HOW TO PHILOSOPHIZE ABOUT RELIGION

John Cottingham

THE LIMITS OF ABSTRACT ARGUMENT

One might expect the philosophy of religion to deal with some of the deepest and most perplexing problems of human existence— questions about our place in the cosmos, the ultimate fate and destiny of humanity, the purpose of human life, the struggle between good and evil, and the enigmas of human suffering, sin, repentance, and redemption. But the way the subject is usually taught in schools and universities can make it seem rather remote from these momentous moral and existential questions. Students invariably find that they are required instead to work through the standard arguments for or against the existence of God, or to debate the various properties traditionally attributed to God (omnipotence, omniscience and so on). Such work is certainly not devoid of interest, and it can provide a good training in careful conceptual analysis and precise logical reasoning. But it can all seem very abstract, and not to have much to do with the way religion actually operates in the life of the believer. It is rather as if the philosophy of music were to confine itself to the abstract theories of musicologists, without any attention being paid to the transforming power of music in the lives of those who experience it.

There is a further problem about the traditional arguments that attempt to establish God's existence: they very seldom seem to have much effect on whether someone is a religious believer or not. Some of those who are already committed believers may perhaps be inclined to take a favourable view of the stock arguments for God's existence, while those who are already convinced atheists will typically find the arguments defective. To the latter group, the cosmos we inhabit appears to be blank, neutral, and utterly impersonal, and the vast and complex chain of events that gave rise to our planet and our species seems to manifest only 'blind pitiless indifference' (to borrow a phrase from the arch-atheist Richard Dawkins (*Rivers Out of Eden,* 1995)). For the believer, by contrast, despite all the pain and suffering that we see around us, the world is seen as containing, in the words of the philosopher and theologian Judith Wolfe,

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an 'unseen depth of goodness, significance, and love' (*The Theological Imagination,* 2024). These are radical differences of outlook, differences in an entire framework of interpretation, and it is hard to see how they could be resolved, one way or the other, by intellectual debate alone.

DETACHMENT VERSUS RECEPTIVITY

If abstract intellectual debate is unlikely to resolve things, some people might infer that religious belief must be a matter of blind faith, and that rational argument has nothing to do with it, one way or the other. This was the view of Søren Kierkegaard, who argued that religious commitment was a purely subjective matter, a commitment of 'infinite passion' in the face of 'objective uncertainty' (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* 1846). But I think such a conclusion is too hasty. Yes, in religion, as in many other areas of human life, there can be no absolute proof or infallible certainty, and some element of faith or trust will be indispensable. But this is not to say that there is no evidence whatever that might count in favour of religious belief.

Such evidence, however, has to be (so it seems to me) of a rather special kind. It cannot be what the American philosopher Paul Moser has called 'spectator evidence' (*The Evidence for* God, 2010) — that is, the kind of evidence that can be gathered and evaluated by a detached and impartial observer. To demand 'spectator evidence' would be to think of God as an item in the universe that might be empirically verified in the same way as any scientific hypothesis. But the kind of evidence that might be relevant to believing in a personal God who is worthy of worship and seeks our free and unconstrained love and allegiance — such evidence would be of a very different kind.

Instead of a philosophical theology that tries to model itself on neutral scientific standards of evidence, we may instead need a 'kardiatheology' (to use Moser's term) — a 'theology of the heart'. This idea goes back at least to the seventeenth century, to the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, who observed that it is the heart, not the intellect, that leads one to awareness of God (*Pensées,* 1670). In somewhat similar vein, Ludwig Wittgenstein in the twentieth

