – and cannot – find meaning anywhere else. Depression is a paradigmatic case in which people find that their existence is devoid of meaning. But we all know that the absence of familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on – and the presence of loneliness, stress, low self-esteem, lack of self-control, ignorance, self-destructive behaviour, excessive risk-taking, and

wildly irrational ideas about self and world, and so forth – are markers of depression, and hence of absence of meaning in people's lives. Those who do not have religious worldviews clearly can – and do – have available to them conceptions of meaning and purpose on which their lives are imbued with meaning and purpose.

A third thought is that those who do not have religious worldviews are obliged to suppose that their lives are meaningless because they are obliged to think that, eventually, more or less everything disappears without trace. If naturalists are right, then, at the very least, it is highly likely that, in the far-distant future of our universe, no trace of the existence of human beings will be discernible. On contemporary cosmological theories, the most likely far-distant future for our universe is one in which it is entirely empty, save only for occasional instances of very low-energy radiation. In that far-distant future, there will be no intelligent agents, but, if there were, they would not be able to detect any traces of our civilization. But, if it is true that, in the far-distant future, not the slightest trace of us and our doings remains, then isn't that a reason for claiming that our lives are meaningless? How can it matter what we do now if, in the far-distant future, all the consequences of our actions will effectively have been erased?

While this line of thought may be seductive, I do not think that it can be correct. Again, we need to only look back to our preceding discussion of the Aristotelian good life. If it is true – as it surely is – that we can find meaning in such things as familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on, then that meaning is simply not dependent upon how things go in the far-distant future. That there are no traces of us and our doings in the far-distant future does not undo the value and meaning of our current familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on. True enough, those who suppose that the meaning of a life is entirely bound up with its legacy – the permanent bequest that it makes to future generations – might have reason to worry about the far-distant future, but the obvious response is that this is simply a mistaken conception of the meaning of a life.

A fourth thought is that those who do not have religious worldviews are obliged to suppose that their lives are meaningless because they think that there is no afterlife and – in many cases – that there is not even the

possibility of an afterlife. On typical naturalist worldviews, the existence of human beings comes to an end when their biological systems switch off for the last time; in the contemporary Western world, the switching off for the last time of the biological systems of a human being typically comes about 80 years or so after those systems were switched on for the first time. But, if it is true that death marks an absolute end to human existence, then isn't that a reason for claiming that our lives are meaningless? How can it matter what we do now if, in a very short span of time, our lives simply come to a complete terminus ?

As in the preceding case, and for much the same kind of reasons, while this line of thought may be seductive, I do not think that it can be correct. That each of us shall eventually come to a complete terminus does not undo the value and meaning of our current familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on. It will be true, after we are all long gone, that our current familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on *were* valuable and meaningful. True enough, there will eventually be no one who *remembers* our familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on, but the value and meaning of these things is in no way dependent upon their being remembered in the future.

Some people may be inclined to press a further response at this point: not only is our continued existence indefinitely into the future not *required* in order for our current lives to be meaningful, it may actually be the case that our existence indefinitely into the future would *undermine* the meaning and value of our current lives. At the very least, by naturalist lights, we would need to be transformed into utterly different kinds of creatures in order for us to be able to continue to exist indefinitely into the future, particularly if we are to be able to enjoy the apparent benefits of that prolonged existence. Given the brevity of human life, each day is precious, but, if I live forever then, soon enough, it will become highly probable that I shall never again recall my current days and the goods that belong to them. At the very least, given the kinds of creatures that we are, it is not obvious that indefinitely prolonged future existence is desirable; nor is it obvious that indefinitely prolonged future existence would make our lives more meaningful.

A fifth thought is that those who do not have religious worldviews are obliged to think that their lives are meaningless because they suppose that there is no epic cosmic melodrama in which human beings feature as significant characters. There is nothing that naturalist worldviews have to offer that compares to the cosmic battles between good and evil that are the stock-in-trade of religious worldviews. On naturalist worldviews, there is no cosmic significance that attaches to the moral choices that human beings make: there is, more or less, nothing in global causal reality that is keyed to those choices, and those choices typically make little or no difference to that global causal reality. But, if it is true that there is no epic cosmic melodrama in which human beings feature as significant characters – and, in particular, if there is no mechanism that ensures that our moral choices have a significant impact on global causal reality – then isn't that a reason for claiming that our lives are meaningless? How can it matter what we do now if there is no grand narrative into which our actions can be written, and within which those actions have considerable significance?

