God for Atheists

For my children.
In memory of my parents.

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Chapter 1

SETTING OFF

(Imagine we have climbed a hill, you and I, and are resting at the saddle looking into the next valley. You, the reader (Lector), ask me, the author (Auctor), what the book is about and why I wrote it.)

Lector Lovely view! You can see where we have come from, and now you can also show me where we are going.

Auctor Yes indeed; a glimpse anyway. But I see you have a copy of my book.

Lector Yes, I was caught by the contradiction in the title: *God for Atheists*. Whatever can that be about? Surely we atheists hold that God does not exist. End of story?

Auctor I agree that God does not exist. But all sorts of important things don't exist, like anger and love. I am going to be a bit picky with words here.

For example, do you know the difference between a *deist* and a *theist*? A theist, like the pope or the archbishop of Canterbury, believes (or claims to believe) in a magical God that interacts with us in our everyday lives; while a deist, like Voltaire and George Eliot, and perhaps Einstein, believes only in a remote God who presumably created the universe, but leaves it alone on a day-to-day basis. I won't give references for everything; you can check most of what we discuss on Wikipedia. (That is a wonderful resource, is it not? I donate monthly.)

LECTOR Fine, then I am an a-theist, and not an a-deist. As to the deist's remote, non-interacting God, I am agnostic — we have to be, don't we! For we would not see him even if he were there, *ex hypothesi*.

AUCTOR Agreed. I am with you on both. But more than half the world's population does believe in a magical God. And that belief used to be more or less universal. A student in Edinburgh was hung for blasphemy as recently as 1697. Fifty years later, David Hume the Edinburgh philosopher, and perhaps the most rational man in the 'Age of Reason', was very careful never to say whether or not he believed in the tenets of the church. Indeed, it is hurtful and rude to declare your disbelief in a neighbour's beliefs. Even in the nineteen eighties

Don Cupitt had his windows broken in Emmanuel College, or so I was told.

LECTOR And I suppose we can describe Dawkins, Fry, Hitchens, *et al*. as anti-theists, as they go out of their way to attack what the atheist merely ignores. But why then, did you bother to write the book?

AUCTOR Good question. I suppose in part because I was brought up as a Quaker and find the religious practice of the Quakers almost completely exempt from the criticisms that are levelled at the traditional God-based religions. And in part because I feel acutely uncomfortable at the possibility that honest and sincere people are being fed falsehoods, either to manipulate them or simply because no-one has the guts to talk about the ambiguities and misinterpretations that have grown up round traditional religion. Someone must start to discuss this subject honestly. There is such a thing as being too polite.

LECTOR Well, I know nothing about the Quakers, but I am with you on the latter. I know an elderly woman who had the misfortune to lose her son (though I cannot remember the circumstances). At her invitation I went round to try to comfort her. We sat for a while. She was an intelligent woman, a retired school teacher. Then she turned to me and asked, with tears welling up in her eyes: "Do you think there is a life after death, honestly?" I paused. I could see she wanted desperately to

believe, but that she could not quite swallow the doctrine of resurrection. "No," I said, "I think the material of the body clearly decays back to the elements from which we are made, and those material structures like nerves and brain cells are so essential to a brain, mind, personality, or soul that it is inconceivable to me that anything remains, once the dissolution occurs. Except, of course, memories; memories in your brain, and those of your son's living friends. And anything that your son might have done, or written, that survive. That is how something of him might live on after his death." She thanked me. I eventually got up to leave. Had I kicked away the crutch on which she was leaning, rotten though it was? But she looked relieved. Perhaps having a tiny, but certain, residue to cling to is better than the awful hope and the more awful doubt.

AUCTOR I think you are right. And that is why I wrote the book. Not just to kick away the rotten crutch, for that has been done very thoroughly by the likes of Richard Dawkins; but to show that much remains of what religion is all about, underneath the accretion of nonsense. I try to discuss morals in an objective, somewhat scientific way; like the version of life-after-death that you pointed out to your bereaved schoolmistress. But there is plenty more, like guilt and forgiveness, heaven and hell, … as long

as one can treat it all as metaphor and can look for the underlying truths, and find them.

Lector : Well, that sounds original, and worthwhile. Sort of rescuing religion from itself.

Auctor Oh, I do not claim to have thought anything that has not been thought hundreds of times before, through the centuries. It seems to me that Jesus himself was very unwilling to endorse the idea of life-after-death; look it up sometime in Matthew 22:23. But I may succeed in putting things in a novel way. And this approach is certainly not 'mainstream', yet. As to my motivation, I could add that the scientist in me enjoys finding simplicity in complexity, and the teacher in me enjoys trying to put that across. I hope the reader will enjoy that too.

Lector It seems you start by addressing the atheist who thinks he can turn his back on the whole business of religion. But then you turn to address the believer, perhaps the doubting believer, who has accepted the stories at face value, but finds himself full of doubt, and his faith a little embarrassing; like a ten year old found sucking his thumb.

Auctor Yes indeed. But I am a little worried at the thought of being read by those who are not ready to follow my argument.

Lector Is this going to be a book for people like me, or for philosophers or academics?

AUCTOR It is aimed at people like you. But I am a scientist, and I guess that will colour both the way I think and the way I write. I am wary of emotions like hope, am naturally skeptical; and I vigilantly avoid ambiguities. The scientist's idea of truth is not as rigorous as that of the philosopher; a statement is true if it explains the observations, and only so long. It is gleefully abandoned when a fact emerges that falsifies it.

LECTOR Is it a long book?

AUCTOR No, though there is plenty to discuss. I see brevity both as a virtue in itself and as a component of clarity. But many further question open up as I go along. Take the apparently simple concept of existence, as we are talking about God existing or not existing. I could do a chapter on 'existence', and another on 'things'. How many things do you know that do not exist? None, obviously, in the sense of things as 'physical objects'. But there are different types of existence. A bit of string exists. Right? It has mass, and extension in space and time. But what about a knot in that bit of string? It is something inherent in the string, but it is only the string that exists in the sense of having mass and extension. Take away the string and the knot it gone; un-do the knot and there is no change in the weight of the string.

LECTOR I see! So God may resemble a knot in a piece of string? I hope you do have a chapter on existence. It sounds interesting, and I can see it is integral to your 'metaphor' idea; but I can also see a slight danger of getting bogged-down into that quaggy wasteland of philosophy.

AUCTOR Which reminds me: our route. Look down there, beyond the trees. There is our route for the next hour or two. Our destination is still out of sight.

Chapter 2

IS BELIEF GOOD OR BAD?

In the following dialogue you have already met AUCTOR*, the author, who knows where he is going, and* LECTOR*, the reader, skeptical, but open minded. Please now meet* CREDENS*, a traditional believer.*

LECTOR I do not believe in God, in the ordinary sense, i.e. a personal God as a supreme, omniscient being. Such a God seems improbable, and the existence of such a God raises problems about evil and freewill; and I have no experience of such a personality. (God as creator is another matter.) Nor do I believe in life-after-death, as that also seems incredible; and in any case does not seem much fun, when I think about it. In fact, I try not to believe in anything, because unsupported belief seems a flimsy basis for a world view.

CREDENS I believe in God, because my parents did, and it feels right to me. And I believe in life after death because without it life seems pointless, and there would be no reward for good behaviour nor punishment for bad. What is more, I talk to God and I feel He knows me.

LECTOR But you cannot surely believe something just because you want it to be true! The person you are talking to might be inside your head — like a dream.

CREDENS The rationalist's view of existence is to me utterly bleak; it fails completely to take account of man's undeniable emotional needs.

AUCTOR You both have weighty points. Of course we can't change reality just because we don't like it. I cannot fly like a bird. I had to face that fact when I was quite a young child. However, much of religion concerns feelings, rather than facts. In my book I propose a way of looking at theses things that may bring your two positions closer together; a point of view that may allow a skeptic to understand and use words like 'God', or 'ought' without embarrassment.

****

Belief

Religion is still quite popular. Not so much in Britain perhaps, where 25% declared themselves to be without religion in the 2011 census, and 53% in 2017. (Before 2001 the question about religion was not asked on the census form.) A hundred years ago religion was more or less assumed. But there were always skeptics. Maybe the skeptics have just got bolder, as the pressure to conform has got less.

It is amazing what people will believe, if they want it to be true. I mean like Santa Claus, and meeting our loved ones again after we die.

Believing seems to be the process of regarding as true a proposition that we do not know to be true. But believing is more than that, for it is not something we do when ample evidence is available. The 'truth-value' of the proposition has to be both unknown and essentially unknowable. I do not spend time believing it is Monday. If I do not know it is Monday I check the day in the newspaper, or my diary.

But for a belief to have religious value, not only must its truth-value be unknown and unknowable, the claim has to be inherently improbable; so that regarding it as true becomes something of a challenge. Some will fail and only some succeed. Not everyone can believe that Mary was a virgin, or that Mohammed was the last prophet, but the

faithful can. This religious believing often seems to be inspired by hope, and is usually applied to the holding (as true) of hope filled concepts like life-after-death, or the existence of an all-knowing, eternal, omnipresent, personality, who loves you.

Belief, when viewed like that, i.e. treating as true something inherently unlikely, which we can never know to be true, primarily because we want it to be true, does seem rather bizarre. Nevertheless, however much we may pride ourselves on being rational, we probably all entertain propositions that are not supported by evidence; and may not even be testable. For example, we may think we have a better political system than other countries, or that we are more moral. Or we may believe that salt and fat are bad for our health. Most people are quite happy about that, recognising that there are many things we have to take on trust, or treat as unimportant. Some may happily follow convention (trusting in numbers), or rely on unconscious inner promptings (trusting in instinct). However, people who label themselves rationalists, or religious skeptics, are reluctant to base important aspects of their lives on unsupported and unlikely propositions, particularly comforting propositions; they therefore try to believe nothing. Skepticism is this reluctance, or refusal, or inability, to believe.

It is best not to argue about beliefs. Beliefs are not based on reasons, for they would not then qualify

as beliefs; so there is really nothing to argue about. This book is not about beliefs. Instead, this book is intended to suggest an interpretation of the word 'God' that will allow atheists to understand and, if necessary, even to use the language of religion. It is intended to bridge the gap between the believer and the non-believer, not to divide them further.

Problems with Belief-based Religion.

Beliefs, being based on emotions like hope and loyalty rather than on reason, can be very divisive and passionate. When it becomes important to distinguish our tribe from others, religious beliefs offer themselves as a means. Religion can then be used as an excuse for violent crimes including genocide.

Even without an external threat, some primitive religions instigated repulsive crimes, such as the sacrifice of innocent surrogates, and the burning of heretics. Such terror tactics no doubt enhanced the power of the priesthood. You might think that we would not tolerate today a religion that exploited belief and superstition to control their people with authority and fear, yet that is much what Franco did to Spain in the nineteen thirties. A religion that cannot evolve is better dead. Do we conclude that society had better repudiate the whole business of God and Religion?

Perhaps the very popularity of religion should make us pause. Perhaps we should question the benefits of religion, and specifically of a belief in God; benefits not to a repressive regime, which are rather obvious, but to the believer and worshipper. A desire to do the right thing is clearly evident in the average human. Some people feel they need a purpose; they want to know *what life is for*. Some are fearful of the future. Some are hopeful of better things to come. Some are lonely. Some feel guilty and crave forgiveness. Some feel gratitude and wish to express it (ideally to the source or cause of their happiness). These impulses are very widespread, though perhaps not universal. They can be seen in non-human animals as well as in man; for example, in a pet dog that wags its tail when you say "Good boy!"

