ISSA Proceedings 1998 – What's Wrong With God?

Philosophy of Religion texts are often constructed by setting out the arguments for and then the arguments against the existence of the object of theistic belief. When presented thus, the writer's final position, if there is one, is likely to be a balancing of pro and con, an inconclusive, provisional preferring of one side to the other.

Theism is not conclusively refutable – a consistent story can be told in its terms. But neither can it be established by pure reason or by any weaker source. J.L. Mackie (1982) thought theism consistent though utterly incredible, but had to make room for it as a miraculous possibility. Some writers may even conclude with something like the position Penelhum (1971) once argued for: that both positions (theism and atheism) were internally coherent, and that there is no common ground (to use a phrase of Nagel's) on which their conflicting claims can be rationally adjudicated: "the theoretical assumptions that they may share are not sufficient, it seems, to allow useful debate between them on the basis of agreed standards. Each must see the world differently, one as God's world and the other as not.… No community of standards exists which would enable the kind of agreement we have argued to be possible about imagined cases, to be arrived at for the experience that the world in fact does offer. The deadlock is deepened by the fact that the believer and the unbeliever each has at his disposal, if he wishes to use them, explanatory devices for accounting for the alleged blindness or gullibility of the other" (89-90).

In this paper I want to explore a more radical approach which is not I believe frequently defended, though it might well be embra-ced by many thinkers if they were forced to choose among a variety of epistemological positions. The view is a slight extension of one expressed a good time ago by N.R. Hanson in a paper published in a memorial volume in 1967. But it seems not to have provoked much discussion.

The position I am concerned with says that theism is simply not a contender in the epistemological stakes. There are any number of utterly groundless hypotheses that no one in their right mind would consider taking seriously in giving an

account of the nature of things, and that are only entertained, if ever, in philosophical discussions of the possibility of our being brains in a vat or living in a 5-minute old universe. Theism, the view suggests, is no better than any of these. Intellectually, the Thomist God is in the same boat with the fantasies of debased "popular" belief, leprechauns or fairies.
Let me offer one example of the contrast. After hurricane Gilbert had wrecked a good part of the village I lived in, I was asked whether I thought it had been sent by God or by the Devil. Not wishing to open up the whole issue, I merely mumbled something about not thinking of either of these as responsible for the weather. For some believers, supernatural agents are among the causes that may be invoked for particular events or for explaining how things work; for the position I am examining, they simply do not arise.

This paper is an attempt to see what is involved in espousing what I am calling the Hanson position. I want to know what we are committed to if we want to say, in any particular argumentative context, that a whole way of approaching the issue can be ruled out without moving on to the sort of pro and con examination typical of the books I mentioned earlier. It is easy and tempting not to notice that we must have an account of this type of rejection, if we want to defend the rationality of our current beliefs and ways of proceeding cognitively. Working within a relatively homogeneous culture-circle, we can say, with Nagel, that "challenges to the objectivity of science can be met only by further scientific reasoning, challenges to the objectivity of history by history, and so forth" (1997: 21), but once we remember that we would not extend the same charity to astrology or Mormonism we see that we need not only to be able to account for developments within disciplines or areas of thought but also for the existence and winnowing through time of distinct "fundamental kinds of thought" (ibid.: 26).
When Quine and Ullian (1978) offer some guidance to the plain man about how to change his beliefs, the first virtue of a new hypothesis they offer is its conservatism – let it make the least disturbance to our overall picture. This might be sensible, once one is working within acceptable parameters or forms of thought, but it is not the kind of advice that would lead one to reject wholesale a type of discourse or intellectual practice.

One might wonder whether this way of putting the issue did not overemphasize a distinction between different disciplines and different stages or sub-stages of one discipline. Why not, for instance, see astrology as an aspect of astronomy, now

superseded?
One reason might be that, for some people, it is not yet superseded. But another, and this is the reason for using theism as the target of this paper, is that some differences between intellectual activities do just seem sufficiently weighty to require separate classification. Theism offers a very different picture of the world and its constituents from cosmology and quantum field theory.

One point that can be made is that the possibility of such wholesale rejection in effect requires us to deny that discourse is a seamless web, that in some sense everything is on par with everything else. (I am not claiming that anyone has ever said that this is how things are, though it seems to be implicated in much Wittgensteinian thought and it sounds like something a postmodernist might say.)
One exponent of a view that seems incompatible with the Hanson approach is the late Paul Feyerabend (1989). In this paper, he begins with two assumptions that lead us into trouble:
a. that the facts and procedures constituting (scientific) knowledge are the result of specific and idiosyncratic historical developments;
b. that what has been found out exists independently of the circumstances of its discovery. Feyerabend uses these claims to assert that the Greeks knew that Athena and the other gods existed and behaved in particular ways, and that there is no rationally acceptable route to a position that says we have shown that they were wrong. What they knew they knew; it can be detached from the circumstances of their asserting it.
We, as it happens, no longer assert those bits of knowledge, but it is "history, not argument, [that] undermined the gods" (397). Criteria for existence do not come first, according to Feyerabend, but rather it is our ontological commitments that generate the particular and historically changing criteria for existence that we might be tempted to invoke.
This position seems to require something like a Parmenidean view that what we speak of we know, whatever it may be. The Hanson view cannot deny that people do speak of God or the saints or Krishna or that they engage in prayers and rituals that are conceptualised in theistic ways. But just as, I presume, all societies tell stories that they know not to be intended to be true, so on Hanson's view we must judge that some of what orthodox members of a society would classify with the pure truths are really to be put with the fairy-stories and tales of a never-never land. The principle that Feyerabend rejects – that only entities postulated by reasonable beliefs can be separated from their history – is close to

