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The
Reasonableness
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Philosophical Reasonableness of Theism

Patrick Masterson

Until the 17th century there was no great problem about the reasonableness of Theism. The affirmation of God was pretty universally accepted. It was the fool who said in his heart there is no God.

Two great intellectual movements of the 17th century changed this. These were the modern scientific revolution and the modern philosophical revolution inaugurated by Descartes. The one concentrated on explaining everything in terms of mathematically modelled, experimentally verifiable hypotheses, the other on grounding all meaning and value exclusively in human terms. These two viewpoints have generated influential philosophical objections to the reasonableness of Theism. I will offer a few critical words about each of them and then a few positive remarks about the philosophical reasonableness of Theism.

Scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo and Newton inaugurated a new conception of scientific knowledge – a less speculative and more practical experimental one. It sought an intrinsic understanding of the material world in terms of itself rather than an extrinsic one in terms of a Creator. The 19th century Darwinian theory of evolution greatly reinforced this approach.

When such empirical science is adopted as the ultimate and exclusive form of genuinely scientific knowledge it becomes a philosophy or ideology. As an ideology its form of argument is essentially reductionist. What occurs later in time and is more complex is to be explained in terms of what is prior in time and is physically more basic. Ultimately all explanation, particularly of biological and mental phenomena, is to be provided in terms of basic, mathematically formulated laws of physics and chemistry.

This is fundamentally a form of reductionist materialism. It rejects the philosophical reasonableness of Theism.

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However, I do not believe that such reductionism is the ultimate and exclusive model of explanation. It assumes that any entity is no more than the sum of its physical parts operating basically according to universal physical laws of motion – whether the entity considered is the solar system, a flower blossoming, an animal fleeing, or Socrates deciding to remain in prison.

Such a view overlooks the undeniable fact that conscious subjects and their mental lives constitute a distinctive order of reality not adequately describable by physics and chemistry. They are emergent novel realities. They have their own distinctive laws and forms of activity which are neither reducible to nor deducible from the physical properties of the entities in which they subsist and from which they are emergent. They exercise causality by generating meaning as well as by physical motion.

The question inevitably arises ‘How must reality be understood and evaluated if it cannot be understood exclusively in terms of mathematically formulated scientific materialism?’ Einstein had framed on a wall in his study: ‘Not everything that can be counted matters and not everything that matters can be counted.’

The other, and contrary, modern challenge to the philosophical reasonableness of Theism is the radical humanism deriving from the Cartesian turn inwards to human subjectivity rather than outwards to a divine Creator for the source of all meaning and value. This approach was significantly developed in the 18th century by the philosophy of Kant. He maintained that we know things only as they appear to us and never as they are in themselves and that we ourselves rather than God invent the moral code which we adopt.

This radical humanism finds contemporary expression in forms of Existentialism, Phenomenology and Linguistic Philosophy. The only world which we know, it is claimed, is one totally correlative to our conscious subjectivity and language. Nothing can exist as objectively knowable apart from its correlation to our consciousness. The only absolute is human consciousness to which everything we know is correlative in one manner or another. To claim to know about anything as it exists independently of our consciousness of it is an illusion:

Consciousness and language enclose the world within ourselves
... We are in consciousness or language as in a transparent cage.
Everything appears to be outside yet it is impossible to get out
(Q. Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, p.6).

This radical humanism which interprets all objective meaning and value as strictly correlative to human subjectivity clearly poses a fundamental objection to the reasonableness of theism. For theism

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affirms that God exists independently of any relation to human consciousness.

However, I believe such humanism is not ultimately sustainable. For the phenomena of which we are aware in experience disclose more than a human viewpoint or appearance. What we know is the intrinsic intelligibility of independently existing things even if only inadequately. Our knowledge of reality is discovered not simply invented. To be and be intelligible is to be more than a correlate of human consciousness. Paradoxically, an effective objection to such absolute humanism is provided by the other mainspring of modern thought namely empirical science. For empirical science provides us with knowledge of reality which cannot be simply a correlate of human consciousness. For it provides knowledge of the physical universe as it was prior to the existence of any human life or human consciousness.

Thus I think that neither of the two main philosophical objections to the reasonableness of Theism constitutes a conclusive objection since they each leave fundamental features of reality unaddressed.

Finally, a few words in positive support of the philosophical reasonableness of Theism.

Undoubtedly most people affirm the existence of God on the basis of personal religious faith. Their religious affirmation of God is not the conclusion of a rational argument. However, reason too can lead us towards this affirmation.