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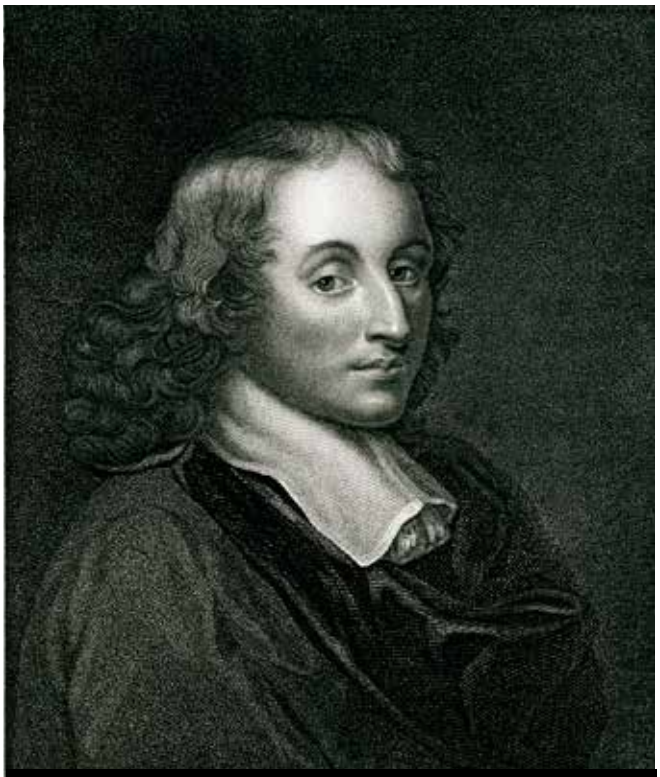
century wrote that '*life* can educate you to believing in God'; and by 'life' he explicitly included 'sufferings of various sorts' (*Culture and Value,* MS of 1950). The implication here is that conversion never, or only very rarely, occurs though intellectual debate alone, but rather comes about as a result of an emotional transformation, a radical shift of perspective, that allows the world to be seen differently. Yet acknowledging this, and giving due weight to the role of the heart and the emotions, need not mean that coming to believe in God is an entirely irrational business. There is an

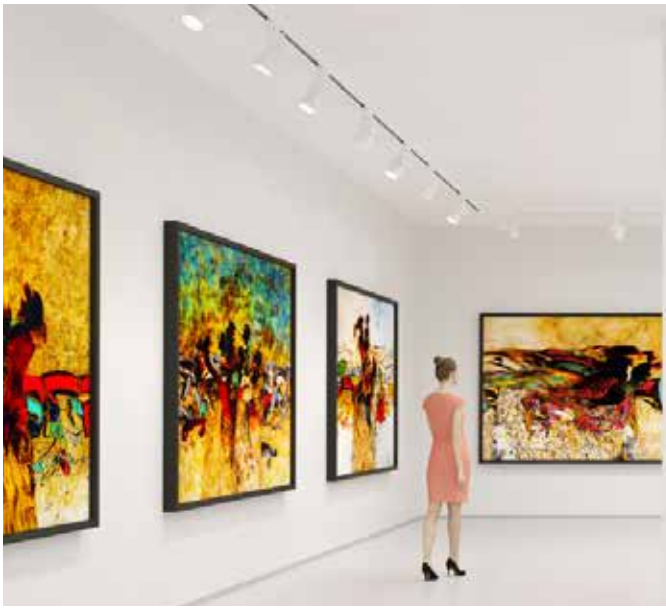


Blaise Pascal. Engraving from 1833

alternative interpretation, namely that an emotional shift can act as a *catalyst for the perception of new evidence*: as a result of being emotionally moved, one may become open to perceiving aspects of reality that were previously hidden from view.

If this is right, then philosophy of religion needs to operate with a different epistemological model (that is, a different model of evidence and the conditions for knowledge) than the currently prevailing model. Instead of an *epistemology of detachment*, where we remain cold impartial observers, requiring to be presented with data that can be laid out for dispassionate scrutiny, we may need an *epistemology of receptivity* — one that requires us to give up our status as detached and lordly scrutineers, and allows us instead to give ground, to be open, to yield to the possibility that we might be transformed.