How important is this *religious need* to our society now — to people in Britain, or in western Europe? I suggest it is still quite important. In money terms it might be up there along with sport and the music industry; perhaps between football and netball; or between Glastonbury and The Proms. Think not of the empty churches but of weddings, funerals, headstones in graveyards, Songs of Praise on the radio, and Christmas carols from the Salvation Army band. Bernard Shaw suggested in his *Quintessence of Ibsenism* [1] that, out of a thousand typical Britons, 700 were what he called 'Philistines' (by which he meant happy to go with the crowd), 299 were

'Idealists' (i.e. trying hard to be good people), and only 1 was a 'Realist' (who was prepared to make his own rules). I think he may be about right.

Perhaps religion can be seen as nostalgia for infancy and childhood? Children are cared for and their needs are met. They are told what is right and what is wrong, what safe and what unsafe. They have a guide. Is God then merely a surrogate parent? Perhaps the whole concept as well as the image of God takes the form of a parent. However, though such a conclusion may explain, it will not explain away; it will not satisfy the yearning.

It does not greatly matter to our argument what in the dim prehistory of man predisposed us to conceive of God as a supernatural father figure. Our next question is whether this imaginary friend (guide, father, judge) can deliver what is needed of him? It sounds too simple; a virtual 'security blanket' for adults. Can imagined dangers frighten, and imagined friends offer real support? Did you ever, as children, blindfold a person, then ask them if they had ever flown before, and lead them onto a plank resting on two books? We did. We wobbled the plank slightly and crouched down, told them they were now 2 metres above the ground. They totter, and their heart starts to beat faster. We tell them there are cushions on both sides. They start to relax. "Oops!" we cry, "You have to bail out." And we laugh as they step, in terror, the 5 cms onto the

floor. So the answer is: yes; imagined insecurity and imagined security both work while there is belief. We conclude therefore that even an *unbelievable* religion will work *if you believe in it*. Hence the tension between believers and unbelievers.

Proposing a God that is a magical parent-substitute will not satisfy a skeptical person. And to offer such a proposition cynically seems wicked. A rational agnostic could admit that a God that is able to create the universe, could also be eternal and omnipresent. Indeed, that seems quite probable. But how could such a God know about my little problems. And moreover (this is the hardest bit for me), how could he possibly care about me when he has all the ants and jellyfish to think about as well? I, the billionth human on the billionth planet in the billionth galaxy — is my tummy-pain a good or a bad thing for the universe as a whole, when looked at from outside? Think of all the happy bacteria! The idea of God as an eternal and omni-present force-field seems incompatible with the idea of God as 'our father in heaven'. The latter image seems improbably human-like, and human-obsessed; and busy.

We get the clear impression, not so much of Man being made in God's image, as of God being made in Man's.

I think that the religion we were taught when we were children is a childish religion. Cast your mind

back to the age of 5, when you still believed in Santa Claus bringing you presents. (A very clear example of belief sustained by hope.) At that age one takes metaphors literally. You hear someone say they were "cruelly cut by a neighbour at the supermarket", and you think of a knife, and blood dripping on the floor. Children are not born to metaphors. Then the penny drops; you remember that your parents had a pop-gun hidden in the wardrobe very like the one purportedly from Santa. Suddenly the child has a new key to apply to the complex task of interpreting the world.

Is Religion to be Taken Literally or Metaphorically?

What if it is all meant to be taken metaphorically? I understand an awareness of good and evil as something like conscience. Could that be what is meant by God? But what of heaven and hell if there is no after-life? What does it mean: "Our father in heaven"? How can heaven be like a mustard seed; is it just that it grows? What impediment prevents a rich man getting into heaven; presumably his wealth, or the tightness with which he holds on to it? Our eyes are newly opened.

Imaginary or Metaphorical?

Supernatural religion, interpreted literally, clearly works for some people; they believe and are comforted. So, either there is a magical God, or some sort of self-hypnosis must be operating; they create an *imaginary friend*. That is quite different from treating God as a metaphor. Suppose a malicious liar tells me that God is magically powerful, can see round corners, and through stone walls, knows what I am thinking, remembers everything, and punishes the naughty. If I believed all that, I could become quite scared. But it would be an *imaginary* God; and it would be a lie, and my informant a liar (on this hypothesis). By contrast, God as a metaphor for conscience cannot be described as powerful, for conscience is often shamefully weak. It cannot see round corners, and it often forgets. We are limited by the objective facts.

In subsequent chapters I am going to try to re-interpret the old religion, the religion of the child (which for clarity I call Religion I). First by supposing there is a metaphorical way of using the word God. Think of it, for now, simply as Religion II, the religion of metaphor; this is a religion that is not a lie, and is limited by the facts. Next, we look at the facts — the psychological basis of Religion. If there is a faculty that does indeed teach us right and wrong, why suppose it is supernatural when it

is plainly natural. In the past it was called God, and we can still call it God, as long as we do not mistake if for the supernatural God I.

We may be able to see a way of interpreting the concept of God as something that does actually teach us right and wrong, (perhaps nothing more nor less than our conscience); that does actually judge and forgive (like our community); that can indeed accept us and give us a purpose. This we could call God II. It requires no act of faith.

Religion I	**Religion II**
God is magical, omnipresent	God is a metaphor
God can break physical laws	Natural laws are consistent
God made man	God is imagined by man
Requires faith	Can be observed every day
Can be doubted	Cannot be doubted

Faith and Religion are not equivalent

Civil servants, pollsters and newsmen seem to treat the terms *Faith* and *Religion* as equivalent. No-one seems able to conceive of a religion that requires no beliefs. That will have to change, for it is precisely what I am going to show; that there is a way to understand God that requires no believing; only observing, and experiencing.

I am not advocating a revival of the old religion, the religion of the child. I am advocating a

metaphorical re-interpretation of religion (Religion II) seeing God as a metaphor for natural morality. If this concept of God seems valid we might be able to look again at traditional religion and re-interpret it all, or much of it. We might conclude that it is a mixture of valid metaphors, and bold lies designed to mislead.

Chapter 3

METAPHORS, THINGS, WORDS, EXISTENCE

Lector (Looks at his watch) How far do you think we have come this morning?

Auctor (Looks at his watch) Oh, about 5½ miles. Why?

Lector I just wondered how fast we are walking.

Auctor Ha-ha! I saw you look at your watch, and wondered what was in your mind. Five and a half miles in 2 hours means 2¾ miles per hour. But I looked at my watch too, because I am running the same calculation in reverse. I know we usually average 2¾ m.p.h., and it is now 2 hours since we struck camp, so that is how I know that we have travelled some 5½ miles.

Lector I see. The tricks you learn….!

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Metaphors.

A metaphor (from the Greek *meta pherein* 'to carry across') can be defined as a figure of speech in which the name of (or word for) an object or idea is transferred across to something else to which is does not properly belong. We are taught metaphor in school as a 'figure of speech', and are familiar with its use in literature to bring fresh insights and implications to limping prose. For example: "Life is a pilgrimage." — Well, it is not really, if we lack a consistent goal and an attitude of reverence. But you see how the metaphor drags into the picture unstated elements, hinting at possibilities of continuity, goal orientation, and selfless duty. I could pile on the examples, but such metaphors are familiar enough. In that example we know it is a metaphor because we know what *life* is and we know what a *pilgrimage* is. The metaphor is unlikely to mislead.

That is not the case when the metaphor transfers words across from a known, real object like *father* to an non-real, imagined, object like *God*, whose nature we do not know but which could be a thought, a dream, a hope, or a force-field. The danger of these metaphors arises when the imagined or imaginary object has (as yet) no shape, no properties, and is (as yet) little known. When there are no appropriate descriptive words the only meaning is brought in

by the metaphor. Then there is a possibility of the metaphor being taken too literally.

If a child is told that "God is our Father in Heaven" he forms a clear image and he thinks he knows what God is and where He is. But what does he really know? There is no biological connection. There is no location called Heaven. A child might well understand it too literally. Hearing of "our father in heaven" he might visualise something up in the sky resembling his father (or grandfather); white hair, grizzled cheeks, slight stoop, few words. It may take him years to get rid of this image. He may spend the best years of his life going round the world denying the existence of such a person.

It is clear that for more than two thousand years, some religious teachers have used metaphors to describe ideas lacking physical reality; sheep and goats, prodigal sons, good Samaritans, vinyards, mustard seeds, *etc*. They have encouraged a metaphorical interpretation of religious statements, preferring to make statements that defy a literal interpretation, recognising that only some hearers will understand the metaphor. ("They that have ears let them hear."[Mark 4:9]) With widening education, people are becoming ever more sophisticated, and fewer will miss the metaphor and take the literal interpretation.

It seems that essentially all the problems with traditional western religions arise when unknown quantities like God, heaven, spirit, son,

father-in-heaven, everlasting-life, are treated literally. Obviously, all those problems disappear when the unknowns are treated as metaphors.

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Appendix to Chapter 3

When I started to think about the existence or otherwise of God, I found my vocabulary entirely inadequate to discuss, and even to think about, the different ways that different classes of object (physical, mental, hypothetical) present themselves. I have tried to establish a nomenclature, but find that philosophers do not agree. They tend each to have their own scheme.

Words and their meanings.

I once saw the following words engraved on a garden bench: "One is nearer to God in a garden than anywhere else on Earth." They derive from a poem of Dorothy Frances Gurney.

Our atheist might snort and tell us that God does not exist, and that the sentence is therefore meaningless because we do not know what the word "God" refers to. But I would reply that if we run the argument the other way round, and proceed from

the known to the unknown, this becomes the first part of a workable definition of God. It would not then be an insight into *gardens*, but an insight into *God*. If we compiled all the sentences ever spoken involving God we would get a composite idea of what is meant by the word. I am going to make a start on that in Chapter 7.

I would like to dwell, for another page or two, on this question of how words get their meanings, to see how well and indeed how poorly we can use words to share ideas. I shall consider first the case of a physical object, because it is enormously simpler to analyse than imaginary objects. Then we can progress to more abstract objects like ideas, dreams, emotions, etc.

A *physical object* like a tree will exist outside the head; but will generate *sense data* that enter the head, and indeed the brain. The brain clearly has an ability to group these sense data into an *image*, and to group repeats of this image into an *idea*. The repeats are not exact, but the brain seems to be able to recognise a pattern, sometimes detecting quite loose similarities, and grouping them into a generalisation to form this idea. (Sometimes the brain thinks it sees a repeat where there is none; the phenomenon we call "déjà vu".)

This ability of the brain to group sense data into categories goes further, forming first a *particular idea* of "tree", and then after several different

tree experiences it seems the brain can generate a *universal idea* of a general tree from the several particular experiences of individual trees.

The *word* "tree" is a token used to label, or evoke, the 'universal idea'; or, via the universal idea, to indicate an existing particular external object (for example, if I pointed and said "that tree").

The idea is mine only; it forms inside my head, and never leaves it; it is private to me. The word, on the other hand, is the common property of a language. We cannot easily extend or change the meaning of the word "tree" without undermining the very process of language. We should perhaps recognise, in passing, that our ideas are built up not solely of sense data but also (by back-formation) from words, because words also can enter the brain and modify the universal idea that was formed there from sense data. For example: if I was told that a cobra was a snake that displayed a flattened, hood-like, swelling just behind the head when threatened, I would know one when I saw one. Let me explore these points further with our original example.

