

You Can't See Through the Looking Glass: Why the Demand for Reasons in Religion is Not Arbitrary

With apologies to Lewis Carroll, this paper has nothing to do with Alice, though it does take us into a sort of Wonderland—for surely the notion that it is arbitrary to want reasons for our most important beliefs is wondrous strange. Indeed, I will argue that it is ultimately unintelligible. The looking-glass metaphor comes from *The Retreat to Commitment*, by William Warren Bartley, III (1984). Bartley suggests that a subjective relativist inhabits a peculiar sort of glass house. But, he says,

Only one kind of glass is suitable for such a building: that ingenious modern one-way mirror glass which one sometimes finds fitted in zoo cages, especially in monkey houses. The world can look in at the subjectivist and watch his antics; but when the subjectivist looks outward, he sees only his own face in the mirrors that imprison him. (82)

This metaphor well represents the logical isolation of anyone who imagines that reason may, as a matter of free choice, be abandoned.

Theists sometimes charge that to appeal to reason is arbitrary and question-begging: they claim that rationalists *assume* the superiority of reason over faith, even when they argue for it. They say any argument in support of reason must itself be an instance of reasoning; and if the point in dispute is the superiority of reasoning to other avenues to knowledge, then such an appeal is circular and illegitimate. Bartley has developed an elaborate analysis in response to this charge of arbitrariness. But, though Bartley's views are interesting, I do not believe that so philosophically extreme a position is required to show that reason is necessary in religion.

The very religionists who claim it is illegitimate to demand reasons are just as dependent on reasoning, and just as committed to it, as is anyone else—nor could they be otherwise. As we all go about our lives—theists and non-theists alike—we state and believe propositions, and support those propositions with reasons. In such ordinary contexts we all—theists and non-theists alike—understand these practices unproblematically. We usually know what we need and want to do, and how to go about doing it, using reasons all the while.

Bartley argues that Protestant Christianity has suffered a crisis of identity since discovering that rational methods of inquiry do not support its traditional beliefs, especially those about the person and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. Consequently, many Christians have concluded that they are free to choose between their commitment to Christianity and commitment to rationality.

And they claim this choice is arbitrary: ultimate principles must be rationally unsupported, they contend; being ultimate, such principles cannot be based on reason. So these Christians have thought that they could as well choose a commitment to Christianity as one to rationality. They have employed the classical *tu quoque* (you too!) argument, claiming rationalists are no more justified in choosing rationality than they themselves are in choosing Christianity, since neither commitment can be supported by reason (ibid., *passim*, esp. chs. 2 and 3).

... the *tu quoque* argument ... claims to afford a rational excuse for irrationalism, and in accordance with which—even from a rationalist point of view—the deliberate irrationalist should be judged to be more rational than the rationalist who denies that he is himself fundamentally an irrationalist. (86)

For example, says Bartley, "In effect, Kierkegaard argued that there is an excuse for irrationalism against which a rationalist has no defense, since it is valid from his own point of view" (42). Bartley further cites Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr as holding versions of this fundamentally irrationalist position (39–61).

In particular, these Christian irrationalists often reject rational criticism of their beliefs about Jesus and his teachings. They ignore challenges from historical discoveries or biblical scholarship if these challenges threaten their previously held beliefs. And they believe this is justified, because *their* commitment is as good as that of the rationalist critics. Bartley's goal is to show that the choice of reason is not arbitrary. But his purpose is much broader than merely to refute this defense of Christianity: he aims his arguments at the whole of philosophy. As he says, "... the various revolutions in philosophy can be characterized by reference to the solution they offer to what I believe is the fundamental problem of modern philosophy. This is the problem of defeating the *tu quoque*..." (ibid., 83).

Bartley proposes a position he calls "pancritical rationalism." He argues that the problems of rationalism come from demanding an authority to *justify* it. Instead, he says, what is needed is a "non-justificational approach" to rationality, in which, "*Nothing gets justified, everything gets criticized*" (ibid., 112, Bartley's emphasis). In contrast to traditional conceptions of justificationalist philosophy, such as Hume's and Descartes' (115),

The new framework permits a rationalist to be characterized as one who is willing to entertain any position and holds *all* his positions, including his most fundamental standards, goals, and decisions, and his basic philosophical position itself, open to criticism; one who protects nothing from criticism by justifying it irrationally; one who never cuts off an argument by resorting to faith or irrational commitment to justify some belief that has been under severe critical fire; one who is committed, attached, addicted, to no position. I shall call this conception *pancritical rationalism*. (118; Bartley's emphasis)

Prior conceptions of rationalism were, by their own standards, irrational, because they could not be justified. "But pancritical rationalism satisfies its own requirements," claims Bartley: "without any contradiction ... the very practice of critical argument can be criticized" (ibid., 119). Thus, pancritical rationalism cannot be dismissed as merely one among many equal alternatives. It alone escapes the *tu quoque* challenge.