As in the preceding two cases, and for much the same kinds of reasons, while this line of thought may be seductive, I do not think that it can be correct. That there is no epic cosmic melodrama within which our actions have wider significance does not undo the value and meaning of our current familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on. There is, after all, a local melodrama – the history of humanity – within which our actions can and do have wide significance, and the value and meaning of our current familial relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on bears various kinds of connections to this local melodrama. Our moral choices can – and do – have significant impact on the direction that human history takes; this is more than enough to ensure that our lives are both valuable and meaningful.

Some may be inclined to press one of two further objections at this point. On the one hand, some will want to object that there is a grand narrative into which human history fits: it is, more or less, the grand narrative revealed to us by science. True enough, the moral choices that humans make do not have any significance for the main lines of that narrative, but, at the very least, the grand narrative of science does nothing to undermine the value and meaning of our current familial

relationships and friendships, exercises of moral and intellectual virtue, engagements in intrinsically rewarding individual and collective pursuits, and so on. On the other hand, some will want to object that, if the local melodrama of human history is insufficient to confer value and meaning on our lives, then it is hard to see how any larger melodrama could be up to the task. After all, it is hard to see how our moral choices could have more significance for any larger melodrama than they do for the local melodrama of human history: that is, it's hard to see how our moral choices could play a larger narrative role in some epic cosmic melodrama than they already play in the local melodrama of human history. Sure, the stakes for human moral choices might be claimed to be higher in an epic cosmic melodrama than they are in the local melodrama of human history – but surely mere raising of stakes cannot transform absence of meaning and value into presence of meaning and value.

A sixth thought is that those who do not have religious worldviews are obliged to think that their lives are meaningless because they are obliged to think that morality is ultimately pointless. On naturalist worldviews, there is no final reckoning, no guarantee that, in the end, virtue will be rewarded and vice punished. However, on religious worldviews, there is always an infallible moral audit and – considerations of grace and the like set aside – there is bliss for the virtuous and torment for the vicious. But, in the absence of a final reckoning, morality is ultimately pointless; if morality is ultimately pointless, then our lives are meaningless.

While it should be granted that, in this life, it is not true that virtue is always rewarded and vice is always punished, I do not think that it should be granted that, unless virtue is always rewarded and vice is always punished, morality is pointless. Even if we grant that, were morality pointless, our lives would be meaningless, we can insist that morality is not pointless, and thereby defuse this threat to the meaningfulness of our lives. Of course, there is considerable debate – both amongst naturalists and more widely – about the nature of morality, but it seems reasonable to view the moral endowment of humanity as the product of both biological and cultural evolution. Morality plays a significant role in enabling people to live in social groups, and people typically have constitutional motivation to act morally as a result of biological and cultural inheritance. Having morality is not pointless, even if virtue sometimes goes unrewarded and vice sometimes goes unpunished, and motivation to act morally is mostly unaffected by the observation that virtue sometimes goes unrewarded and vice sometimes goes unpunished. True

enough, morality relies upon there being some rewards for virtue and some punishments for vice, but we are typically so constituted that we reward virtue – through our approbation – and punish vice – through our disapprobation, and our acting in these ways helps to perpetuate the existence of the institution of morality.

Even if it is granted that the considerations that we have criticized are insufficient to establish that life is meaningless for those who do not have a religious worldview, it might be suggested that religious worldviews are, nonetheless, advantaged by their ability to accommodate these considerations: since religions provide an ultimate reckoning, and an epic cosmic melodrama, and life beyond the confines of a single human organism, and so on, religions are able to provide dimensions of meaning that non-religious worldviews cannot provide. Even if life is not meaningless for those who do not have a religious worldview, it is, nonetheless, the case that life is *less meaningful* for those who do not have a religious worldview.

