

Spirituality for the Godless

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1. How to be spiritual without being religious¹

'Godless' was never a neutral term: in 1528 William Tindale talked of 'godlesse ypocrites and infidels' and a 'godless generation' is one that has turned its back on God and the paths of righteousness. An atheist, by contrast, a *new* and self-conscious atheist perhaps, might now wear the term as a badge of pride, to indicate their rejection both of belief and the implication of moral turpitude. Traditionally, though, those who declared themselves 'atheist' had a hardly better press than the 'godlesse', since 'atheism' was and in some cases still is considered a form of intellectual and moral shallowness: thus Sir Francis Bacon offers a bluff refinement of the Psalmist's verdict on the fool who says in his heart that there is no God:

The Scripture saith, *The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God*; it is not said, *The fool hath thought in his heart*; so he rather saith it, by rote to himself, as that he would have, than that he can thoroughly believe it, or be persuaded of it.

In these sentences from his essay *On Atheism*² Bacon expresses the irritated commonsense one associates with a certain kind of believer, who cannot take non-belief quite seriously, but treats it as a kind of wishful thinking or self-deception. Bacon, however, goes further: 'as atheism is in all respects hateful, so in this, that it depriveth human nature of the means to exalt itself above human frailty'.

I shall in what follows speak up for the secular humanist project and defend it against the charge of shallowness *and* the charge that it leaves us without the resources to overcome our human frailty – though I shall also suggest that the plausibility of the defence depends upon the appropriation of some of the phenomena covered by the term 'spirituality'. This may seem at first sight

¹ Many of my reflections in this paper run in tandem with my 'Spirituality and Humanism: or How to be a Good Atheist' in Cornwell & McGhee (eds.) *Philosophers and God* (Continuum, 2009).

² I have used Brian Vickers (ed.) *Francis Bacon: A Critical Edition of the Major Works* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), 371–73.

incompatible with the project, which is to develop and promote a conception of ethics independently of religious belief, and surely, it will be said, 'spirituality' cannot be disentangled from such belief since it has to do with our relationship with God or the things of the spirit – though the clue to what can be retrieved lies in the implicit opposition, viz., with the things of the world or the flesh: an opposition which reveals an ethical estimate of two ways of living *from the point of view of one of them*. I wish to recommend the notion as a repository of wisdom and experience as we seek to understand and confront the conflicted moral condition which gave rise to that distinction between spirit, world and flesh in the first place. Some secularists have a faintly absurd antipathy to anything that sounds 'religious' and may react against my suggestion. Such reactivity, though, is to be found also in their opponents, and it would be unfortunate if all believers and non-believers had in common was an unjust and inaccurate estimate of each other's position. If dialogue between believers and non-believers is to prosper, then it must be premised on the correction of false perceptions.

ii

The opening verses of Genesis draw on the imagery of artistic production and appreciation and convey a judgment of artistic success. They draw on our experience of the moment when the artist knows their work is achieved and loves it as their offspring – God saw that what he had made was *good*. But the image of an artist or creator expresses a sense of wonder and delight in the earth's beauty and, crucially, in the original beauty and innocence of humanity. This sense of wonder, at the earth and at ourselves, takes the imaginative form of delight in what the artist has created and represents the impulse of protective care towards it – towards humanity and the earth. It is the sense expressed in Blake's thought that 'everything that lives is holy'. The verses express, but also promote, a common but fugitive human experience, that of inclusive love and benevolence, and this universal sense becomes the half-remembered measure of moral endeavour. It is the felt *Sorge* that motivates the diverse phenomena that we collect under the term 'morality', an experience of the moral sentiments in their universal expression. Now it is certainly true that this is a suspect way of talking – 'he loves humanity but doesn't like people' – but, as I shall suggest in the conclusion, this inclusiveness or universality may be expressed in and precipitated *by* the particular, and doesn't so much embrace

all as *any*. Nevertheless, and this is really our theme, there is a gulf between the acknowledgment, even the love, of the ideal or measure, and the ability to live by that standard.

These moral sentiments are not only independent of 'religious belief', but they *inform* its narratives, and, in the case of the theistic traditions, therefore, have determined (changes in) how God has been conceived in those narratives, both in terms of what he commands and what he sanctions, as exemplified in the familiar difference in conception between the wrathful Jehovah and the 'still small voice'. Some theists may want to say that we have over time come to a better understanding of God's will because he has disclosed it gradually and according to our lights, but secularists will simply note the moral improvement enshrined in how that will has been conceived.