Some may be inclined to object here that letting one's guard down in this way is not philosophically or epistemically respectable, because it risks allowing us to be swept along towards religious belief in a way that we would regard as rash or irresponsible in any other area of inquiry. In fact, however, there are many areas other than religion where an epistemology of receptivity is both necessary and perfectly appropriate. In literary studies, for example, as the American philosopher Martha Nussbaum has argued, if we are to learn to appreciate a great poem or novel we have to allow ourselves to be receptive and '*porous*', knowing when to *yield* to the power of the language instead of maintaining a constant critical detachment (*Love Knowledge*, 1990). Or to give another example, in cultivating a personal relationship, if we always remain at a distance, clinically scrutinizing the qualities of the person in front of us, we may only succeed



in blocking the opportunity for a closer kind of acquaintance that allows their deeper qualities to shine through.

A similar dynamic applies to our discernment of the qualities of a great work of art. Instead of being fixated on a scientific model of perception, and on impersonal, 'spectator evidence', if we wish to see the beauty of a great painting we have to give up the fantasy of being lofty, detached evaluators, surveying the data and pronouncing our verdict. Yes, artistic evaluation is of course a complex and intricate matter, involving all kinds of intellectual expertise, careful scrutiny, and critical judgment. But true appreciation of the beauty of the work in front of us also requires us, whether we like it or not, to be *involved*, to be *receptive*, to be *moved* by it. This does not mean being gullible, or lacking in discrimination, or baldly accepting the first impression that comes into our minds. But it does mean that we have to be prepared to be permeable, to allow the possibility that there are aspects of the work that might have a transformative effect on us, and that, if we allow ourselves to be transformed, we may be taken to new levels of awareness and understanding. So what might have begun as a mere minimal willingness to pause and look becomes, as the transformations take effect, a rapt and attentive looking, and then a delighted looking, with richer dimensions of reality coming into focus at each stage. And as we progress up the spiral of committed attention, we ourselves may undergo further interior change, and this may in turn lead to changes in perception, awareness of new dimensions in the work we are contemplating, which in their turn generate further transformations, both in our discernment of what is presented to us, and in how we perceive its value, its beauty, and its meaning. (For more on this model of the 'upward spiral' of belief formation, see John Cottingham, *How to Believe* (2015), Ch. 3.)

ADOPTING A RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

The above points about receptivity as an appropriate epistemic stance can be seen to apply to many of the world's great religions. In many forms of Buddhism, for example, there are programmes of disciplined meditation that require the practitioners to abandon the demands of the controlling ego and yield themselves up to a calm and focused attention, a process of attunement, of listening, of 'letting be' (see David Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens*, 2006). Or in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, there are many examples of individuals being 'called', being required to turn aside from their self-absorbed preoccupations and be responsive, prepared to listen and to align themselves with something beyond themselves that commands their awe and allegiance (I Samuel 3:10; Luke 1: 31). Those who as a result are drawn to adopt a given worldview do not do so without evidence, since their own experience, when they become 'porous' and receptive, confirms the validity of their choice. Such evidence, to be sure, does not amount to

demonstrative proof; but neither the Hebrew Bible nor the Christian New Testament purports to offer such proof, nor does the mainstream Western theological tradition attempt to map out God's essence, or define the mysterious source of being and goodness. We cannot know what God is, only what he is not, Thomas Aquinas warned in the thirteenth century (*Summa theologiae,* Part I, question 3); and much earlier St Augustine had declared that God cannot be comprehended or grasped by the finite human mind — 'if you grasp him, he is not God (*Sermons*, early 5th century). What the tradition offers is not proofs, but a form of life, whereby believers can affirm their allegiance to the good, and strive, despite all the weakness inherent in human nature, to come fractionally closer to what they are called to be.