Bartley's proposed interpretation of rationality is powerful and intriguing beyond the scope of this paper to explore. But I believe we do not need such a sweeping re-conception of reason to refute Christian irrationalism. The ordinary, everyday notions of truth and reason, which are and must be used by every thinker and speaker, make that sort of irrationalism impossible to maintain. In fact, since the Christian irrationalists are already committed to this everyday form of rationality, it is *they* who are arbitrary. For

they arbitrarily exempt the crucial propositions of their religion from the standards they must use if they are to speak or think intelligibly about anything at all. And so, whatever the merits of Bartley's view of rationality, less ambitious argument can show the irrationalist defense of religion to be untenable.¹

In my discussion I will use the words 'reason', 'true', 'believe', etc., in their ordinary senses, without technical or philosophical meanings. Focusing on these ordinary meanings will show that requiring reasoned support for beliefs about religion is not arbitrary. It is no more arbitrary to demand reasons in the context of religious beliefs than it is arbitrary to demand them in ordinary life—where we see the need for reasons and use them without difficulty.

When I speak of a proposition's being 'true', this means 'true' in the same sense we ordinarily intend. It is true that three is greater than two, that the government of the United States of America has two federal legislative bodies, and that I am writing this on a Thursday. Anyone who knows enough English to read these words knows what the preceding sentence means. If someone tells me he does *not* understand what I mean by saying they are true, I will reply, "Is it really true that you do not understand?" And either an affirmative or a negative response will show that he actually (i.e., truly) does understand the meaning of the word 'true'. This shows that it is not even possible to challenge the ordinary meaning of the word 'true' without employing that concept. To doubt or deny that there is such a well-understood use is either confused or disingenuous.

Now, when we use this perfectly ordinary word in religion, it often has this familiar, ordinary meaning. If someone says that Jesus of Nazareth walked on water, that is a claim that a certain proposition is true: that a certain man did a certain thing, a thing that we easily understand. What he is saying of Jesus is just what he would be saying of me if he claimed that *I* walked on water. Everyone understands this well enough. Saying this proposition is true means just what it ordinarily means.

Now, if we wish to know whether such an ordinary proposition is true, we look for reasons. The conceptual connection between reasons and true propositions is crucial—but it is not obscure or difficult or the least bit unfamiliar. Reasons are grounds for believing that propositions are true. When the question arises, *why* should we believe a proposition is true, the answer must be some form of reason. Therefore we look for reasons whenever we care whether a proposition is true.

If you wish to travel from Salt Lake City to San Francisco by automobile, Interstate Highway 80 is a direct route. This is a true proposition. You could be confident setting out westward from Salt Lake City on Interstate 80, intending to go to San Francisco; so could anyone, because there is good reason for that belief. An authoritative map shows it so (e.g., Rand McNally 1993, 2). None of these statements is the least bit difficult to understand, and they illustrate why and how we use reasons in ordinary circumstances to learn the truth of propositions that are important to our purposes.

Again, suppose you wish to buy a new computer. The cost of the system is \$2,000. You believe your checking balance is sufficient to cover the check. That is, you believe it is true that your account has at least \$2000 in it. Does anyone have difficulty understanding what is being asserted here? Your belief may have good reason: your

balance yesterday was \$3000, all previous checks have cleared, and you have written no checks since. Or your belief may be false—perhaps you don't balance your checkbook after every check you write (who does?), and so your confidence is ill-founded. Either way, we understand perfectly what is being said. We know perfectly well what it means to say that such a belief is true, and that there were good reasons for believing it. The need for reasons is clear: you need them because you want to buy the computer, and to do so you need to write a valid check. It is just this familiar use of the words I intend when I speak of propositions about religion or Jesus being true, or of having good reasons to believe them.