The word "tree" signifies a woody plant of greater than a certain size (so bigger than a bush or a sapling). It is important to distinguish if the word is standing for an existent single "tree out there", or for the idea of a tree; i.e. whether its 'referent' is a 'particular' or a 'universal'. Together we can walk round a particular tree, tap the trunk, pick a

leaf, measure the height, etc... We are not likely to disagree much about any aspect of the tree before us.

If we asked a botanist, and an Arab each to draw a tree, it is probable that each would draw their own *idea* of a tree, each unlike the other. It could seem that we have a controversy on our hands. An Englishman might draw a conventional English tree, a brown trunk surmounted by a spherical mop of green leaves; a cultural stereotype. So, part of what we know about trees comes from sense data by *acquaintance* (as Bertrand Russell puts it [2], but part comes from words, by *description* (again Bertrand Russell's term). The former might predominate for a forester, while the latter predominate for a poet.

From what has been said above, we might expect more controversy when we are dealing with knowledge by description (borrowed cultural ideas), and less when we are dealing with knowledge by acquaintance (experienced ideas, which we ourselves have formed from sense data). This greater reliability of sense data over hearsay would be strongly true if the sense data were external only; more weakly true if the data we experience concern physiological or psychological phenomena coming from inside our bodies, for then we *must* be discussing different things; albeit similar things.

Let us therefore extend our range of objects to include sensations like hunger, dizziness, pins and needles, colour perception; and emotions like anger,

sorrow, love. It is quite clear that we all experience these sensations and emotions, and do so similarly. Even quite young children learn to use the words with confidence.

To summarise: misunderstanding is to be expected in the process of speech. I form an idea, pick a word that more or less matches the idea in my head, send it across to you, where it evokes a similar idea in your head. But your collection of ideas are different from my collection. Each of our ideas are partly formed from observed sense data (external or internal), but partly from received ideas coming into the brain as words.

Now transfer these concepts to the case of 'God'. We each build up a universal idea from a number of experiences, together with much hearsay, and we then attach the word-label 'God' to that universal. But I do not know how the word works for you, and *vice versa*. Misunderstanding seem to be more likely than understanding.

Real and Virtual Images

In the field of optics, physicists use the term "object" for the real entity giving off the light energy. As to the image, however, they distinguish two types: real and virtual. In a real image the light energy passes through the image point. For

example, a real image of the sun can be focussed on a piece of tinder, which soon starts to burn. In a virtual image the light *seems as though* it diverges from the image point, though it does not actually do so. When I look at myself in a mirror, my brain thinks it is looking at a left-handed man standing behind the plane of the glass, but there is (in most cases) no man there. The brain makes a construct, which it regards as a real entity, in order to interpret the light energy that enters the eye. Indeed, it can be very hard, by studying simply the image, to tell whether it is real or virtual, whether the light entering our eyes has travelled straight or has been bent or reflected. (Other cues can help in that case. For example, I may get suspicious if the actions of the observed image are always exactly synchronous with my own.)

I am going to use the concept of a virtual image as a metaphor, for I am going to suggest that our concept of God may have something of the nature of a virtual image. Just as the light coming from a mirror into our eyes may seem to be coming from a point behind the glass, but actually be coming from somewhere else, so also it seems possible that some of the ideas and emotions we experience that suggest to us the presence of a real thing outside ourselves, may be coming from another source. God might then be a name for the virtual construct that we create in order to interpret the feelings we experience.

These psychological states will be different between different people; but they will be similar *ex hypothesi*.

What hypothesis is that, you might well ask; and I would reply: The hypothesis that all humans share all fundamental features. And is that a solid hypothesis, or a flimsy one? Quite solid, as a starting point, I would say, for it is the hypothesis on which a very large part of medical science is based, the hypothesis that allows us to say something about one human from observations made on another; that allows me to know anything about your inner world. It is also the hypothesis that makes language possible; perhaps we can accept it for now, while remembering that it is only an hypothesis. (See below the section on **Subjectivity and Objectivity**.)

Objects, Concepts, Things

I want to distinguish between (a) physical objects, (b) imaginary objects, (c) concepts, (d) Platonic universals, and (e) emotions. Physical objects possess mass and volume and *exist* in space and time, like our piece of string. They are what is normally meant by the word 'object'. Imaginary objects like a golden mountain, or the centaur take place only in the imagination or mind; they do not exist. Concepts, Platonic universals and emotions

require physical objects for their *realization*, their existence; thus 'two', 'the triangle', 'fear', do not exist in themselves but only when there are two objects, three lines or an animal brain.

Alexius Meinong developed his own *Theory of Objects* (*Gegenstandstheorie* [3]) and introduced two useful words. He realized that he could think about objects that did not exist – like a golden mountain or a centaur. He therefore suggested that only material objects *exist* (in a material and temporal sense), but that concepts, numbers, imaginary objects, etc. *subsist*. For his third category, of impossible concepts (such as square circles, or the integers lying between 2 and 3, etc), he coined the verb to *absist*). This reduces the controversy over God to the question: Does God exist, subsit, or absist?

We are familiar with existent physical objects, because everything we have ever seen falls in this category. We know nothing about non-existent *physical objects*, because we have never encountered any. Nor do we know anything about entering or leaving the category of existent thing (i.e. creation or annihilation.)

Imagined Ideas and Imaginary Objects

You may have noticed that I have had to introduce a distinction between imagined and imaginary

objects. If we accept the convention of calling a centaur an imaginary object (following C.S. Peirce and Alexius Meinong), we need a different word for the concept evoked in our head by the word "tree". So I have called that an imagined idea.

Existence and Reality

It is curious that people seldom argue about the existence of anything other than God. Sea lions exist; mermaids do not. There will occasionally be some doubt, as regarding for example the dodo; a bird which existed until late in the 17th century, but probably not thereafter. The question of God's existence, on the other hand, is endlessly discussed. We are not yet ready to tackle that question, for we have yet to build up our concept 'God'. But let us clarify further what we could mean by the terms *exist* and *existence*.

Let us agree that physical objects *exist*, and as such have mass, finite positive extension in space and time, and obey the laws of physics. We do not know much about existence, for example how to get into or out of this category; and even less about non-existence. We can say the *words* "a four-sided triangle", but we cannot conceive it in our mind. Meinong's centaur was conceived in the mind by cutting the head off a horse and replacing

it with a human head and torso; but he knew it was imaginary. 'Objects that do not exist' are not 'objects'; so the category is empty. The dodo is dead; it is not 'non-existent'.

What shall we say about the status of the *properties* of objects, or their *conformations*; do they exist? For example, what about the heat in a kettle, a knot in a piece of string, or a smile on a face? Are these also objects? Obviously not. A smile can come and go without any change in mass. Perhaps we can call them *forms* and say that they *appear*. They are observable by the senses and so can usually be discussed objectively without discord. If forms cannot be said to exist, can we call them *real*? Unfortunately not, without wrenching the word from its roots, for the word reality has the same earthy, 3-dimensional, connotations as existence (Latin rēs, meaning 'thing'). For the time being, we shall have to say of forms that they are not 'real' but that they are 'valid'. Furthermore, these forms or properties can be perfectly objective, available to many observers, and therefore susceptible of considerable agreement.

If the face is a thing and the smile is a form, what is 'happiness'? Let us call it an idea, or an emotion. Ideas and emotions neither exist nor appear; perhaps we can say they are *thought* or *felt.* Ideas and emotions entail the existence of a mind, just as forms require the existence of an object. Ideas

are therefore subjective. They are not objectively observable; they cannot be pointed to. They are felt or thought in ourselves, but in others can only be inferred from actions, or presumed by analogy (as discussed in the next section).

This may serve the discussion for the present, though it is probably oversimplified.

Subjectivity and Objectivity

Science relies heavily on the reproducibility of observations, and consequent agreement between investigators. I want to bridge the gap between the *subjective* and the *objective*; I want to bring the world of feelings and emotions into the world of science. In other words, we have to grapple with what philosophers call the "Problem of Other Minds" (See e.g. Anita Avramides[4] in the excellent online *Stamford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.) Descartes struggled to find anything of which he could be certain, and ended up clutching his famous "*I think, therefore I am*". This seems too skeptical, as it makes the objective scientific study of the external world impossible. Science therefore ignores Descartes' comprehensive doubt, but it sticks faithfully to the criteria of objectivity and reproducibility. And it has proved very fruitful.

An early attempt to justify the notion that other

people are feeling the same sort of things as I am feeling was the Argument by Analogy, annunciated here by J.S. Mill:

"First, they have bodies like me, which I know in my own case, to be the antecedent condition of feelings; and because, secondly, they exhibit the acts, and outward signs, which in my own case I know by experience to be caused by feelings." (Mill, J.S. [5]*)*

This has been modernised into a pragmatic position that the existence of other minds (like my own) is the "Best Explanation" of my relevant observations. If you think the assumption *that I know what you are feeling* is left appearing rather tenuous, reflect on the reinforcement that will come from a discussion among a number of people.

Chapter 4

SOCIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF GOD AND RELIGION

AUCTOR You say you believe in God; so, tell me about God.

CREDENS He is omnipresent, all-seeing, all-knowing, just, yet loving, ...

AUCTOR Hey! Wait-a-moment. I really meant, 'What do you know about God from your own personal experience, your own sense-data'. Don't just tell me things that you have heard said.

CREDENS Ah! That certainly changes things.

LECTOR If I may butt in, perhaps you will both allow that we can experience external objects, and we know that we cannot create them. We could then use the term God to describe the creator of real objects.

AUCTOR Yes; but you must admit that God is then only a label for ignorance. We know nothing about creation, so we still know nothing about God. To say that God is the creator of physical objects is, in fact, to add nothing to our ignorance except a name for it.

CREDENS I don't know much about God, personally. But I suppose I think of my conscience as coming directly from God.

AUCTOR Excellent! That is at least a beginning. If we eliminate hearsay and belief, it turns out that we know rather little about God; but we do seem to know some things.

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I suggest we reject, for the present, all that we have heard and read about God, but look instead to whatever sensations or ideas or impulses we experience that could be regarded as the subject matter of religion. In this way we step away from all questions of belief and disbelief, and all questions of how to explain this raw data.

In our metaphor of the mirror (see Appendix to Chapter 3), some light enters our eyes and it seems to come from a source behind the glass. Of course we know, in the case of the mirror, where the light really comes from, but at this stage we are interested only in what enters the head, and it certainly comes

from the glass. By analogy, religious ideas or feelings are experienced and, in order to make sense of them, they have been interpreted, in the brain, as though coming from a 'virtual image'; so, foisted onto that virtual construct called 'God'. However, in this chapter we are not asking what we think we are feeling, but what we are actually feeling. What (I now ask) are these ideas and sensations in our brains, that we ascribe to God? This could be called the sociology or psychology of religion, as opposed to the theology. It is a scientific question, and part of the Natural History of *Homo sapiens*.

Perhaps we could summarise this *experience of religion* as (in general) including:

[a] A sense of good, evil, sin, and guilt;
[b] A desire to express gratitude to someone responsible for our happiness;
[c] A desire to feel valued and loved;
[d] A need for a purpose;
[e] A need for guidance;
[f] A hope for real practical interventions on our behalf.