I think we sometimes get into muddles about reason because we adopt too restrictive a view of it. We tend to think of rationality primarily as a matter of drawing irresistible conclusions from self-evident propositions. We have mathematics in mind as the model of rationality. On this narrow view of reason neither the existence of God nor indeed his non-existence can be established.

A more adequate view of reason is one which sees it as a liberating capacity which enables me to live in a specifically human way as a communicating openness – to the world, to other people, and to myself.

The light of reason opens me out beyond my bodily limitation to participate in a life of scientific enquiry and cultural achievement. I can progress from knowing particular truths to knowledge of scientific laws and theories and finally to marvel and wonder at the intelligibility and truthfulness of reality which grounds my scientific endeavour. It is indeed remarkable that through us the material universe comes to know itself, discovers the world of values, and can ponder its own ultimate meaning and value.

Likewise, in the practical sphere, reason enables me to develop from mere self-interest, through mild benevolence, to ethical acknowledgement of the absolute moral demands which another

person can make upon me. I can even come to love another person selflessly through loving her intrinsic, more than physical, goodness.

Again, I can marvel at the various levels of rational questions I can put *to myself* in seeking to understand myself. As Kant observed, reason enables me to ask, 'What can I know? What must I do? and For what may I hope?' – each level involving its own type of rational discourse.

In a word, through the life of reason we can come to live under the authority of truth, beauty, justice and love. I believe that both theists and atheists can agree about this conception of an authentic human life governed by these requirements of reason. They can cooperate in promoting it, whatever its ultimate significance.

However, it seems to me that the affirmation of God as a personal creative principle of unrestricted truth, beauty, justice and love makes ultimate and dependable sense of this conception of the life of reason in a way that atheism does not. For it grounds and validates as most ultimately real and dependable these values which are the life-blood of reason.

Atheism on the other hand is committed, I think, to viewing these values, however heroically, as encompassed fundamentally within a context of contingent inexplicable fact. They are disclosed as in no way necessary or ultimately vindicated. They just happen to have occurred or evolved accidentally and seem destined, as empirical science predicts, to peter out in a silent inanimate universe. As Bertrand Russell put it: 'All the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system.' If human intelligence owes its ultimate origin either to mindless matter or an intelligent Creator it seems odd to use this same intelligence to choose the former as a more reasonable explanation of itself than the latter.

The affirmation of God as an infinite personal centre of dependable meaning and value does not dispel the mysteriousness of being. Indeed it even deepens it and accentuates agonizing issues such as suffering and evil. It is a profoundly self-involving affirmation unlike the impersonal deliverance of mathematics or physics. It expresses a hopeful validation of a rational concern for meaning and value and a repudiation of the despairing suggestion that the life of reason originated mindlessly and is destined to perish in post-human oblivion.

It is along these lines that I think rational space can be created for the philosophical reasonableness of Theism. Such philosophical affirmation of God, as even Kant enthusiastically argued, can be reliably affirmed as a personal and genuinely rational hope in

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the assured ultimate significance, of meaningful enquiry, moral endeavour, and unselfish love.

This rational expectation is not logically inescapable. But neither is it just an exercise in self-delusion. It is a genuinely rational interpretation of the ultimate significance of reality in general and of human existence in particular. It affirms the real coincidence of what is inherently valuable with how things ultimately and fundamentally are. It maintains that reality is intrinsically valuable, ultimately characterized by values such as truth, goodness and love rather than by contingent inexplicable occurrences. As Wittgenstein observed 'If there is a value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being so.'

Such an interpretation of the ultimate significance of reality is one to which each person is challenged to respond in their individual circumstance. Thus it can make sense of enigmatic utterances such as 'love is stronger than death' when, for example, one finds it hard to accept that the intrinsic goodness of a deceased beloved partner is reduced without residue to a handful of ashes. Such intimation of the intrinsic more than physical goodness of a beloved is an existential sign or cipher of the more than transitory reality of truth, goodness and love. I believe that the affirmation of God as infinite, creative, personal love *deciphers* and vindicates rationally such finite existential ciphers of the ultimate and dependable reality of these values which are the lifeblood of reason. So at least I have found to be the case.

Letting go. Forgiveness is another word for letting go. We are saved by forgiveness, the power to forgive ourselves, to allow ourselves to be forgiven, which matures into the power to forgive others and allow them their time to be forgiven. Forgiveness is about letting go of guilt – some imagined, some real – and about letting go of fear. There is no healing, no salvation, without forgiveness. And with forgiveness all things become saved and healed once again. Creation is restored.

– MATTHEW FOX, 'A Theology of the Cross', *A New Creation*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Crossroad) p.27.