the working assumption we all make in recognising a difference between ordinary names and empty ones, between real relations and intensional ones. These differences are at root ontological. The logical differences (of what inferences each type will support) flow from and follow the ontological difference, and are not as it were given in the language itself. We may not invoke transhistorical criteria of existence, but we do presume a non-linguistic difference between language that refers to and characterises an independent world and language that floats free of the cosmos to conjure up imagined worlds.

Feyerabend might agree and insist merely that in the language we use to characterise an independent world, what we say is what we know. And, anthropologically, he is of course right. But part of what is claimed in claiming knowledge is that things are thus and so not merely for us with our specific history but for anyone, whether or not they can bring themselves to acknowledge it. We recognize the gap between word and world.

So our next question could be: can we find, within the resources of a widely shared conceptualisation of things, a reason for adopting the Hanson classification of ways of speaking? Here Hanson himself seems to slide from the extreme position I have characterised above – theism simply isn't a contender – to a much weaker one, that we can rule theism out because we have examined everything that can be said in its favour and found it all wanting. As he says, outside logic and mathematics, the best reason for supposing that X does not exist is that there is no good reason to suppose that it does, and that requires us to have examined putative reasons. But that puts God in the same intellectual position as phlogiston whereas the more extreme view, suggested by Hanson's examples, puts God with Santa Claus. We do not argue children out of belief in Santa Claus, by pointing out its inherent absurdities; we simply let them grow out of it since we don't think it worth arguing against. It is the more extreme position that I am interested in and wish to draw to the attention of argumentation theorists – the context in which we think there is no point to arguing.

One obvious way in which we could defend the adoption of this stance, from a particular time, is that we have in fact done the comprehensive examination of putative reasons. Nowadays, phlogiston is about as absurd as Santa Claus; it is, in our culture, the paradigm example of a non-existent and bizarre theoretical notion.

But we recognise that, in a different intellectual climate, it warranted serious

investigation. One might then think that Archbishop Ussher may have had some reasons for thinking the world to have begun in 4006 BC, but no one has ever had a reason to suppose it began five minutes ago. Philosophers may find illumination in examining the latter supposition, but the absence of any positive support rules it out for serious consideration elsewhere. But once again, this would put the theistic framework back among the potentially viable contenders – since Ussher's time, we have concluded that his reasons are baseless, but they were viable for him.

Even if, pace Feyerabend, that were historically accurate, it diminishes the interest of the Hanson position, since it becomes no more than an application of the normal procedure that once something has been established we don't need to keep re-establishing it. The interest of the Hanson view is in seeing whether there are cases where we are justified in never taking the view seriously (or would have been if that had been our stance).

One requirement of such a position, if it is to connect with actual views rather than the deliberate fantasies of the philosophers, is the point that merely being believed by somebody, or even by a very large number of people, is in itself no reason at all in support of a belief. For all the popularity of principles of charity, that point seems quite right to me. Some sorts of common belief are indeed likely to be true, but others equally widespread have a content that gives us no reason to suppose them reliable.

What we find is a perfectly understandable deference to what people think, so some widespread beliefs are discussed respectfully while others of the same sort but socially more marginal may be mocked or simply ignored. I have characterised the position I am looking at as an extension of Hanson's since he too adopts this respectful approach -he was writing for a Catholic journal in fact – but his comparisons suggest the extension: the question of God's existence is compared with that of the Loch Ness monster and Shrangli-la.

To have examined the reasons offered and found them wanting is then one way, but an uninteresting one, of ruling out the continued exploration of an issue. One might, however, understand Hanson's "no reason for" claim more positively, as it were, as claiming in effect that we can see directly that there are and could be no reasons for a certain position. In the case of theism we might want to contrast two broad contexts:

a. supernatural interventions in this world, such as some of the battles in the Iliad, or resurrection, or zombies, or some understandings of prayer or of

charismatic personalities;
b. the disengagement of more theological views from any nearby portion of space-time. In the former case, there is at least something accessible to us that is being explained or accounted for. If there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in some of our philosophies, then we might wonder whether there is something very unusual that plays an explanatory role.