A consciousness of sin, and a sense of guilt is certainly part of the ethical equipment of *Homo sapiens*. I read recently of a Jewish Frenchman trying to escape over the Pyrenees from the Nazis' occupation of France carrying a large amount of cash intended for de Gaulle in London. He never made it

to the coast. His republican Spanish *passeur* was suspected of killing him for the money, was charged with the murder, but was not convicted. However, the Spaniard's guilt was confirmed decades later when, dying of cancer, he confessed and offered the dead man's son relics of his father and the residue of the money in return for forgiveness. He wanted to confess, and he wanted to be forgiven. He wanted these badly enough to risk punishment and to forgo the money that had prompted the crime.

For those people culturally exposed to the God of Abraham (thus Jews, Christians and Moslems), it seems natural to regard 'God' as the definer and judge of morals. But in other cultures the same functions are assigned to other divinities. Ancient Greek and pre-Greek stories tell of the avenging 'furies' (*Erinyes*, relentless divine female pursuers of anyone guilty of high crimes, like matricide, breaking an oath, or the insolence of children to parents). These stories do not aim to explain what is bad about the crime; no-one tries to explain that killing your mother is wrong — that is taken as obvious. Rather they describe the operation of guilt in the head of the criminal. The Jewish tribes were told that Moses was directly instructed by God what to write down as the Ten Commandments. But there were no tablets of stone in that Greek world. We note that the different beliefs about how the code of morals was passed down do not greatly affect the

content of that code, which seems rather constant across the human species.

For many people, words like 'good', 'ought', and 'sin' would seem, in theory, to make no sense if God did not exist. This was the position of the moral philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe (Q.V., herself a catholic by conviction). However, they are wrong. It turns out that the fundamental morals of believers and atheists are very largely the same.

The desire to love (and to be loved by) a transcendental *someone* has seldom been more beautifully expressed than by Augustine of Hippo (in his "Confessions"): *"Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."*

The question: "What is life for?" is so obvious, it must cross the minds of most people at some stage in their lives. It is, however, a trap; something of a *Loaded Question*. Merely to ask the question, without attempting to answer it, seems to imply that there is an answer. Without postulating God, the questioner seems nevertheless to have postulated the possibility of an answer, therefore something rather God-like; something that could have intention, and a plan. They are looking for 'the giver of meaning' and it already seems rather like a person, and to require a name. Beware of asking: "What is life for"?

A child is guided by its parents. An adolescent will

feel the need for guidance as soon as they miss their parent. (I find a purse; should I keep it? The girl is pregnant; should I marry her?) They will seek inside their own heads for guidance, and furthermore, in many cases (and this may seem the mysterious part) they will find guidance. This in a human; much more so in a migrating bird. The young cuckoo never sees its parents but sets off to fly south several weeks after its parents have left. Its guide must be minute physical cues like magnetic fields, or the angle of the sun at dawn and dusk, but I doubt the bird thinks of it in terms of elector-magnetic fields. The young bird probably feels a *mysterious guiding force*. The answer to prayer may, or may not, come from a personal, external, God; so also the 'flight instructions' of a migrating bird. Or both may have a non-magical explanation. The latter alternative leaves the laws of physics intact and untransgressed.

The skeptical reader will have wondered at the amazing things that fellow humans can believe. One of the most amazing is believing that God will intervene physically on our behalf in the pre-ordained running of his universe; we only have to ask. People might pray: "Please bring us fine weather for our important day", or "Please send me a loose ball so I can score a big hit". Clearly, for someone who has already believed in a supernatural God, it will not seem impossible that such a God could have the power to hear these petitions, and to grant

them if he wishes; even though it is ludicrously unlikely that he would use those powers on such trivial occasions. Think of the task of attending to the hopes and requests of all the people on this planet, expressed and unexpressed, plus those of all the worms and insects also, not forgetting those on the other planets in other galaxies; never mind deciding how to resolve clashing needs. Yet people will believe that he does attend and does respond. Others will cross their fingers, or clutch their thumbs, or take a small teddy-bear into the exam hall, if they can do nothing else more profitable. We can see the immense power of hope, even if we do not feel it ourselves.

As sociologists of human religious behaviour, we have to recognise these needs, beliefs, fears, and hopes. We doubtless experience many of them ourselves.

Speculative Explanations

There is much of the child in all this, and God can seem like an invention of the growing child in an attempt to retain the parent-child relationship; a sort of virtual surrogate parent. However, that is mere speculation.

Since the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species" (1859) it has become easy to believe

that man has evolved as a social animal and as such has developed a moral faculty; perhaps as a necessary attribute for community living. This genetically based moral force might be quite weak, and possibly depends on kinship. There is clearly a strong biological 'reason' for protecting the survival of your children (the selfish gene argument), less when it come to protecting your nephews and nieces, practically none when it comes to strangers from your tribe. (Other tribes are, on this analysis, competitors, and enemies.) Scientific papers have been written on models that would allow the evolution of *altruism* — where some members of a tribe rush out to their certain death to protect other (genetically related) members of the tribe.

When Richard Dawkins sees someone caring for an unrelated child, he talks of a "misfiring" of the altruistic gene [6]. Following an alternative train of thought, Dan Batson found experimental support for what he calls *Empathic Concern and Altruism in Humans*, for it was found that succour was more readily forthcoming for a wounded dog than a wounded child, or adult [7]. The supposed gene is not so much "mis-firing" as "back-firing".

These also are mere speculative hypotheses. And in any case, it is not our quest here to explain man's moral or religious behaviour; we are simply acknowledging that it exists, and to some extent exploring it.

Chapter 5

THE COPLESTON – RUSSELL DEBATE ON THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

There was an fascinating debate on British radio in 1948 between the philosopher and religious agnostic Lord Bertrand Russell, and the Jesuit priest and philosopher Father Frederick Copleston. We can use this debate as a way of recapitulating the arguments so far deployed in this book. The complete transcript of this debate is available in many places [8,9]. When I quote the dialogue between Copleston and Russell in this chapter the words ascribed are not mine but those of the named debaters, as closely as they could be deciphered from the tapes, though I have added punctuation in places where I believe it is helpful in grasping the argument at first reading. I place my comments in italics and in brackets.

Copleston (like our CREDENS) believed in the existence of a God that he described as "…. a supreme personal Being, distinct from the world and Creator of the world." In this context supreme is presumed to mean omnipotent, and a 'personal Being' rules out God being mere energy. Claiming that God is distinct implies being separate from and outside the universe (i.e. 'transcendent'), while Creator implies that the universe depends on this God for its existence. This is the classic Abrahamic God, brought up to date for the 20th century. Russell's philosophical position was agnostic; neither the existence nor non-existence of God could be known, though he admitted that in ordinary conversation he was an atheist.

Copleston's Metaphysical Proof

Copleston first laid out his Metaphysical Proof of the existence of God, to which Russell replied as follows:

RUSSELL Well, certainly the question "Does the cause of the world exist?" is a question that has meaning. But if you say "Yes, God is the cause of the world" you're using God as a proper name; then "God exists" will not be a statement that has meaning; that is the position that I am

maintaining. Because, therefore, it will follow that it cannot be an analytic proposition ever to say that this or that exists. Take for example, suppose you take as your subject "the existent round-square," it would look like an analytic proposition that "the existent round-square exists," but it doesn't exist.

COPLESTON No, it doesn't, then surely you can't say it doesn't exist unless you have a conception of what existence is. As to the phrase "existent round-square," I should say that it has no meaning at all.

RUSSELL I quite agree. Then I should say the same thing in another context in reference to a 'Necessary Being.'

COPLESTON Well, we seem to have arrived at an impasse. To say that a Necessary Being is a being that must exist and cannot not exist has for me a definite meaning. For you it has no meaning.

(This exchange seems to me rather garbled, either by the speakers or in the transcribing. In any case it has reached an impasse, by the speakers' own admission. We clearly do not know enough about 'existence' and 'non-existence', and the process of creation. This point was conceded by Copleston a minute later.)

COPLESTON Yes, [God is] a being the essence of which is to exist. But I should not be willing to argue

the existence of God simply from the idea of His essence because I don't think we have any clear intuition of God's essence as yet. I think we have to argue from the world of experience to God.

(*This was the essence of my Chapter 4; metaphysics gets us nowhere. Neither of the debaters knows the cause of the universe. Copleston calls it God. Russell says that calling it God brings us no further forward. We shall have to look at the world to proceed.)*

Copleston's Religious Argument

(Copleston argues next from the religious experience of a Transcendent being. It is an emotional experience of "a loving, but unclear, awareness of some object which irresistibly seems to the experiencer as something transcending the self, something transcending all the normal objects of experience, something which cannot be pictured or conceptualized, but of the reality of which doubt is impossible — at least during the experience". He calls it his Religious Argument for the Existence of God, but admits it is not a strong argument.)

Copleston …. I'm speaking strictly of mystical experience proper…. I mean simply the experience (and I quite admit it is indefinable) of the transcendent object or of what seems to be a

transcendent object. I remember Julian Huxley in some lecture saying that religious experience, or mystical experience, is as much a real experience as falling in love…. Well, I believe that when we …. fall in love, well, we fall in love with somebody and not with nobody.

RUSSELL May I interrupt for a moment here. That is by no means always the case. Japanese novelists never consider that they have achieved a success unless large numbers of real people commit suicide for love of the imaginary heroine.

(This somewhat flippant point is one I covered in Chapter 2 on belief. The physiological response, be it 'fear' or 'love' to an imaginary object is similar or the same as to a real object, because both are in the end imagined. 'Falling in love with God' is proof of 'falling in love' but not proof of 'the existence of God'.)

Copleston's Moral Argument

(The argument then moves to the Moral Argument for the Existence of God.)

RUSSELL But aren't you now saying in effect, "I mean by God whatever is good or the sum total of what is good -- the system of what is good, and, therefore, when a young man loves anything

that is good he is loving God". Is that what you're saying, because if so, it wants a bit of arguing.

COPLESTON I don't say, of course, that God is the sum-total or system of what is good in the pantheistic sense; I'm not a pantheist, but I do think that all goodness reflects God in some way and proceeds from Him, so that in a sense the man who loves what is truly good, loves God even if he doesn't advert to God. But still I agree that the validity of such an interpretation of a man's conduct depends on the recognition of God's existence, obviously.

RUSSELL Yes, but that's a point to be proved.

COPLESTON Quite so, ...

RUSSELL You see, I feel that some things are good and that other things are bad. I love the things that are good, that I think are good, and I hate the things that I think are bad. I don't say that these things are good because they participate in the Divine goodness.

Copleston: Yes, but what's your justification for distinguishing between good and bad or how do you view the distinction between them?

RUSSELL I don't have any justification any more than I have when I distinguish between blue and yellow. What is my justification for distinguishing between blue and yellow? I can see they are different.

COPLESTON Well, that is an excellent justification, I agree. You distinguish blue and yellow by seeing them, so you distinguish good and bad by what faculty?

RUSSELL By my feelings.

COPLESTON By your feelings. Well, that's what I was asking. You think that good and evil have reference simply to feeling?

(As with the Metaphysical Argument, we see that Copleston seems to be merely adding the name 'God' to an entity; to the creator of the universe in one case, to the sum-total of what is 'good' in the other. But whereas we knew nothing about the creation of the universe, it is (I am arguing) potentially possible to know the "sum-total of what feels good", by examining ourselves and discussing our results with other people.