In any case, that we describe the moral sentiments as 'moral' in the first place indicates our cultural approval of them, and it will be asked what the grounds of that approval might be. It is not as though we exist as a neutral consciousness impartially judging the merits of opposing tendencies: we find, rather, that we have already taken sides. Our approval seems to rest in this underlying but evanescent attitude of inclusive benevolence which I suggested informed the opening of Genesis. It is a fundamental orientation that is, however, often overlain, though its bass note is audible even when most muffled or distant, in the form of disquiet or remorse. I would call it a primal and ungrounded moral vision or perspective, an internal moral ideal, a *conscience*, perhaps, though I use that term with caution since 'conscience' is liable to manipulation and perversion, particularly by what John Buchan called dogmatic enthusiasm, and by creeds that attract (because they express) intemperate mentalities in conflict with this moral ideal. Certainly we cannot give an account of the moral sentiments independently of critical scrutiny of their proposed intentional objects – and the moral sentiments are not, alas, the only human sentiments or impulses to inform the scriptural narratives.

But if we have already taken sides, what are we to make of the idea of *metanoia* or moral conversion? Surely this is the idea of a *re-orientation from* a life of crime, as it were, and towards the good. In one sense this is right – in the sense that it represents a self-conscious *renunciation* of the inner forces that stand in the way of the good, a renunciation motivated by *concern* for the good, not as an abstract entity, however, but in the sense of concern to avoid the harm and damage one finds oneself doing. The metaphor of the 'still small voice' is an apt representation of the phenomenology. *Metanoia*

represents a moment of self-conscious commitment and renunciation that *strengthens* an orientation that is already in place and is its motivating force. This commitment is activated by the vivid sense of what is endangered by what needs therefore to be renounced. To put it another way, and to draw on diverse sources, *metanoia* takes the form of a commitment to the processes of self-overcoming or inner *jihad* – commitment, in other words, to the disciplines of a spiritual life.

To use the language of the state of nature, human beings are capable of sympathy, benevolence and generosity of spirit, though these are limited in scope and force by contending impulses of cruelty, vindictiveness and the ruthless pursuit of power and territory at the expense of others. The antagonism between these fundamental attitudes is also part of the scriptural narrative, though as we shall see the narrative often enough *compounds* what its history has also sought to resolve. Nevertheless it is a narrative that has plenty to recommend it to humanists since it represents the progress of moral struggle, and spirituality is as it were a body of knowledge that treats of the contours and limits of that struggle. As I have already indicated, and to reassure the more suspicious secularists, the moral sentiments, albeit in contention with our darker nature, are not only independent of religious belief but also inform it, so that religion might be thought of as in debt to morality rather than the reverse.

iii

However, there are two things that the promoters of a humanist ethic would quite rightly dissociate themselves from. The first is that form of allegedly ‘religious’ consciousness and practice which reflects, reinforces and seeks to justify conduct that flows from the dark side of our nature.³ Recent secularist writers have done this emphatically, but have tended, with a lamentable absence of critical judgment, to tar all religion with the same brush. The second is those ‘moral beliefs’ or ‘moral convictions’ that are determined by credal beliefs or ‘metaphysical commitments’. Needless to say, certain creeds, particularly those which operate with a simple-minded cosmogony, can

³ John Buchan remarks of the divines of the Seventeenth Century Scottish Kirk that ‘Finding little warrant for force in the New Testament, [they] had recourse to the Old Testament, where they discovered encouraging precedents in the doings of Elijah and Hezekiah and Josiah’, *Montrose* (Cornwall: House of Stratus, 1928/2008), 29.

so represent things that an act of torture becomes a sort of higher kindness and requires one to 'overcome' the natural human sentiments even as they appeal to them – they appeal to them, but alter and pervert their objects. One needs to make a distinction here. Humanists would not wish to be associated with a certain kind of justificatory theology or metaphysics even though it endorses moral positions that they hold independently. But nor would they associate themselves with casuistic moral beliefs that are determined by a particular theological or metaphysical position. One thinks for instance of the alleged (but not often self-ascribed) 'objective disorder' of homosexuality, and of certain other precise delineations of sexual and reproductive ethics that one associates with the official teaching of the Catholic Church, and to which a rhetoric of moral sentiment is often attached, even though the objects of these sentiments are metaphysically determined and remote.

There is another side to this story, however. In the first instance, 'being religious' is quite obviously not all one thing and the resources for a critique of its malformations are available within the history of the traditions themselves, as we have seen and as evinced in Buchan's wry remarks about the Seventeenth Century Kirk – *available* even if they are occluded or perverted in certain cultural and political contexts (giving rise to protests and reactions later recognised as 'movements of renewal'). But even religiously-minded people who would join in the secularist repudiation of religious zealotry will complain that secularists who express admiration for some of the moral teachings of the Bible can in the nature of the case appropriate those teachings only in an incomplete form, and that it is an error to minimise the sharp differences between secularists and 'people of faith'. It is indeed an error, but there is plenty of common ground, if not about what ultimately constitutes human well being, at least about the justice of striving to establish and maintain the conditions for the possibility of any kind of flourishing at all, and if secularists do not share the hope of eternal life and the conquering of death, they will also note the promise that such a life can be tasted here.