So if the philosophy of religion is to do justice to the phenomena it purports to be studying, then I would argue that it needs to pay closer attention to considerations of the kind just discussed. In other words, instead of remaining aloof and detached, confined to the realm of abstract argument, it needs to attend to the way religion actually operates in the lives of its adherents. But it is important to add a caveat. Nothing so far said should be taken to suggest that adopting a religious outlook should be a matter of uncritical acceptance. Ever since Socrates, philosophy has prided itself on the critical testing and evaluation of our beliefs — as Socrates famously put it, 'the unexamined life is not worth living' (Plato, *Apology*, *c.* 390 BCE). Reason is the jewel in philosophy's crown, the 'quality control department' (Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things,* 2021), without which our thinking would be chaotic and undisciplined, and ever liable to lead us into confusions and wrong inferences. So it should remain a vital part of the philosophy of religion to be able to stand back from a given religious outlook, or framework of interpretation, and assess how far it coheres with other parts of our belief system — for example how far it fits with what science tells us about the workings and evolution of the cosmos, the history of the earth and of our species, and so on, and how far it accords with fundamental moral convictions about how we should live and how we should treat each other and the environment. These wider questions are part of the broader task of philosophy, which in addition to its analytic work (the definition of terms, the examination of concepts, and so on) should always, in my view, aspire to be a *synthetic* or *synoptic* discipline, striving to bring the different parts of our worldview together and see how far they fit together, or clash.

RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE AND LAYERS OF MEANING

Before we conclude our discussion of the proper methodology and scope of the philosophy of religion, and the kind of epistemology that is appropriate to it, something needs to be said about the nature of religious language. Much of the language used in the sacred writings of the great world religions manifests a striking *polyvalence* or *multiple layering*. This comes from the rich poetic quality of the language, and from the use of symbols and images which have a certain 'density'. They resonate with us not just intellectually but at many different levels of awareness, some no doubt operating below the level of explicit conscious awareness. And because of this, such language may have the power to transform our understanding in ways that the precise and colourless propositions of literal discourse are powerless to do (see Janet Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language,* 1987).

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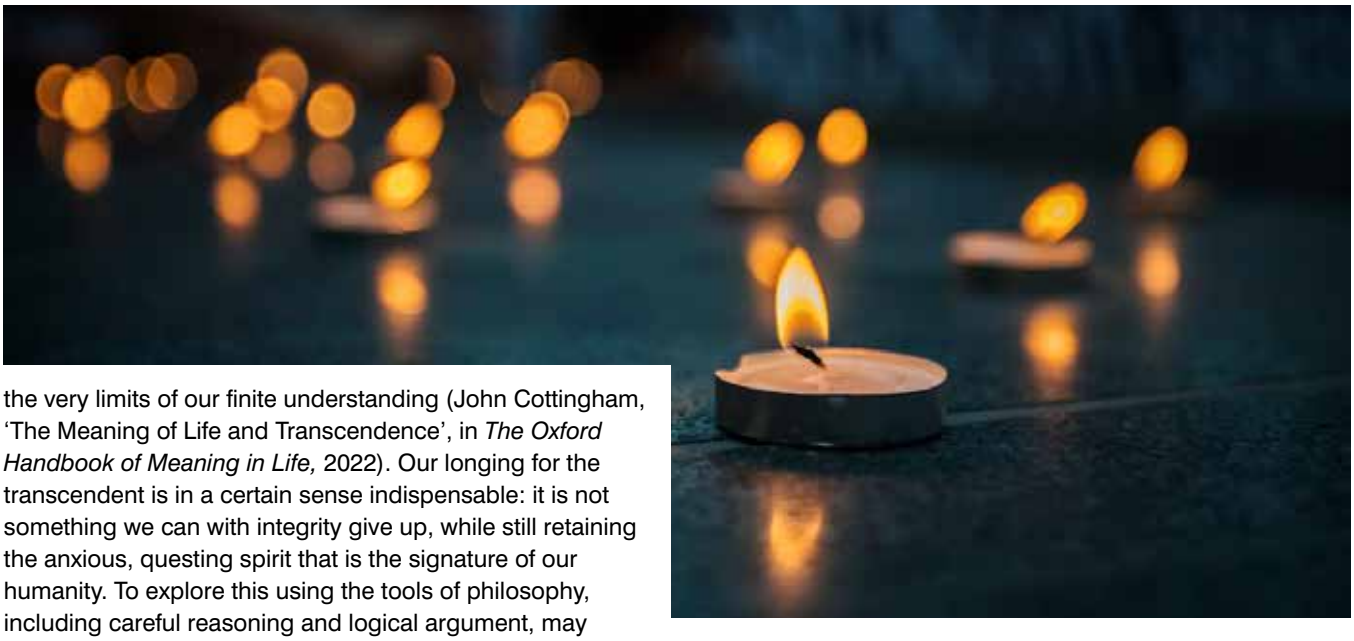
Here again the typical methods and techniques of contemporary analytic philosophy may give grounds for concern when it comes to the philosophy of religion. The 'power-point slide' approach, where arguments are reduced to a sequence of bullet points, with each proposition stripped of any ambiguity or emotional resonance, may give the impression that philosophical understanding is achieved through a kind of abstract purity of expression, uncontaminated by any poetic or imaginative echoes that might distort the unadorned truth. Some philosophers might defend such linguistic austerity on the grounds that there can be no truth or validity beyond the empirical domain as captured by the precise and unambiguous language of the sciences. But scientism (the thesis that there is no truth or reality beyond that studied by science) is a self-refuting doctrine, since its truth could never itself be established by scientific means.

