

## Narveson's Liberation Epistemology

by Mark Turiano

Religious topics are notoriously difficult to deal with philosophically. Cicero said that the nature of the gods is the darkest and most difficult question of all. Cicero does, however, go on to say that while the nature of the gods may be inscrutable the fact that they exist is not. This much, he says, is something about which most philosophers are in agreement, for such a belief is plausible and one to which we are naturally inclined. Professor Narveson disagrees. Whether or not we are naturally inclined to believe in a god or gods, he finds such a belief so implausible as to call it unreasonable, furthermore he claims that he is in agreement with the philosophical community in his assessment. If belief in God is demonstrably unreasonable, then it would seem to be something from which mankind ought to be freed. Professor Narveson's essay, simply titled "God," is an attempt to demonstrate the antecedent of this hypothetical statement, with the hope, if I am not mistaken, of proving the consequent.

Whether or not anyone has really shown that religious belief of any kind is folly, it is easy enough to imagine some reasons why some would like it to be so. This is especially true of monotheistic religions. Polytheism is open to a great deal of doctrinal plurality as its truth is located primarily in a particular community. Theism on the other hand is universalistic and makes correspondingly greater doctrinal demands. Polytheistic religion is civic religion and its demands on individuals are more concerned with practice than belief and are for the sake of maintaining and fostering the good of the community as such. Religion, as the name suggests, is supposed to bind a community together. This is why Cicero maintained that "when piety goes, religion and sanctity go with it. And when these are gone, there is anarchy and complete confusion in our way of life."<sup>1</sup>

If belief in the gods of a polytheistic religion is for the sake of maintaining a way of life, it would make sense that, while certain things might be required by way of practice, the demands that such a religion would make on individual belief would be minimal. Belief is oriented toward practice in such a way that it makes sense to a polytheist that other communities with other practices should have other beliefs. Of course, atheism or severely heterodox views which destroy the meaning of communal religious practice are intolerable.

Monotheistic religion, particularly Christianity with its jealous God and doctrine of the salvation of individual souls, is more exacting in the demands it places on the believer. Such a religion makes claims that are at once universally binding and pertain to the individual as such. Such truth transcends particular political communities. Christianity, following Judaism, claims that beyond the distinction between noble and base which, being based on communal norms, is essentially political, there is a distinction between the blessed and the cursed, which is more fundamental.

Theism is not just different from polytheism, it abolishes it. Because of the key position that Christianity has played in the civilizational process of the west, it is simply not possible for westerners to take polytheism seriously. Anyone who doubts this would

do well to take up Chesterton's challenge to think a heretical thought about Odin. Heresy presupposes orthodoxy. The gods of Olympus and Valhala have simply become incredible, in their stead is one, universal and transcendent God. The presumption of many atheists, and I think Professor Narveson can be included here, is that this belief in one, true God will, or should, go the way of the belief in Zeus and Hera.

At the same time most atheists will allow that theism is an advance on polytheism in at least one respect. Theism is universalistic, it is predicated on the claim that there is one truth binding on everyone. It is not, however, universal in the way that science is. Scientific beliefs, though fallible, are compelling to all, and, what is more important, they are supposed to be compelling on the grounds of reasons which are accessible to all. Religious beliefs are not so; some will refuse to believe, or believe differently. Furthermore the structure of most of the key religious beliefs is such that logically compelling reasons cannot be given to defend them exclusively. Arguments for particular religious beliefs are all explicitly predicated on the acceptance of other, unargued for, beliefs. The view of the modern atheist is that religion will be or should be overcome in favor of an understanding of the world for which there are compelling reasons accessible to all. If this is true, and if the folly of religion can thereby be replaced with the wisdom of science, it seems that there is hope that a great deal of strife and human suffering can be eliminated. What the prostelytizing atheist hopes to do is to free men from the shackles of religious belief, replacing such belief with rationally justified scientific beliefs, which, because they are compelling to all (or should and will be eventually), will eliminate the inconveniences of religion. Science is rational, it merely remains to make men so as well.

Professor Narveson hopes to liberate us from the unreasonable belief that there is a God. While he graciously concedes that such a belief may be comforting, interesting, or even fun, he insists that we really need to avoid this, as he calls it, "hypothesis." Professor Narveson advances these claims about religious belief being comforting, etc., presumably because he, quite understandably, feels the need to explain why so many people do, in fact, believe what he finds unreasonable.

Professor Narveson is sure that most theists are such because of early inculcation. The beliefs are then retained because they are comforting. Religious beliefs would then be much like patriotic feelings: we adopt them early as a result of inculcating the customs and prejudices of our native land, and most of us find comfort in the belief that these customs and prejudices are true or the best.