This is crucial to the whole argument and purpose of this book. It turns theology from recondite hot-air into a matter of science and observation.)

(Copleston continued.)

COPLESTON Well, … The vast majority of the human race will make, and always have made, some distinction between right and wrong. The vast majority, I think, has some consciousness of an obligation in the moral sphere. It is my opinion that the perception of values and the consciousness of moral law and obligation are

> best explained through the hypothesis of a transcendent ground of value and of an author of the moral law. ....

("Best explains"! If you already believe in a transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, personal non-thing perhaps it is a neat explanation of the set of reproducible, inherited and learnt responses that we call morality. But if such a God is unimaginable and unbelievable it is no explanation at all. I want people to focus their minds, not on the image behind the mirror which can be doubted, but instead on the real source of the light that creates the projected image of God. I think this 'light' comes from our community — our fellow humans.

Dawkins [6], in Chapter 6 of his "The God Delusion", questioned the root of morality, asking "Why are we good?" He pointed out that atheists scored as well as theists on simple mathematical tests of morality, like "Under what circumstance might you kill one person to save five?". He argued (as have many others) that altruism can have Darwinian survival value in several social contexts, making it credible that altruism has indeed evolved in social animals by natural selection, thus dispensing with the need to base morality in God. He anticipated the protest that some altruistic actions, like feeding other people's babies, have no survival value for the selfish genes that code such actions, by calling such actions "misfirings of the

altruistic gene". The gene evolved (he could argue) in the context of an inbred clan in which a hungry baby was likely to be related to the altruistic feeder. So, to the question "Is it a supernatural God that makes us moral?" Dawkins could robustly answer "No! It is natural selection". I offer the following rephrasing: "Is it a supernatural God that makes us moral? No. It is an internal sensation of morality that makes us moral, but people have called it God."

I do this not simply to annoy R. Dawkins, but because I think this is a correct analysis of a very large part of religion as it has developed over the last 2000 years. We are not talking about the Stone Age God, the supernatural, pre-scientific, God, but the concept that lies behind the teachings of Jesus, and innumerable other saints and sinners who have used the word "God" to embody their concept of right and wrong.

To the extent that God is supposed to have a personality, is supposed to love, praise, blame, etc., in-so-far-as God talks to mankind, bids us do this or not do that, to precisely that extent God is clearly a human construct. The Dawkins-type atheist does not deny morality; he merely wishes to say it is not supernatural, but natural. This seems completely valid, because it seems tautological, given that 'natural' includes 'that which is', and excludes only 'that which is not'. Those people who feel bidden to love their neighbour may like to say that they love their neighbour because Jesus bade us love our neighbour. Or they may not

ascribe their feeling to Jesus. It makes no difference to the feelings. Morality seems to be a 'vague bundle of feelings and teachings', which was codified and spoken of, by some, as the will of God. To dismiss God as a delusion should never make us dismiss the vague bundle. It remains as important for us as when it was described as 'the will of God'; as important, but less pompous.)

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Appendix to Chapter 5

(I have had my chance to comment; now I let the others have their say.)

CREDENS When Father Coplestone and Lord Russell debated the existence of God [8,9], Coplestone offered three types of proof of God's existence; a metaphysical proof, a religious proof, and a moral proof. His metaphysical proof was to point out that all the things in the universe are individually 'contingent'; i.e. they cannot explain their own existence but depend on some prior cause. In that situation the universe as a whole requires a prior cause that is not itself contingent.

LECTOR Were you persuaded?

CREDENS I thought Coplestone got the better of that argument.

LECTOR I agree, but Russell bungled his rebuttal. He said that the sum total of contingent objects does not itself 'have to be' contingent, which may be right; but he sounded a little dogmatic and arogant, as though he knew about 'contingency' but did not need to prove it. I incline to think that the sum total of contingent things probably would be contingent, rather than be non-contingent (self creating). So I think the universe would need a non-contingent explanation of some sort. However, I think Russell should have said instead that we do not know anything about non-contingent things; least of all whether they exist or not.

AUCTOR Excellent. I agree. A non-contingegnt God is beyond our ken; but an existing non-contingent God is surely a contradiction.

LECTOR As you said before, given that 'natural' includes 'that which is', and excludes only 'that which is not', it seems odd to invoke a supernatural entity.

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CREDENS What about Coppleston's second argument; the religious argument; that to love God implies the existence of a God, just as to love poetry implies the existence of at least one poem.

LECTOR Coplestone was aware that this was a very weak argument, and did not push it. You can fear a dream and love a fiction.

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CREDENS Then what about Coppleston's third argument; the moral argument; that we sense the presence of God, in our consciousness of good and evil, etc?

LECTOR Well, if I granted, as I am inclined, that such feelings are general to mankind (though perhaps not universal), I could only conclude that we have a consciousness of good and evil; I certainly could not conclude the existence of a supreme being who knows all about everything, and fiddles with physical laws.

CREDENS Coplestone argued that the concepts of 'ought' and 'goodness' are meaningless without the concept of 'God' to require the 'ought' and to define the 'good'. How can you get real moral laws from an imagined source? That is why Coplestone (and I) have to believe that God is real

LECTOR I thought we had established that real fear can be caused by an imagined danger — like a ghost. Russell claimed that he could distinguish good and evil like he could distinguish yellow and blue; the latter by sight; the former by feeling. He also claimed that the feeling of

'ought' is the result of an imagined disapproval, either by parent, nanny, or God; but in any case imagined disapproval. (Has he perhaps got too many explanations; an instinctive source and a learned source?)

AUCTOR This is where I jump in. I think Russell is right in that teaching reinforces instinct. I think I do a chapter on it—Chapter 10. Our inherent 'knowledge' of right and wrong it weak and slow; it is mostly a case of regretting things we have already done. It helps to know what Nanny thinks, and Ma and Pa, and their friends. And Copleston is right, if we accept that he is mearly renaming morality. My position is that the word 'God' has significance. I believe it makes sense to talk of God's will, to say that you love God, or that "God is love", or "God forgives", or "Allah is merciful'".

CREDENS It sounds as though you believe 'in God', but not 'that God exists'. How can you believe in something that does not exist?

AUCTOR As far as I am concerned happiness and remorse are not objects, and therefore do not exist. But I can believe in happiness, and remorse, can I not? They are mental states. You know if you have got them. Most God-believers (just as most God-deniers) seem to be talking about an existent God; something that you cannot see, but know that it is there — like an electron, or a black-hole. However, some people nowadays

are talking about this other sort of God; a non-existent God, if you like, or 'God as a metal state'.

CREDENS I suppose so. But I don't think philosophers use the term 'exist' in such a narrow sense. Most would say that happiness exists.

AUCTOR It is barmy having theologians like Copleston affirming the existence of God but meaning that some non-contigent, non-thing, exists, while to a skeptic like Russell, or me, a non-contigent, non-thing cannot exist, *a priori*. We had to clarify 'existence' in Chapter 3. And we may have to introduce further new meanings, new interpretations; maybe even new words. If we stick to old ideas we shall repeat old arguments. I would… "come out by the same door as in I went" (to quote Omar Khayyám).

LECTOR New meanings for old words? First you change the meaning of the word 'existence'; now you propose to use the word 'God' in a new way. What is the point?

AUCTOR I am not inventing; I am only unpacking the word; for I think that there are many meanings extant for the word God. Indeed, given the present world population, there are probably several billion different meanings, all legitimate. I am looking for a valid meaning that you and I can find useful. What is more, I don't think we are barred from changing the meaning of a word, if the old usage causes confusion. I suggest we aim only to

be consistent in our terminology, and make sense with our logic. But ultimately, I am not too worried about a word; it is the hopes, aspirations, and emotions of love, fear, duty, that I am concerned with. Please let us keep, and teach, these.

LECTOR Is your position that of the humanist; that our concepts of good and evil are entirely from within ourselves, that 'God' is basically human in origin?

AUCTOR Exactly so. It certainly seems that God is indeed made in man's image, if you consider his properties. But I think I am doing a bit more. For one thing, the concept of God that I am putting forward (in the next few chapters) is of an objectively knowable 'God Concept' outside ourselves, which generates objectively knowable moral laws. And secondly, whether the construct is new or old, objective or subjective, I think it is very close to what mankind has been attempting to obey, love, and worship these last few thousand years, even if that was without knowing the nature of the God so worshiped.

LECTOR OK then. Your shot. Where do you go from here?

AUCTOR The term 'God' covers a number of concepts: God the creator, God the giver of moral laws, and of purpose, the judge, the rewarder, the friend. I am not going to discuss creation; but I think we can include the others concepts.

Chapter 6

GEORGE FOX AND THE QUAKERS

"Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light, and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?" (George Fox, at Ulverston, 1652.[10]*)*

George Fox (1624-1691), son of a Leicestershire weaver, during his early twenties came, by small steps and through great troubles of the mind, finally to a big idea which he grasped tenaciously and followed where it led him for the rest of his life. The small steps included the observation that a training at Oxford or Cambridge university was not the main requirement to make a good preacher; and the realisation that God did not dwell (was not confined) in a church building 'built by man' but

could as well be found in an orchard. And he was thus led, step by step, away from reliance on the religious teachings of others, and more and more to rely on what he called "that Inward Light, Spirit, and Grace by which all might know their salvation". The big idea, that came to him at the age of 23, was that we do know, in our own head, what is right and what is wrong; there was, in his head, "a voice as of Jesus that spoke directly" to his condition; and his heart lept.

Fox went from place to place, getting up in churches after the priest had finished, or talking to hundreds gathered on the open fells to hear him. One hearer described (in 1694) her first encounter with Fox in the spring of 1652 — Margaret Fell, the wife of the circuit judge Thomas Fell, living at Swathmore Hall, Ulverston, on the edge of Morecombe Bay. Thomas Fell was away on the Welsh Circuit but the family kept open house to touring preachers, and Fox and friends stayed the night there. The next day Fox went down and into the church, then already full and singing hymns, stood upon a bench and asked the minister if he might speak. He was allowed, so there he stood and held forth. Margaret Fell, surrounded by her children, was so astonished at his doctrines that she stood up in her pew, but then Fox spoke these words (I quote Margaret Fell, [10,11]):

> "Christ saith this, and the apostles say this; but what canst thou say? Art thou a child of the Light, and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest, is it inwardly from God?" &c. This opened me so, that it cut me to the heart; and then I saw clearly we were all wrong. So I sat down in my pew again, and cried bitterly: and I cried in my spirit to the Lord, "We are all thieves; we are all thieves; we have taken the scriptures in words, and know nothing of them in ourselves."

A magistrate, being present, ordered that the voluble Fox be taken out of the church, but Mistress Fell called out from her place "Let him alone, why may not he speak as well as any other?"