And it is because these words have such meanings in their familiar use that demanding reasons for beliefs is not arbitrary. When we speak of beliefs as true, we mean "true" as in the examples above, the way we use the word "true" in such ordinary contexts. The significance of a true proposition is shown in the way we use it. If your belief about the highway is *true*, then you arrive at your intended destination. If your belief about your checking account is *true*, then your check does not bounce. The truth of the beliefs is important precisely because arriving where we want to go is important, and so is staying out of jail. That is why we care whether such ordinary, everyday beliefs are true. And therefore we demand *reasons* for our beliefs.

What if someone were to deny any interest in reasons for beliefs about highways or checking accounts? "Don't bother me with such pettifogging details," she cries. "I have more important things to think about!" Clearly, if she is uninterested in reasons about what road goes to San Francisco, then she just doesn't care whether she gets there or not. It does not make sense to want to drive there but not to care what road to take. This would be, precisely, irrational. And *for this reason*, one who cares where she arrives must care what reasons there are for believing where the roads go. To write checks without caring whether they would bounce would likewise be irrational; a deliberate hot-check writer needs as much as anyone to give reasons that make his check *seem* good.

The contexts in which truth claims about religion are made are not much different from or discontinuous with these contexts in everyday life. The theist uses them in getting the information on which the original truth claims are based. If the information comes from the Bible, the theist uses ordinary means to identify certain books as copies of the Bible. What reasons does he have for thinking the story of the Resurrection he has read in Luke, say, is not in a different book entirely? Well, they are the ordinary sorts of reasons: the book's cover says *Holy Bible*, and he recognizes the texts from previous copies similarly titled, and from Sunday School lessons, etc. Without such uses of ordinary reasons no debate would have ever begun, because we could not even talk about the same book.

Moreover, the theist imputes the ordinary use of reasons to the writers of the Bible. Hume's insight is profound: it is only by using standard criteria of reasoning that we can interpret marks on paper as evidence of past events at all. The theist must suppose that the writers of the Bible made the marks they meant to make, and intended those marks to be interpreted as conveying the sense they convey, just as we ourselves usually do.

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Similarly, any appeal to information in the Bible must presuppose that Jesus and his companions themselves employed ordinary criteria of rationality. When the theist asserts that the disciples saw Jesus walking on water, he must suppose that they knew how to recognize water, that is, that they had reason to believe that the stuff under Jesus' feet was water; and he supposes that they knew how to recognize Jesus, and his feet.

My point just now is not to challenge this evidence. Rather, it is that using reasons in these ways is an inseparable part of the meaning of saying the above propositions are true accounts of what happened. Deny that these sorts of reasons are crucially relevant and you cannot say meaningfully that it is *true* that Jesus walked on water. So the theist does and must use reason for his own claims to mean what he wants them to mean. If a theist were to abandon reason, he would be unable to make—or even to understand—true statements about Jesus, the Bible, church history, or religious experience. And this is why it is not arbitrary to insist that reasons—in this very simple and familiar sense of reasons—are necessarily connected with truth.

Moreover, without reasons a theist could not make true statements about logical relations between his assertions: he could not say that it is false that God does not exist because it is true that God exists, or that it is false that Christianity is false because it is true that Christianity is true. It would in fact be impossible to say that whatever claims he *did* make were true. He could not so much as utter a meaningful declarative sentence—because if it does not deny its contradictory, it has no meaning.

Using reasons in such a way is not just a practice non-theists use for the ignoble purpose of undermining religion. Nor is it a philosophically controversial or debatable practice. It is indispensable for understanding or asserting any statements at all. Thus, if a theist charges naturalists with *arbitrarily* insisting on reason, the charge rebounds back on him: it is the theist himself who *arbitrarily* refuses to use reason in just those cases where the conclusion displeases him, while depending on it to make his own assertions intelligible.

All these points are obvious in ordinary life. No one could think or speak without using reasons in these ways, nor could we understand anyone who tried to. And this use of reason is all I defend here. So I conclude that the charge of arbitrariness in the demand for reason cannot be sustained, or even intelligibly stated. This is why anyone who thinks he rejects reason is isolated in a house of mirrors: he cannot communicate with anyone because he cannot make a meaningful assertion on any subject. His only view is his own reflection, because you can't see through the looking glass.

Note

Bartley (1984) intends his concept of rationality to be perfectly general, rather than applicable only to religious truth claims. What I say about the inescapability of reasoning may be similarly general, but I will not attempt to show here that this is so.

References

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