I do not find this explanation of the fact of widespread religious belief very persuasive. I happen to believe that there is a God, as well as the other things stated about Him in the Nicene creed, though I have to add that I do not find these beliefs particularly comforting, or fun, and I do not think of them as hypotheses. Granted, this may simply be the degree of my self deception. Yet, to say that I, or anyone else, believe in God because the belief is comforting or interesting seems to get things backward. I do not even see how I could find such beliefs comforting or interesting (leaving aside fun) unless I already thought they were true. My interest in God and the things men have said and believed about Him, is the consequence, not the cause, of my belief. God is interesting because he is real, and being human, I take an interest in reality.

I will grant that some fictional entities can be interesting, but that does not lead me to mistake them for realities. For instance, I find Tolkein's middle earth to be extremely interesting, yet I am never seduced by this interest into thinking that hobbits, wizards, elves and dragons are real. The same goes for Greek mythology: interesting, but, to my mind, incredible, and there is no confusion about the reality of the Olympians created by my interest in them.

Nor do I think that I, or most theists, believe in God because the belief is comforting, though of course it sometimes is. Again, when and to the extent that I find it comforting, I find it so because I think it is true. Besides, only some of the beliefs are comforting, and those are needed to overcome the uncomfortable, if not horrific, ones. It is indeed comforting to think that Christ has redeemed the world, but one can only believe that if one already believes that the world needs redemption; that humans are mired in sin in such a way and to such an extent that only by the death and resurrection of the Son of God could this situation ever be rectified. And furthermore, it is not even totally clear how this all worked. This belief I am sure is not a "hypothesis."

Professor Narveson's paper claims to be an attempt to free us from the unreasonable, if not downright irrational, belief in anything like the Christian God. He attempts to do this on the grounds that such a belief is simply not "epistemically" respectable. If he had merely claimed it was not respectable, we would have a very weak argument on our hands, one that amounted to saying it was not in good taste, or merely out of fashion, to have such a belief. He modifies this instead by claiming that it is not "epistemically" respectable. I am not sure this changes things much. As near as I can tell this is merely another way of saying that it is not scientifically up to snuff. If one were to tell this to Plato, or Aristotle, or Boethius, or Thomas Aquinas, or Isaac Newton, or even Albert Einstein, all of whom were scientists or epistemers, I think they would be quite surprised. Professor Narveson sides with Laplace against all these others in saying that he has no need for the god-hypothesis. Both the cosmos and science it seems can get along without any God. I mention these authorities not because it constitutes an argument against Professor Narveson's atheism but because it points out the extent to which his argument hinges on the *unfashionability* (i.e. lack of epistemic respectability) of arguments for theism. Several times Professor Narveson justifies the cursory treatment which he gives actual arguments for Theism on the grounds that he "stands with the overwhelming majority of his fellow philosophers."

The "cosmological" and "ontological" arguments are reviewed and dismissed in a few paragraphs. This is OK according to Professor Narveson because if the reader has any qualms he may merely consult the current philosophical literature to have the arguments refuted in as much detail as he desires. In other words, there are any number of fashionable, or, epistemically respectable, arguments available to assure the reader that the cosmos can get along fine without God.

Lest the reader think I am being unfair to Professor Narveson, I would call his attention to what I find the most interesting part of Professor Narveson's paper. This part deals with what he calls emotional or "sideshow" considerations. This is where he muses over the real sources of religious conviction: wishful thinking and an appeal to the sheer

number of believers. After saying that he believes that most religious people "want to suppose that there is a personal God." Narveson then reminds us that 'p' does not follow from "would not it be neat if 'p'," he then goes on to confess that he cannot understand how a person could be convinced by such an argument. Here I agree with him; I too cannot really fathom a person being convinced that something is true simply because he would like to be so. The conclusion I then draw is that this is not a good explanation of the source of religious conviction. Furthermore, to my mind, it makes as good, or better, sense to say that atheism is wishful thinking. True, one loses the personal God who looks after us, but one thereby gains the freedom to make man the measure of all things, one is thus freed from original sin, in short, one is free to make a good of man. If one joins with the (current) scientific community in viewing nature as simply everything that does happen or can be made to happen, rather than an order created by a mind which, as such, ought to be respected, then anything goes. True, man is still mortal, but that loses some of its sting once we cease to measure man by the standard of the immortal, eternal, and unchanging, in short, man's existence in time is no longer measured by something out of time. According to Professor Narveson talk about such a being as God existing "out of time" is nonsense, and evidence of the slippery sort of wish- fulfillment characteristic of theists.

As far as the appeal to the majority goes, Narveson, as we have seen, makes the same appeal when he claims the authority of the philosophical community against the arguments for theism. Now it is true that the opinions of experts are to be given preference when there is conflict such as this. But the only way that Narveson can get the "experts" or the philosophical community on his side is to restrict that community to those who are currently living or recently deceased - not a particularly impressive bunch. If we go back a few thousand years and expand the community, the theists win by a handy margin.