Fox was often beaten, arrested, and imprisoned, and it is true that he did deliberately provoke people, particularly the authorities. He refused to doff his hat to gentry, refused to distinguish in his speech between his equals and his 'betters', refused to swear any oath whether of allegiance to the king (on his restoration) or any other, and refused to pay tithes to the church. These so-called *testimonies* to his vision of The Truth cost Fox and his followers (including Margaret Fell, after her first husband died) many years in prison and much hardship. But they were stubborn people, and convinced. It became

a favourite trick of magistrates to require an oath of allegiance, knowing that a Quaker would refuse. In 1664 Margaret Fell protested in court that "....I love, own, and honour the King and desire his peace and welfare; and that we may live a peaceable, a quiet and a godly life under his government, according to the Scriptures; and this is my allegiance to the King. And as for the oath itself, Christ Jesus, the King of Kings, hath commanded me not to swear at all, neither by heaven, nor by earth, nor by any other Oath." She spent the next 4 years in prison. [12]

Eventually, in 1686 after 34 years of persecution, King James II signed an act of Toleration and Quakers up and down the country were freed from prison. It had become clear that Quakers were peaceful, sober, honest and religious folk, and that the persecution was a rearguard action by the privileged. It was political rather than religious, and justice lay with the Quakers. It became embarrassing to charge a person for not taking off his hat, as though the superiority of the gentry lay in the position of a hat.

As to Fox's core theological claim, that each of us can know in our own head the truth of the teaching of Jesus — this seemed at least partly true. We, today, still have to acknowledge that partial truth. It is, of course, a rather dangerous truth. Some people have in their heads all manner of nonsense besides the basic knowledge of good and evil that we have been arguing for. I am not arguing, with Fox, that

each human is as endowed as every other with the insight necessary to be a teacher of morals. What I am arguing is that there is no other source than the human head for these insights; that it is the human mind that has defined what we regard as moral, and what we regard as immoral. Morals, on this view, are the product of a collection of minds, built up over generations.

Were this proposition accepted as true, there would be some grounds for recognising this moral-defining collective mind as standing in the rôle previously assigned to God.

Chapter 7

EXPERIENCING GOD II.

"God is the helping of man by man; and that is the way to eternal glory." (Posidonius, quoted by Pliny, quoted by Murray [13])

A great many of our fellow citizens find no difficulty in believing in a magical, miracle-working, all seeing, supernatural deity, judging and helping us (his 'children'); indeed they rather like the idea. However, more that half in the United Kingdom now say, when polled, that they have no religion.

Both groups have problems, though they are of very different sorts. Those who believe in a supernatural God are prone to believe nonsense (even violent nonsense), and can be conned into giving their money away to swindlers. Those who believe 'super-natural' to be synonymous with 'non-existent', and have concluded that they are able to

live without religion, may miss out on some of the heart-warming practices of their religious fellow citizens, like telling the truth, looking after each other, or giving to charity. They may sense a moral vacuum and an abyss of personal loneliness. There is a third group, who acknowledge their need for religion but who cannot quite believe it, as it is presented; the doubters.

This chapter is addressed to that third group; well, perhaps to the last two groups. It suggests that the concept of a supernatural God (which I am calling God I, for clarity) is not the only conception of God that fits the facts of everyday experience. Morals, we have already seen, are the product of a *collection of minds*, built up over generations. This matter-of-fact conception I am calling God II.

Whence Morality?

In the early nineteen eighties the UK Government felt it necessary to decide on the morality of experiments on *in vitro* fertilisation and set up a Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology (1982-4). The committee of 16, under the chairmanship of Mary Warnock, a respected moral philosopher, represented a 'broad spectrum of opinion' (we are told; though there were 2 Dames, 5 Professors, 3 Doctors, and only

6 without titles). The *Warnock Report (1984*) says that the ultimate concern to be addressed by the committee was the question "what kind of society is morally praiseworthy, and what recommendations are appropriate to make the current society more morally praiseworthy".

Their Report was well received, and the committee was so successful in establishing a consensus that the Government set up another Home Office Committee on *Animal Experimentation (1984-1989)*, again under the chairmanship of Dame Mary Warnock. This committee approach seems to have become accepted as the way in which a consensus on morality is established. It also seems (to me) to be a tacit acceptance of the notion that our knowledge of "good and evil" is most directly discovered by getting together a number of thinking people and asking them to think on exactly that — "good and evil".

Reflecting, years later, on her experiences, Mary Warnock wrote a book titled "*Dishonest to God: On Keeping Religion Out of Politics*" [14]. She argued that religious and theological issues should have no place in issues of public morality, particularly in a society largely indifferent to (and indeed ignorant of) religion. One chapter bears the title "Where Morality Comes From".

So, theologians out; lay philosophers in. A complete revolution, you might think. But not so, say

I, for according to our present thesis the thinking mind is where morality always did come from. The conscience of the people is the source of morality, and always has been; though over the centuries that source has been muddied by the guesswork of chancers, and by deliberate falsehoods from the priesthood and political authorities.

Whence forgiveness?

Let us turn from morality to forgiveness. I am sure we can all call to mind imperfect actions, of ours and of others: hard words spoken in the heat of an argument, wrong decisions made in haste and regretted at leisure, a student cyclist fatally hits a pedestrian, an exhausted trainee doctor mis-reads a microgram for a milligram, a first-time rapist whose optimism swamped his prudence. There are many mistakes and offences that we might censure and, if ours, regret. It would be nice to be forgiven, to be allowed back into society. And indeed to forgive; for hatred is a bitter gall to sleep on, wake with and with which to take our daily bread.

> *"The quality of mercy……is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes."* [15]

Who actually does the forgiving? Is it not other

people; ideally the victims, or (failing that) the community? King Henry II, full of remorse for the death of Thomas à Becket, walked barefoot and in sack-cloth through the streets of Canterbury, to the Cathedral and allowed himself to be flogged by monks with withies. He had to be seen by the people to be doing penance, because it was the forgiveness of the common people that he needed.

Does the universe have a purpose?

There is no need to point out that loneliness can be mitigated by humbly joining and taking part in a caring community.

What about the question I described in Chapter 4 as 'loaded': "What is life for?". Or its more piquant and personal version: "What is my life for?". But first let us clarify what exactly we are craving? Do we want a plan, a rôle, or a purpose? If we can make our own plan (work, marry, learn to play the piano, die), that becomes trivial, and is surely not our real problem. A rôle can also be self-assigned, if we have sufficient self-confidence; e.g. "I am a wife, a mother, and a doctor". But is life worthwhile? Does it matter? What is the purpose? Who am I doing this for? Why was the universe created in the first place? Those could remain as problems.

I recently came across a formulation that

provides partial answers, and sufficient answers for me. I had been interested in the Stoics since my teens in the nineteen fifties, their stiff-upper-lips, their calm acceptance of death and their confident dedication to 'goodness'; but I was puzzled as to how they defined goodness without reference to God. I found the answer recently in Gilbert Murray's "Five Stages of Greek Religion" (on my own bookshelves these last 30 years; and free online, [13]) The Stoic's answer is found in the Greek word "*Phusis*", from which we derive our word Physics. *Phusis* meant 'growing' or 'the way things grow', and was translated into Latin as *Natura*. I like to think of it as 'following our nature', or 'going in the direction prescribed by the universe'. It need not be the same for all people; it is the destiny of an artist to create beauty, of a governor 'to produce a flourishing and virtuous city'. Murray quotes [13] with approval a sentence from Pliny's *Natural History* (though perhaps traceable back to the Greek stoic Posidonius): "God is the helping of man by man; and that is the way to eternal glory."

Are there rewards and punishments?

What about the prospect of heaven (as the reward for a good life) or hell (as the punishment for a wicked one)? Would we choose 'good' over

'bad' if there were nothing in it for us? Heaven was supposed to be the reward for virtue, but in most cases there are few visible benefits attending the virtuous in this life, so the gullible believers were assured by the church that they could definitely rely on a posthumous reward, in Heaven, for all eternity. Traditional Hell also seems to involve persistence after death in everlasting torment.

Jean Paul Sartre, in his play "Huis Clos", created the famous phrase "Hell is other people".[16] He jokingly suggests that the tortures of hell can be visualised as being shut up for all eternity with appropriate people. But there is no need to introduce the improbable element of surviving death for all eternity, except as good theatre; it is quite possible to see "other people" as exactly the appropriate consequence for most sins; the pain of the victims, the horror of our loved ones. Similarly, it is at least as possible to see the gratitude of "other people" as a very plausible realisation of *heaven in this life*. Other people are indeed a powerful reason for behaving well, and not badly.

It always comes back to people. People are the source of our moral code, of forgiveness, punishment for evil, reward for good, comfort against loneliness. And our best guess as to the purpose of it all is to do what it is in our nature to do, and to do it in such a way that increases happiness, and decreases unhappiness.

Chapter 8

QUAKER PRACTICE

Introduction

I mentioned George Fox and the early Quakers back in Chapter 6. The excuse then was that Fox had introduced me, with startling clarity, to the difference between traditional religion taken on trust as hearsay from others, and direct religion experienced inwardly, as from God. I felt no trace of doubt about the meaning of Fox's 'inwardly from God', so I shall not explain it further here. Religion, approached in this way, held out an excellent prospect that, among Quakers, I would be able to escape all those religious tenets, teachings, and practices that I myself abhor, and that lead atheists to turn their backs on religion. I would be licensed to ignore all the opinions of priests and Sunday school teachers about miracles, virgins, life-after-death,

intercessional prayer. And so it has proved; I found a religious community that seemed to me free of nonsense, and full of wisdom.

Some people in Britain and elsewhere claim indifference to the moral climate in which they live. Others care, and at least aim to live in virtue, to speak truth, and to co-operate rather than compete. There is a favourite phrase among Quakers whose curious language derives from George Fox himself: *"Be patterns….that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in everyone….."*.[10] I like that — speaking to and answering "that of God" in everyone. Do not mind if someone professes indifference, address all people as though they care for virtue, co-operation and truth.

All the points that I shall mention in this chapter pertain to the 'Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain'; and all numbered quotations can be found in their publication "*Quaker Faith and Practice*", which is available in print and online [10]. That book is constantly under revision. Every few years some phrases are modified, withdrawn or added. Some quotations come down to us in the original language of the 17th century; others from the 21st century. In that book (as in the Society generally) Quakers usually refer to themselves as Friends (note the capital F). It is short for their original self-style

"Friends in the Truth". In formal contexts, Quakers style themselves members of the "Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)".

Some of the historic Quaker Testimonies have been modified over time, as have Quaker attitudes to many things. This seems to be one of the greatest advantages of a religious practice based on the Inner Light over religions based on a written text, for it is the inner light of those present today that counts. In consequence it remains always up-to-date. Quakers no longer use the outdated second person singular pronouns— 'thee', and 'thou'; intended originally to level their address to avoid flattering those who regard themselves as 'betters'. Their so-called 'Plain dress' soon became too distinctive, and was then clearly a vehicle for pride; so it was abandoned. Surviving testimonies include: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Justice, Equality, and Sustainability, to which could be added Community (to make the mnemonic SPICES, as in Friends' School, Connecticut, *Q.V.*)

Quaker Meeting

The central focus of Quaker life is known as '*Meeting for Worship*'. It is the Quaker equivalent of going to church. Its power and purpose can be gauged by some quotations from *Quaker Faith and Practice*.

1.07 Be aware of the spirit of God at work in the ordinary activities and experience of your daily life. ....

> 1.08 Worship is our response to an awareness of God. We can worship alone, but when we join with others in expectant waiting we may discover a deeper sense of God's presence. We seek a gathered stillness in our meetings for worship so that all may feel the power of God's love drawing us together and leading us.....
>
> 1.09 In worship we enter with reverence into communion with God and respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Come to meeting for worship with heart and mind prepared. Yield yourself and all your outward concerns to God's guidance so that you may find 'the evil weakening in you and the good raised up'.