Setting aside quibbles about whether we can actually make sense of the suggestion that, given two worldviews that provide for the meaningfulness of human life, it might be that one of those worldviews renders human life more meaningful than does the other, it seems to me that it is evidently contentious to suppose that human life is more meaningful on religious worldviews than it is on non-religious worldviews. To take just one relevant piece of data, there is no evidence, in most of the major religions of the world, that religious leaders – priests, ayatollahs, gurus, monks, and so on – experience lower rates of depression than the population at large. Given the clear connection between depression and a sense of meaninglessness, one might have suspected that a deeply lived religious worldview would afford some protection against depression, if it were the case that human life is more meaningful on religious worldviews than it is on non-religious worldviews. Moreover, setting this kind of data aside, we have already seen that there are good reasons for scepticism about the claim that believing in an ultimate reckoning, and/or an epic cosmic melodrama, and/or life beyond the confines of a single human organism really does make human life more meaningful: at the very least, in each case, there are considerations which suggest that believing in these things actually makes human life less meaningful.

Postscript

Abstract: *We present some brief considerations concerning arguments about the existence of God. Drawing on the claims made in Chapter 3, we treat exemplar ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments and an exemplar logical argument from evil. We argue that, in every case, the chosen arguments are unsuccessful. The failure of these arguments tells us nothing about the reasonableness of belief – or absence of belief – in God.*



Keywords: cosmological argument; God; logical argument from evil; ontological argument; Plantinga; Swinburne; teleological argument; theism

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Apart from the kinds of philosophical questions raised by religion that are considered as a general phenomenon, there are also philosophical questions raised by particular religions, or by particular kinds of religions.

In Western philosophy, there has been a particular focus on theism, and an even more particular focus on Christian theism. Much philosophy of religion in this tradition is concerned with God: arguments for and against the existence of God, discussion and clarification of divine attributes, examination of the reasonableness of belief in God, and so on. Some of these discussions are generic – it applies to God as conceived in any of the theistic religions – and some take up topics that are specific to Christianity: trinity, incarnation, and so forth.

Most of the major arguments for the existence of God have a very long history. *Anselm* (1033–1109) provided a carefully formulated *ontological* argument in 1078. *Aquinas* (1225–1274) and *Scotus* (1266–1308) gave canonical formulations of *cosmological* arguments that have antecedents in the writings of Aristotle. *Teleological* arguments – the preferred arguments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – were given their most memorable formulation by *Paley* (1743–1805) in 1804; they also trace back to ancient writers. Prominent recent proponents of arguments for the existence of God include Richard *Swinburne* (b. 1934) and Alvin *Plantinga* (b. 1932).

Criticism of the major arguments for the existence of God also has a long history: *Hume* (1711–1776) subjected teleological arguments to penetrating critique; *Kant* (1724–1804) did the same for ontological and cosmological arguments. Prominent recent opponents of arguments for the existence of God include John *Mackie* (1917–1981) and Jordan Howard *Sobel* (1929–2010).

Ontological arguments seek to prove the existence of God without appeal to empirical evidence, even of the most general kind. There are many ontological arguments, of varying degrees of complexity. Here is a very simple ontological argument:

- 1 God is a being that has every perfection. (Premise)
- 2 Existence is a perfection. (Premise)
- 3 (Therefore) God has existence, that is God exists. (From 1, 2)

Proponents of this argument might insist that the first premise is a conceptual truth: it is part of the concept of God that God is an absolutely perfect being, and hence possesses every property that it is better

to have than not to have. Moreover, proponents of this argument might insist that the second premise is obviously true: how could anyone sensibly deny that it is better to exist than not to exist? Finally, proponents of this argument might insist that it is obvious that the conclusion of the argument follows logically from the two premises

Opponents of this argument might deny all of this. First, they might insist that, at best, it is a conceptual truth that, were God to exist, God would have every perfection. But if we understand the first premise this way, the only conclusion we will get out of this is the trivial claim that, were God to exist, then God would exist. Second – following Kant – they might deny that existence is so much as a property, let alone a perfection: existence is a condition for the possession of properties, but it is not in itself a property. Finally, they might say that, even if it is a conceptual truth that God has existence – that is, even if it is true that we have so constructed the concept of God that existence is built into that concept – it doesn't follow that God exists: the building of existence into a concept simply does not guarantee that there is anything in the world that answers to that concept. If, for example, naturalism is correct, then there just isn't anything in the world that answers to the concept of God.