But to treat supernatural entities like opposing chiefs of staff is to analogize from known purposes (known virtually only from human cases, with a few animals thrown in) to purposiveness or "marks of order". Thunderbolts and hurricanes can be traced to earlier states of affairs, if even a butterfly's sudden escape from a predator. Destruction wrought by B52s requires a chief of staff; wind and rain doesn't. There is no need to invoke such an analogy. There is no sign of the supposed agents, only the significance for us of the collocations of things. As agents ourselves we could imagine an agent wanting to bring such a collocation about, but in the absence of any sign of their independent existence we have, speaking now for the educated minority, given up invoking them. We might also note that the gross ego-centricity (or species-centricity) of many theistic explanations is sufficient to rule them out of court by a kind of "golden rule" – if we suppose God is on our side, our opponents have exactly the same reason to suppose the opposite.
In the case of (b), where nothing close by is to be accounted for in its particularity, we can ask not merely 'would X explain or fit with Y?' but 'is there any independent reason to suppose X and its links with things that would explain or fit with Y?' This seems close to the version of Occam's Razor that Russell so frequently espoused: can we get by without X? A different but related query would be 'is there anything to be explained here?' Much theistic discourse can seem unmotivated narrative. The form of argument I am suggesting here has a link with the mode of argument Mackie (1977: 36) extracted from moral relativity. Not, different moral systems show the subjectivity of morality, but rather: what is needed to explain the different moral systems? If moral truths are otiose, then scrap them. Another take on this approach is Dawkins' (1993) suggestion that we can see the etiology of intellectual viruses as distinguishing them from intellectually benign conceptions.

There is also another Mackean point that can be made. Mackie objected to the queerness of supposedly objective evaluative properties. Looking at the kinds of

entity we use to account for the universe as we now know it, we can surely add that the type of being characteristic of theism is a remarkably unmotivated and odd kind of entity. In this we could follow Bernard Williams' old argument that Christianity at any rate cannot escape ultimately unintelligible claims in linking humanity and godhead in its distinctive way (1955). Of course, more needs to be said to articulate the way in which a theistic god differs too much from the fields and forces of contemporary physics. But one point is that theism invokes a type of explanation of occurrences that is radically different from those of dynamics – by appeal to will or intention rather than prior conditions. We are happy to use appeals to will in the narrow context of human action, while not understanding exactly how they mesh with the physicalist story we think can also be told, but once again we have no reason to extend the range of events to be thus explained to the whole unfolding of the cosmos.

I have suggested, then, that we might be able to offer an account of what is going on when we assume that a particular claim is a non-starter. It has nothing going for it; it invokes bizarre and idle oddities. If these characterizations are true, then the suggestion is that we are indeed justified in not bothering to open the argument, not countering the case that believers put up.

Of course, as a matter of history, we have not hitherto treated religion so derisively. It may seem farfetched to argue that we should have done so, and given the complexity and ingenuity of theistic argumentation I am certainly not convinced in my own mind that that is the proper attitude to adopt towards theism, though I wish it were. But perhaps I may make a pragmatic point here also: it seems to me that we need more argument than we are usually offered for equating what theistic argument is meant to give us positively with the objects of actual theistic belief. One can see "natural theology" as changing the question as much as a route to defend some existing system of belief. A decent life has little to fear from natural theologians; it has perhaps quite a lot to fear from actual religions.

Looking at religion sociologically (epidemiologically) it is evident that the way of life comes first, ideology issues from practice and may later influence it. In many spheres of action, people like to invoke a backing for their particular practices. An exercise routine is not enough for some; it must be justified or rationalized by reference to obscure entities. To the extent that practices spawn such "narratives" they invite the Russellian Occam's razor. The Hanson attitude does not merely record what is conventionally thought; it asks, do we need it for any

intellectual purpose? Then, the fact that some beliefs are incorporated in widespread and well funded traditions and that others are the idiosyncratic invention of a deranged mind remains as the only significant difference, in intellectual weight, between them. We write books about the Thomist God and not about leprechauns or zombies, purely for sociological reasons.

The moral I am pointing to is that a stance that says we can simply ignore a possible hypothesis or way of looking at things must go beyond passive tinkering with inherited belief-systems and begin to interrogate them. It must bring with it some notion of what explains what, and what can be taken to be more secure, epistemologically. Whether or not theistic religion is actually in this position, the point has been to use it as a conspicuous and provocative case for examining the possibility and the assumptions that are needed to adopt this stance in any area.

REFERENCES

Dawkins, R. (1993). Viruses of the Mind. In Bo Dalhbom (Ed.) *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind,* Oxford: Blackwell – (available from http://www.physics.wisc.edu/~shalizi/Dawkins/viruses-of-the-mind.html).

Feyerabend, P.K. (1989). Realism and the Historicity of Knowledge. *Journal of Philosophy* 86, 393-406.

Hanson, N.R. (1967). What I don't Believe. In: R.S. Cohen & M. Wartofsky (Eds.), *In Memory of Norwood Russell Hanson: Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol 3, (467-489), Dordrecht: Reidel.

Mackie, J.L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Mackie, J.L. (1982). *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nagel, T. (1997). *The Last Word.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Penelhum, T. (1971). *Problems of Religious Knowledge.* London: Macmillan.

Quine, B.A.O. & Ullian, J.S. (1978). *The Web of Belief*, 2nd edition. New York: Random House.

Williams, B.A.O. (1955). Tertullian's Paradox. In: A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (Eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (pp.187-211, ch. X), London: SCM.