God, in these phrases, is not defined, except by the sort of backwards definition I described in Chapter 3. God is regarded as related to and justifying that feeling that Quakers seek, and find, in the 'expectant waiting' and 'gathered stillness' 'drawing us together'. If you feels nothing, God is not present for you; if you feel something, that is God for you. There is usually much silence in Meeting for Worship, and some speaking.

2.55 Remember that to every one is given a share of responsibility for the meeting for worship, whether that service be in silence or through the spoken word. Do not assume that vocal ministry is never to be your part. If the call to speak comes, do not let the sense of your own unworthiness, or the fear of being unable to find the right words, prevent you from being obedient to the leading of the Spirit.

2.73 The intent of all speaking is to bring into the life, and to walk in, and to possess the same, and to live in and enjoy it, and to feel God's presence.

Quaker Business Meeting

There are several distinctive features of the way Quaker Meetings conduct business:

[a] Business meetings are also Meetings for Worship. Those present aim to be aware of the 'presence of God'.

[b] There is typically a pause after someone has spoken so that their contribution can be reflected on. Each contribution is taken to be sincere.

[c] There is no voting. What is sought is not a majority, nor even a consensus, but unanimity, for what is sought is the 'right' way forward, God's way.

[d] A draft minute is prepared by the clerk at the end of the discussion on each point. It might cause renewed discussion. When there is no longer any dissent, that minute is filed and preserved. And the meeting moves to the next item.

> 3.02 In our meetings for worship we seek through the stillness to know God's will for ourselves and for the gathered group. Our meetings for church affairs, in which we conduct our business, are also meetings for worship based on silence, and they carry the same expectation that God's guidance can be discerned if we are truly listening together and to each other, and are not blinkered by preconceived opinions. It is this belief that God's will can be recognised through the discipline of silent waiting which distinguishes our decision-making process from the secular idea of consensus. We have a common purpose in seeking God's will through waiting and listening, believing that every activity of life should be subject to divine guidance.

Quaker Marriage Ceremony

Quakers, early on, insisted that their procedure (described below) constituted marriage, not merely the solemnisation of marriage. God

married the couple while the Gathered Meeting merely witnessed. They persuaded the state that a subsequent civil service was not necessary, as the Quakers kept scrupulous records available to the civil authorities. There are, of course, procedures that ensure the couple is known to the Quaker Registering Officer, and to the meeting; for example all names and places are published appropriately.

> 16.01 For the right joining in marriage is the work of the Lord only, and not the priests' or magistrates'; for it is God's ordinance and not man's; and therefore Friends cannot consent that they should join them together: for we marry none; it is the Lord's work, and we are but witnesses.
>
> 16.04 ....The basis of a Friends' marriage remains the same as in the early days of the Society. The simple Quaker wedding where the couple, together with their friends, gather in worship is for Friends the most natural setting for the two concerned to make a commitment to each other in the presence of God. With their declaration they take each other freely and equally as lifelong partners, committing themselves to joining their lives together in loving companionship, asking God's blessing on their union. ....

16.52 When the meeting for worship is gathered, the couple at a convenient time shall stand, if able, and, taking each other by the hand, declare in an audible and solemn manner, the one after the other in either order, each saying: "Friends, I take this my friend ..... [full name] to be my spouse, promising, through divine assistance, to be unto him/her/[commonly used name] a loving and faithful spouse, so long as we both on earth shall live. (For spouse they may say wife or husband as appropriate.)

Quaker Funeral Service

17.03 Friends should not adopt any rigid pattern for the conduct of funerals. In some cases it is best to hold, separately from the committal or cremation, a 'meeting for worship on the occasion of the death of our Friend', at a weekend, when Friends are free to attend and there is time for the spirit of quiet trust and dependence on God to overcome natural grief. In other cases the brief meeting for worship at the crematorium is all that is either possible or desired...

17.10 It may be right to hold a memorial meeting for worship to give thanks for the life of a Friend who has died.

In the quotation 17.10 above, the phrase that captures, for me, the essence of a Quaker memorial service is "meeting for worship to give thanks for the life of a Friend". This is often met as *"...give thanks for the Grace of God, as shown in the life of [Firstname] [Secondname]."* This seems gently to draw minds away from the trivial or venial, to the good and uplifting, and lays the credit on God.

Conclusions

In the early days of Quaker enthusiasm there seems to have been a tacit assumption that all humans would respond the same way in loving virtue and hating vice and would acknowledge 'The Truth' once it was shown them. Fox thought he was leading the country back to the truths of early Christianity. And other countries also, for he and colleagues travelled to Europe and north America. One woman follower (Mary Fisher) made her way, alone (in 1658), by ship to Smyrna then on foot to Adrianopole to tell 'The Truth' to the Sultan of Turkey. (It is nice to record that she was well treated, and came home to testify as much.)[10, 19.27] Large numbers did join with Quakers, but the appeal did not turn out to be universal. It requires a special type of mind possessing, among other qualities, a strong desire to do the right thing, a dislike of

dishonesty, and a delight in simplicity and in thinking for oneself. Quakerism would presumably have little appeal among those who like ceremony and the possibility of magic.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, a word can acquire meaning by they way it is used and understood. There are many reference to God in Quaker circles, but there is little attempt to define what is meant; presumably because there is no need. There is no insistence on any one interpretation of the term, and there are, no doubt, many different interpretations, depending on context and speaker. For me, Quaker usage of the word God seems to focus on *a communal awareness*; it seems to be a name for a *shared concern for goodness, mercy, fairness, love, generosity*. Other types of shared consciousness can arise in a group: vengeance, pride, hurt, hate. These are not God, but the antithesis of God.

Together with Richard Dawkins, I dislike the concept of a supernatural, magical, God, and think it has done more harm than good in the world. But the rather everyday God that gently infiltrates the minds of earnest people I rather like. The former requires belief; the latter requires only to be experienced.

Chapter 9

GOD — ONE WORD, VARIOUS MEANINGS

Lector I am beginning to see where you are going with this. You use the word God very differently from the way Dawkins does (which you tease by calling childish).

Auctor But is my usage valid?

Lector Yes, I think you make a good case, linguistically and psychologically. We find ourselves dimly aware that we have done wrong, etc. We discuss that with our friends, and they agree. So we wonder where the idea came from. There are then two options: to treat the inner sensations as God, or to project that inner morality onto an imaginary, external, genii-like, God.

Auctor You would agree, I think, that getting other people to adopt our moral code is the difficult bit. That may be why God got externalised. You could

then say: "They are not my rules, they are God's rules. And he is powerful." And some people would be impressed.

LECTOR The 'Dawkins God' requires faith because it cannot be proved; but for precisely that reason cannot be disproved. To some people it is impossible, to others improbable; but to many it is magnificently powerful. Your God is weak, and speaks gently; one could say whispers, and only to some people.

AUCTOR That is true; one needs to listen carefully. But my God does not require an act of faith because it can be directly experienced.

LECTOR Yes, I take that point, and like it. However, I wonder if it is sensible to use the same word for two such different concepts. Dawkins objects strongly to that. You should try to meet that objection.

AUCTOR I see belief in magic as far older than Christianity and a completely separate issue. Let's keep magic out of religion. I think the God of Dawkins's childhood is the product of 4 millennia of evolution, culminating in the early 20th century. I am going to argue that my God is as old as the other, but has followed a different path over these 4 millennia. See if I can convince you.

LECTOR Why does Mary Warnock argue to keep religion out of politics? It sounds as though she wants to relegate religion to a very low place; inspiring lovely music, but little more.

AUCTOR I think you are right; poetry and music. She wants morality to guide policy, but wants to keep religion out of morality. She sees religion as too blind, too violent, too passionate.

LECTOR And she is right, is she not?

AUCTOR Yes, I agree. Allow, and indeed require, belief; and almost anything become possible.

LECTOR Then, in retaining and reforming religion you are at loggerheads with Mary Warnock? Does that not worry you?

AUCTOR Well, I think Mary Warnock was arguing to keep religion out of morality; that is a different thing from keeping morality out of religion.

LECTOR Go on.

AUCTOR I want morality left in religion; and only the nonsense removed. Like George Fox, I cannot bear to see the clergy dressing up in copes and chasubles and assuring their congregations that Jesus rose again on the third day, and that they shall see their loved ones again in heaven. Why can the clergy not confine themselves to saying what they themselves know to be true. Is that too simple a request, or one too gigantic?

Lector Probably too gigantic; but I wish you 'Godspeed'.

AUCTOR Ha!

****

The term God means many things to many people, and has changed over time. Many books have been written on the history of religion and the evolution of the concept of God. Not only scholarly analyses of our Abrahamic tradition, but also studies that anthropologically or speculatively reach right back to pre-historic man (or contemporary but primitive, a-historic, man).

In the first category two recent authors include Karen Armstrong, writing from the Christian perspective [17], and Jack Miles, writing from a Judaic perspective [18]. The Armstrong and Miles books examine literary texts of the Judaic tradition. They make it clear that various aspects and properties of the magical God of Dawkins's childhood have changed, subtly but perceptibly, during the last 4000 years; his name for a start, and whether he could be heard, spoken to, or even wrestled with. That is enormously encouraging for my argument, for it points to hearsay, and imagination as two of the sources of God's properties. Our present day, Church of England, realisation of God seems to me to be a *chimera*, composed of three elements: the whispering voice of conscience in the head, the desperate desire to believe in magic, and a clear-eyed and cynical element representing the political church.

For a century or two there have been books on the anthropology of religion going back to Frazer's

Golden Bough [19] and beyond. Recent speculative work by Robert Wright [20], employs genetic and evolutionary arguments. He considers not so much man's concept of God evolving, as man himself evolving; the believer not the belief.

Belief in magic seems to be far older than the delusional Dawkins God; and a separate concept altogether. Frazer's Golden Bough [19] studies not the historic or literary record, but the anthropological record of contemporary (1922) primitive societies. It catalogues thousands of examples of superstition from the Hebrides to Mexico, from British Columbia to New Guinea; sympathetic, homeopathic, imitative and contagious magic. Mankind all over the world has been crossing fingers, clutching milk-stones, and burning bits of knotted string to ward off danger, staunch the loss of blood, induce the flow of milk, or rain. A single page at random from this 700 page book clearly establishes primitive man as vastly given to hope and belief. These beliefs are not about God and his powers, but about everything else. It is not God that brings the milk; it is the white stone; by its whiteness. It may be possible to educate mankind out of such superstitions, perhaps with the idea of the controlled experiment. (Try it with the white stone, and without.) But it will clearly take thousands of years.

So, we have the moral God-in-our-heads (God II). Add to that some magical abilities, generated

by man's hopes (e.g. rain-making abilities, or birth-control). Then the priests step in. They claim the unique ability to 'talk to God'. They have learnt (for example) that he like roast meat. They somehow know he can see through stone walls, but he nevertheless likes it when we own up to our misdeeds; tell them to the priest and he will pass it on. Money is always welcome in heaven, and generous gifts can lessen our time in Hell; if we leave money with the priests they will see that it gets where it is needed. This also stretches credulity to breaking point, but these are serious matters, and many have been content to play safe.