Narveson's most sustained attack on a particular argument is reserved for the design argument, the argument he seems to feel has the best chance at being compelling. This argument he unmasks as a fake, its apparent strength resting on a series of confusions and equivocations. Narveson apparently regards this argument as the most formidable candidate for epistemic respectability because its structure most resembles the hypothetical-explanatory form of modern scientific theories. I have already said that, being a believer, I do not experience my belief as being acceptance of a hypothesis, so I would say that again Narveson begins on the wrong foot. However, even if we grant this I think his refutation of the argument leaves something to be desired. So without recommending the argument from design as compelling evidence for belief, I would like to defend it from Professor Narveson's attack. The argument from design, as Professor Narveson presents it runs as follows: All entities that have a structure get that structure from an intelligence, that is, are designed. The cosmos is an entity with a structure. Therefore, the cosmos gets its structure from an intelligence and that intelligence is God.

Narveson's attack is focused on the major premise. Apparently he thinks that design or structure means something like visible regularity, whereas what is actually meant in the forms of the argument I am familiar with is more like intelligibility. The point of the argument is that when we look at the cosmos we find that it is shot through with intelligibility, so much so that even what appears at first sight to be chaotic can be understood according to principles, i.e. it is intelligible.

The primary instances of beings that we understand, whose form and function we can grasp and relate to each other, are artifacts. When I make something, I know what it is for, how it works, the principles of its construction, and how the form serves or is related to the function. In other words I understand it through what Aristotelians call the four causes. Now when we are able to understand things in nature which we did not create, our understanding of them is similarly structured, we attempt to grasp the principles of its "construction," (the more basic elements that constitute it), its form and function, and to relate these things, though we can never do so as fully with natural objects as with artifacts. Because our understanding of natural things operates on analogy to our understanding of artifacts, we tend to assume that there is a mind responsible for natural objects as well. Where we discover intelligibility we attribute it to a design or intention. Now when we come to view the cosmos as an orderly whole the tendency is to do the same thing.

Professor Narveson has two responses to this. First, there are, he says, intelligible structures in nature that are not the result of intelligence, and he cites crystals and DNA here. But this misses the point; what is remarkable is not that there is a shape or pattern to crystals or DNA which is the result of some "wholly mindless natural processes" but that the structure and the processes are intelligible. It is the very fact that they are intelligible that leads us to the belief that they are "designed." Not that we are justified in saying much about this intelligence based on the analogy because natural objects and especially the cosmos exhibit an order that differs from that found in objects designed by human intelligence. It is just that we have no other way to explain such manifest intelligibility.

Secondly, Narveson claims that attempts to explain natural order with reference to an intelligence are examples of "metaphysical snobbery." Apparently Narveson thinks it is mere self-flattery that we thinking beings rate intelligent being above merely physical being. This means that all arguments based on a hierarchy of beings with God at the top are really just vain self-flattery. This smacks of the sort of moral relativism which would, I suspect, drive one to wish God out of existence.

But, it appears that Narveson is no relativist, and he draws out a variant of the Euthyphro problem to show that moral distinctions must somehow precede the will of the divine. It is at this point that Narveson's argument appears to pay off. Because religion is irrelevant to morality (a fifth wheel as Narveson calls it) it can be removed from consideration. This move is not only permissible, but salutary since religion has actually generated moral problems. Not only moral problems, but political ones too. Narveson actually makes the absurd claim that "the natural political outlook of any religion, including Christianity, is theocracy" and he apparently means by this something like fascism. Now speaking only of Christianity, the closest one can come to a (non-heretical) theocratic tendency, is the belief in the kingdom of God, which, since at least St. Augustine, has been clearly distinguished from an earthly political order, and is not something to be brought about by men.

Furthermore, there is good historical evidence to suggest that the spread of political liberty in the world is a consequence of (among other things) the spread of Christianity. Now, I am in full agreement that basing claims for rule on divine dispensation and attempts

to bring about the city of God by legislation are recipes for disaster, but what I do not see is how this is connected with belief in God, given recent historical developments it seems just as easily connected to the rejection of that belief. To blame the tyranny based on mistaken interpretations of the relation of the transcendent to the worldly order on the belief in a transcendent source of order is akin to condemning the belief in equality before the law for the absurdities of egalitarianism. Theocracy is not the natural political consequence of Christianity.

None of the arguments I have presented here is intended to be proof of God's existence, or even to make it more plausible. I have only tried to show two things: First, that Professor Narveson has not shown that belief in God is unreasonable, only that it is not currently fashionable among scientists and philosophy professors. And, second, that it is far from clear that belief in God is something humans would do well to be freed from. Professor Narveson makes evident here as elsewhere his concern for human liberty. I think that if you look at the historical record, Christianity emerges as not a foe but a friend of liberty. It would seem then that a champion of liberty should seek his battles elsewhere.

### Endnotes

1. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* I, *The Nature of the Gods* translated by Horace C.P. McGregor (London: Penguin Books, 1972) p.70.