In any case, the history of philosophy demonstrates time and again that human beings can never allow their thought to be circumscribed by any given system of ideas that claims to have the final word. The human spirit will always reach for something more, and a key feature of religious language is that it strives to express this human longing for transcendence, even though this may bring us up against



the very limits of our finite understanding (John Cottingham, 'The Meaning of Life and Transcendence', in *The Oxford Handbook of Meaning in Life,* 2022). Our longing for the transcendent is in a certain sense indispensable: it is not something we can with integrity give up, while still retaining the anxious, questing spirit that is the signature of our humanity. To explore this using the tools of philosophy, including careful reasoning and logical argument, may not be easy; but if philosophy of religion stands too far aloof from our human confrontation with the wonder and mystery of existence, it risks distancing itself from the very phenomena it is supposed to be studying.

CODA: THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION

If our aim is to bring the philosophy of religion into closer contact with how religion actually operates in the life of the believer, one final point deserves mention. The human religious quest has many dimensions, but one important

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aspect of it that is often overlooked by philosophers is that it expresses itself not just theoretically, through the formulation of dogmas and doctrines about the divine, but *practically*, through programmes of spiritual praxis, including prayer, fasting, liturgy and ritual, music and movement, and much else besides. Many people in our contemporary culture who are sceptical about organized religion are nevertheless sympathetic to the idea that there is a spiritual dimension to life, and they are often drawn to forms of spiritual praxis such as meditation and yoga, which may offer paths to self-transcendence that do not necessarily require assent to complex metaphysical doctrines. However that may be, if philosophy of religion is to be, as it surely should be, the systematic reflective study of religious phenomena, it seems clear that it should not confine itself to theory, or to the examination of theological doctrines alone, but should also consider the manifold forms of religious practice. What is more, practice may be more integrally connected to theory than might at first be supposed. For we need to take note of one of the main lessons bequeathed to philosophy by Ludwig Wittgenstein, namely that we cannot hope to understand the meaning of the language and concepts we use unless we attend to the 'forms of life', the cultural values and practices, in which they are at home and from which they derive their significance (*Philosophical Investigations,* 1953).

Let me end by returning to the analogy with music which I invoked in the opening paragraph. Just as understanding the role of music in our lives cannot be achieved by abstract musicological theorizing alone, in the same way a philosophical understanding of the meaning of religious ideas cannot be achieved by the scrutiny and evaluation of doctrinal claims alone. The philosophy of religion can and should aspire to a deeper richer kind of understanding, one that is informed not just by logical analysis (essential though this is), but by evidence drawn from all the imaginative resources of the human mind. By engaging with the manifold forms of life, the symbols and images and practices whereby human beings express their longing for the transcendent, we may perhaps come closer to understanding the perennial fascination of the religious quest, and of the unending human struggle to come to terms with the mystery of our existence.

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