Our 'Lector' asked if we should use the term God for our low-key, non-existent, moral God (God II) if that term has been pre-empted by the supernatural Dawkins God (God I). I do not admit that the Dawkins God is the only way the term is used and understood. Quakers use the term God without implication of supernatural powers. What Dawkins is objecting to is superstition, credulity, and deliberate deceit. I also object to those. In any discussion, a clear understanding is necessary of what is meant by all terms, and clear distinctions must be drawn; hence my God I and God II.

I am going to make the tentative suggestion that wise men and religious teachers were trying all along to talk about a metaphorical God that gives us instruction in our own heads, essentially the

Quaker God, a version of God to which a sensitive atheist could not possibly object. (See for example my Pliny quote at the head of chapter 7.) It seems it is the fate of religious leaders that their teachings become transformed by their followers, and made more concrete and more magical. Let me illustrate with three stories.

My first story is from some 4000 years ago. Moses went off into the wilderness to fast, and to commune with God, leaving his brother Aaron in charge. When he came back after forty days, with the Ten Commandments, he found that Aaron and the people had made themselves a golden image of a calf, which they were worshipping as divine, thus imitating the practice of neighbouring tribes. When he saw what had happened, Moses thundered against the golden calf of Aaron, and, with the Levite priests, slew 3000 of the 'sinners'.

My second story concerns a more recent historic figure, that of Guru Nanak (the founder of Sikhism, who lived in the Indian Punjab, 1469 — 1539). At the time of Guru Nanak, Muslim and Hindu lived in relative harmony, and Guru Nanak was clearly trying to pick the truth out of both religions. His teaching was simple: "There is but One God, His name is Truth". We are told that Guru Nanak declined to wear the Hindu's sacred cotton thread, saying that "mercy" would be his cotton, and "contentment" his thread. Guru Nanak chided his Hindu relatives for

worshiping the cow. The cow, he said, is valuable but it is not divine. His devotees understood, and ceased to worship the cow, or to wear the sacred cotton thread. But instead they leave their hair uncut, the first and foremost of their 5 symbols (*Kesh, Kangha, Kara, Kachera,* and *Kirpan*). You warn your disciples not to overemphasise one token or symbol, lest it be thought divine; so they overemphasise another symbol instead.

My third story also concerns an historic figure, this time in 16th century Prague. Rabbi Loew is said to have created a giant 'Golem' out of clay and given it written instructions to help the Jewish people, who feared persecution from emperor Rudolph the Second. But the Golem grew in strength and started to persecute the people instead; and Loew had to unmake his Golem. This is doubtless largely myth, or a metaphor; but it is most apposite to my argument.

There is some evidence that Jesus said "The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field." (Or something like that.) There is no evidence that he meant that literally.

There is some evidence that Jesus said "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." (Or something like that.) There is no evidence that he meant that literally.

There is some evidence that Jesus said "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Or something like that.) There is no evidence that he meant that we are children of God literally. These teachings can make some sort of sense when treated as metaphors, but make no sense at all when taken literally.

Jesus objected in particular to the way some people pray, both as to their public display and the specific requests they were making. ("*Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him.*"[21]) Jesus then went on to illustrate what he meant with his illustrative 'Lords Prayer'; and indeed, except for the apparent request for "daily bread" he omitted to ask for any material benefit; only for spiritual improvement and the '*quid pro quo*' of forgiveness. Even the "daily bread" can be treated metaphorically if we go back to the original Greek text. The word "*epi-ousios*" occurs nowhere else in either classical or biblical Greek, and St. Jerome was clearly unsure how to translate it into Latin, opting for different translations in Luke and Matthew; but treated literally it would mean "super-essential". So perhaps Jesus was indeed following his own teaching and was refraining from asking for the essential. Yet we ordinary people are still badgering an imagined God for the most secular of benefits such as: rain, absence of rain, victory in sport, or

success in exams. We have even been encouraged by our priests to pray for victory in war, and good health and political success for our Monarch.

The superstitious and the magical are so nearly absent from the actual verbal teachings of Jesus that I am tempted to believe that any apparent lapses are the work of later authors; like the *panem quotidianum* of St. Jerome, or the "only-begotten Son of God", "being of one substance with the Father", "the third day he rose again, ….. and ascended into heaven"; all of which we know to have been written in the 4th century, in Rome, Nicaea or Constantinople.

However, my purpose is not to talk about words, but about the experiences that lie behind.

Chapter 10

THE IMPORTANCE OF TALKING AND SHARING

Instincts are weak in humans.

Back in Chapter 5, I said I thought Bertrand Russell was right in that teaching reinforces instinct. I suggested that our inherent knowledge of right and wrong is weak, and slow. In my anecdote of chapter 4, the Spaniard felt sufficiently guilty to confess to murder, but only as he approached death, some 30 years after he had committed the crime. At the time of the murder he only felt overwhelming covetousness. If morality is mostly a case of regretting things we have already done, it is too slow. Russell suggested that the voice in our heads was quite possibly that of Nanny. Be that as it may, it surely helps to know

in advance what our parents and friends would think on matters of right and wrong. Can this be left to parents? What if the parents are themselves unsure?

For example, I am myself unsure whether telling the truth is a moral issue, or a matter of expedience. I have a strong preference for telling the truth, but I sometimes catch myself saying something that is literally true but hoping that I will be misunderstood (which I think of as a form of lying). And I am really mean towards people I find to be lying. When parents instruct their children to tell the truth, is that just for the parent's benefit? It seldom does the child any good.

Religious Education in Schools?

Should 'right and wrong' be taught in schools? I remember being quite worried, as a parent, at the thought of schools giving watered-down, general-purpose, non-denominational, moral instruction. It is quite difficult to do. Each parent may want it taught differently, and the teachers who volunteer for that task are likely to be the least suitable. I am sure that learning about Joseph's coat-of-many-colours taught me nothing in the way of morality, whatever its cultural benefits.

Debates, such as Professor Michael Sandel (BBC's

"Public Philosopher") leads on the radio, and in various places round the world, would undoubtedly be a good way to lead older children to think for themselves.

There was widespread gratitude when Mary Warnock chaired the *Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology*. Are the philosophers then to be our new priests? Probably not. It is unusual for our professional philosophers to take to the public platform; they do not often present themselves as having the people's answer. In the world of academic moral philosophy it is rare to find a consensus, and for a very good reason. *Academia* has fostered and rewarded argument, originality, and discrimination to such an extent that academic philosophers have each learnt to hold views arguably different from all their colleagues.

The value of experience

Many atheists who are atheists by conviction, deliberately rejecting the teachings of organised religion, will find themselves initially without a moral code, i.e. without a set of ready formulated rules. Descartes, while he was struggling to establish a new and *completely certain* basis for moral behaviour, famously foresaw that problem and constructed a set of rules to guide his behaviour in

the transition period; basically he decided to follow the trend in his society. That worked for Descartes, as a single individual. It is likely that few of his contemporaries even noticed he was temporarily without internal moral conviction. But we cannot all do that simultaneously, for there would then be no trend to follow.

Imagine a society that has to a very large extent stopped going to church, and where parents have stopped instructing their children what to do; perhaps because they themselves are not sure how to justify the rules. The young people would lack a ready-made rational basis for ethical decisions, and perhaps also the language with which to discuss morals. Are they at a disadvantage, growing up in such an amoral society?

To illustrate what I mean about the weakness of our instincts, imagine a generation of teenagers having to rediscover politics with only their instincts to guide them! They would have to track through all the phases of political evolution that we have experienced in the last three thousand years; to progress from bullies, to kings, to dictators, from slavery to serfdom to wage-slavery to trade-unionism. Imagine how long it would take a community to re-invent constitutional monarchy, cabinet government, value-added tax, trial by jury, the institution of marriage, and divorce. This 'thought experiment' shows us how much man

differs from the beasts; how little we depend on our instincts, and how much we gain from our culture, by the use of words and ideas. It also shows how much we would be set back if we jettisoned our moral culture and traditions.

The value of talking

We should not rob ourselves of our cultural inheritance in the sphere of morality and religion by wholesale jettison, but keep discussing our morality, changing it, letting it evolve. In politics, we somehow agreed to abolish slavery, the lynch-mob, trial by combat. In religion, there are many things that are ripe for discussion and, in due course, modification. It is a pity that people are so shy of discussing things that are deeply and personally important, such as questions of politics and religion. We should meet regularly, in groups, and talk with extreme honesty, and listen with patience and reverence to each other, on the basis that all are speaking honestly. We could do worse that find a nearby Quaker Meeting and try attending that.

Chapter 11

CONCLUSION — THE DOOR WHEREIN I WENT?

Oh, come with old Khayyám, and leave the wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that life flies;
One thing is certain, and the rest is lies;
The flower that once has blown for ever dies.

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and saint, and heard great argument
About it and about; but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.
(Edward FitzGerald: Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám, [22]*)*

Auctor Has reading this book led either of you to change your mind?

CREDENS I used to pray happily for benefits and help, as well as for guidance. I cannot now do that. You have made me self-conscious. Also, I used to assume a life after death; but you have made that harder to believe in, and less desirable in any case. If I give up my belief in a personal God I fear I shall relapse into the depression from which my 'faith in Jesus' rescued me.

AUCTOR Well, I would be sorry if that is the outcome. But I would encourage you to contemplate what Jesus might have meant by 'Heaven' if he was not talking about a supernatural eternal life in the sky. Not just Jesus by the way; also Pliny, Buddha, Guru Nanak, and the others. And bear in mind that you are not alone in this predicament of mortality, but share it with every other living thing from man to microbe. What might 'living in the presence of God' mean if God is seen as *the collective aspiration of good people*. Good people do, at least, exist, and do have collective aspirations when they meet. Might that provide you with some sort of haven, or 'heaven'?

CREDENS Maybe I should give it a try.

LECTOR I think your book has changed me considerably. I am not a religious person, and do not feel I need the reassurances and resources you offer. A chat with friends down at the pub does the job, for me; as does a good walk. But I am not going to scoff at the Quakers. I can see

that my chat with friends over beer, is not totally removed from your silent meeting 'practicing the presence of God'; we also are seeking company, sharing truths, and being grateful. And my walk engenders a great deal of unformulated gratitude for the natural world.

AUCTOR Thank you for that. One such reader makes the effort seem worthwhile. Twenty years ago, when my mother died, I had a glimmering of a mission: to preach the God of George Fox, and to debunk the nonsense of traditional religion which seemed to me to be hindering the Churches in their purpose; bringing discredit on the whole concept of religion. My mother (Jean West) once wrote: "Christianity used to survive because of the empty tomb; now Christianity survives in spite of the empty tomb." [10, 26:20]

LECTOR And you? Did you come out the self-same door wherein you went?

AUCTOR I have benefitted enormously during the writing by rethinking, clarifying, and enlarging my views. But I suspect I am coming out the same door. What a hubbub there is in there! There are so many hundreds of books on all aspects of religion and God. There is even one called "Religion for Atheists". And thousands of vociferous opinions from those who have not yet written their book. It seems to me that every one of my ideas has been thought and said before.

Yet still the atheists scoff at religion, and still the religious enthusiasts believe in magic, and still the depressed and lonely seek comfort. Will one more book make a difference? It may be that I have collected and arranged these ideas into an original argument. I hope so. Perhaps it will be picked up by one or two people, if the title or the cover grips them.

LECTOR And this is our destination, finally. Thank you for a wonderful walk, with entertainment along the way. Do tell me if you plan another trip; I would gladly join you again.

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