Cosmological arguments seek to prove the existence of God by appeal to the most general kinds of empirical evidence – for example, by appeal to the observation that the world has causal structure. There are many different kinds of cosmological arguments, with varying degrees of complexity. Here is a relatively simple cosmological argument:

- 1 Some things have causes. (Premise)
- 2 There are no circles of causes. (Premise)
- 3 There is no regress of causes. (Premise)
- 4 (Therefore) There is a first cause, which is God. (From 1, 2, and 3)

Proponents of this argument can note that the first premise is obviously true: we witness things causing other things all of the time. Proponents of this argument may agree that the second and third premises are less obviously true: nonetheless, they can insist that it seems pretty plausible to claim that there are no circles of causes, and that there is not an infinite regress of causes. And then proponents of the argument can insist that the conclusion of the argument follows from the premises.

Opponents of this argument will most likely agree that the first premise is obviously true, and they may well concede that, while the second and third premises are controversial, there is certainly no compelling case

against either. However opponents of this argument will insist that the conclusion simply doesn't follow from the premises. First, the most that is licensed by the premises is that there is at least one first cause – that is, at least one thing that causes other things but that is not itself caused by anything (including, of course, itself). Second, even if they agree that there is exactly one first cause, opponents of this argument can deny that that first cause is God: if, for example, they are naturalists, opponents of this argument will simply insist that whatever first causes there are belong to natural causal reality.

Teleological arguments seek to prove the existence of God by appeal to certain kinds of detailed empirical evidence – for example, by appeal to the complex structure of the human eye or the human brain. There are many different kinds of teleological arguments, some much harder to assess than others. Here is a relatively simple teleological argument:

- 1 We properly identify artefacts as products of intelligent design by observing in them such things as functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality. (Premise)
- 2 (Hence) Whenever we observe such things as functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality in things, we properly identify those things as products of intelligent design. (From 1)
- 3 We observe functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality in plants and animals. (Premise)
- 4 (Hence) Plants and animals are products of intelligent design. (From 2, 3)
- 5 (Hence) God, the intelligent designer of plants and animals, exists. (From 4)

Proponents of this argument can note that the second premise is evidently true. Moreover, they can claim that the first premise is at least initially plausible: surely we should agree that we *can* identify artefacts as products of intelligent design by observing in them such things as functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality. But how can it be true that we *can* identify artefacts as products of intelligent design by observing in them such things as functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality unless it is true that *whenever* we observe such things as functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality in things, we *can* properly identify those things as products of intelligent design? Finally, proponents of this argument can claim that it is plausible

that if plants and animals are products of intelligent design, then plants and animals are products of God's intelligent design.

Opponents of this argument should, I think, deny that we *can* identify artefacts as products of intelligent design by observing in them such things as functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality. Given that we can distinguish between artefacts and naturally occurring objects, there *must* be something *other than* considerations of functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality that underwrites our ability to do this *if* it is also true that some naturally occurring objects exhibit functionality and suitability of constitution to functionality. But then it is our ability to observe these *other* considerations that allows us to properly identify things as products of intelligent design. A plausible conjecture is that the materials from which things are constituted plays a crucial role: artefacts are made from manufactured materials – plastics, ceramics, metal alloys, glass, and the like – whereas plants and animals are not.

The arguments for the existence of God that we have just discussed are relatively simple exemplars: there are much more complex ontological, cosmological and teleological arguments whose discussion would raise a host of difficult issues. Moreover, there are many other kinds of arguments for the existence of God: for example, arguments that appeal to moral considerations, or aesthetic considerations, or normative considerations, or considerations about mathematics and logic, or considerations about consciousness, or considerations about reason, or considerations about experience of God, or considerations about textual authorities, or considerations about organizational authorities, and so forth. And then there are arguments that draw together individual arguments to form more complicated cumulative arguments of one kind or another.

There are also arguments against the existence of God that have a very long history. Epicurus (341–270 BCE) was already in possession of an *argument from evil*, that is an argument that attempts to establish that certain facts about evil count against the existence of God. Here is a relatively simple version of an argument from evil:

- 1 A perfectly good being would prevent horrendous suffering as far as it could. (Premise)
- 2 There are no limits to the extent to which an omnipotent and omniscient being can prevent horrendous suffering. (Premise)

- 3 (Therefore) An omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being would prevent horrendous suffering entirely. (From 1, 2).
- 4 There is horrendous suffering. (Premise)
- 5 (Therefore) There is no omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being. (From 3, 4)

Proponents of this argument can note that the third premise seems incontestable: there is horrendous suffering in our world. Moreover, proponents of this argument can claim that the first two premises are plausible: surely an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being would prevent horrendous suffering entirely. Finally, proponents of the argument can note that the conclusion of the argument follows logically from the premises.

Opponents of the argument should agree that the third premise is true, and that the conclusion of the argument follows logically from the premises. Moreover, I think, opponents of the argument should concede that the second premise is plausible. However, opponents of the argument can certainly dispute the first premise. Whether a perfectly good being would prevent horrendous suffering as far as it could clearly depends upon whether there are reasons that tell in favour of permitting some horrendous suffering: while a perfectly good being would clearly have *a* reason to prevent all horrendous suffering, there might be other reasons that tip the balance in favour of permitting some horrendous suffering.

The argument that we have just discussed is a relatively simple exemplar: there are more complicated arguments from evil whose discussion would raise a host of difficult issues. Moreover, there are many other kinds of arguments against the existence of God: for example, arguments that appeal to the diversity of human worldviews, or the paucity of positive evidence for the existence of God, or the paucity of positive reason to believe in God, or the nature and scale of our universe, or the greater simplicity of naturalistic worldviews, or the apparent joint inconsistency of attributes that are standardly attributed to God, or the apparent impossibility of single attributes that are standardly attributed to God, and so forth. And then there are arguments that draw together individual arguments to form more complicated cumulative arguments of one kind or another.

Argument about the existence of God depends upon prior agreement about what God would be if God were to exist. Those who offer

arguments for and against the existence of God typically suppose that we can say quite a bit about what God would be if God were to exist: perhaps, for example, God is infinite, perfect, simple, eternal, impassible, necessary, perfectly free, fundamental, incorporeal, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, omnipresent, conscious, personal, agential, spiritual, perfectly loving, perfectly compassionate, perfectly beautiful, providential, creative, and so forth. But, of course, not all who believe in God are so forthcoming. Many believers suppose that there is very little that we can say about what God would be if God were to exist: God is a mysterious being who largely eludes our comprehension. Some of these believers are not much interested in standard arguments about the existence of God; some of these believers think that arguments for the existence of God are somehow in tension with the requirements of faith.

Disputes about the reasonableness of belief – or absence of belief – in God stand in no obvious relationship to standard arguments about the existence of God. On the views given earlier in this book, if there were successful arguments about the existence of God, then the success of those arguments would mandate belief in their conclusions. But, on the views given earlier in this book, it is clear that we do not have successful arguments about the existence of God. Given that we do not currently have successful arguments about the existence of God, we are left to assess the reasonableness of belief – or absence of belief – in God in other terms. While many are prepared to claim that reason requires acceptance of one particular worldview, it seems to me that any serious account of what reason requires will allow that there is a wide range of worldviews that can be reasonably believed. In particular, it seems to me that any serious account of what reason requires will allow that there are both theistic and non-theistic worldviews that can be reasonably believed.

In Western philosophy of religion, there has been a relative neglect of non-Christian – or, non-Abrahamic – religious worldviews. There is no Western discussion of arguments for and against reincarnation, or karma, or samsara, or ch'i, or the Tao, or kami, or Sat, or the like, that compares to the exhaustive discussion of arguments for and against God. However, it is an open question whether there is more reason to believe in God than there is to believe in reincarnation, or karma, or samsara, or ch'i, or the Tao, or kami, or Sat, or whatever; it is also an open question

whether worldviews that postulate reincarnation, or karma, or samsara, or ch'i, or the Tao, or kami, or Sat, or whatever, should be preferred to naturalistic worldviews. I hope that, in the coming years, the relative neglect of non-Christian worldviews in Western philosophy of religion will be overcome.

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