There is, then, a moral content independent of 'metaphysical commitment' and 'religious belief' that plays an original and determining role in the formation of religious narrative and theology, and is not their outcome – and this notwithstanding the pitiless vein of *Realpolitik* that also runs through the scriptures, and sometimes distorts and sometimes overwhelms the moral vision. But the articulation and expression of this moral vision requires an account of the conditions for its fulfilment, conditions which are both interior and

intersubjective, and I suggest that the concept of spirituality belongs to such an account. Now, the same religiously-minded people who insist that secularists can only partially appropriate the New Testament message will also routinely charge them with a 'shallow' and optimistic view of human nature and the possibilities of human progress. This criticism is well-deserved in some cases. It applies to certain polemical writers who have expended their intellectual energies in the refutation of belief and are then too tired or ill-equipped to offer more than a glad gesture towards a glorious future. Nevertheless, the moral vision that the older generation of secular humanists endorsed is precisely a humanist one in its passion for justice and its condemnation of hypocrisy and corruption. But, to return to the issue of spirituality, the humanist movement needs not only to re-endorse this defining moral vision, but also to take seriously the reality of a divided self by incorporating an account of the kind I have just mentioned of the conditions for the fulfilment of that vision.

iv

In his *Treatise* (Book III Section V) David Hume remarks that

Tho' there was no obligation to relieve the miserable, our humanity would lead us to it; and when we omit that duty, the immorality of the omission arises from its being a proof, that we want the natural sentiments of humanity.

Hume makes the want of these 'natural sentiments of humanity' an object of moral criticism and you might think that he relies in that case on what appears to be the moral judgment that we *ought to have them*. I have elsewhere⁴ tried to defend the view that this kind of ought judgment is an epistemic rather than a practical one – roughly, 'being possessed of certain sentiments' describes a *condition* rather than an action, and there is a shift in the logic of ought as it applies to the two kinds of case. A practical ought judgment is one which implies that there is a reason to *do* something, whereas an epistemic ought judgment is one which implies that there is a reason to *believe* something. In the present case the judgment that someone *ought to have* the 'natural sentiments of humanity' implies that there is reason to believe that they *will* have them, on the grounds that human beings generally *do*. To have this expectation, though,

⁴ See 'Facing Truths' in McGhee (ed.) *Philosophy, Religion and the Spiritual Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

is relatively naïve since experience shows us all too well that human beings often don't. But it still makes sense in the face of their absence to insist that they *ought* to be there – and we thus imply that there must be a special explanation of their absence – and indeed we are usually ready to offer such explanations, usually of a psycho-social nature. But the *tone* of these judgments depends upon disappointed *empirical* expectations which have a practical impact – if someone lacks these sentiments then they are dangerous or frightening. There are probably only very few who want these natural sentiments entirely, but we now know well enough how easily they are subverted and overlain or stifled, and not simply by 'selfishness' which we have traditionally thought of as the natural contrary of benevolence or sympathy. As we now know a bureaucratic conscientiousness as well as deference to voices of authority can cancel these sentiments in the sense that they cancel awareness of what naturally attracts their attention, and have disastrous consequences for human well-being.

But the idea of 'having' or 'possessing' the moral sentiments is ambiguous. One can have them in the sense that at least intermittently they provide a perspective on the world, or one can have them in the sense that they dominate consciousness and action in their light flows naturally and without effort. The transition from the one state to the other represents the programme for spirituality.

The problem with the moral sentiments has always been their reliability and their scope since if we are naturally benevolent we are also naturally selfish, fearful and deferential and we anyway exhibit in our sympathy a bias to the near. But, as Hume indicates, we are wanting in the natural sentiments of humanity if we are indifferent to the plight of the miserable, *whoever* they may be. To be moved to act in the presence of human or other animal misery indicates a widening of the scope of the relevant sentiment of sympathy or compassion. Indeed the very idea of *universality* as a necessary and 'objective' component of morality is in reality a reflection of the internal moral ideal that represents our collective memory of protective care such as informs the opening verses of Genesis. The significant point about them from the point of view of spirituality is that the perspective is easily lost and even when lost we are too full of human frailty to act in its light.

As I have said, we don't stand over against these opposing forces as a neutral consciousness wondering how to choose, but are, rather, constituted by the struggle – and precisely *haunted* by one pole of the opposition. The sense of the whole and of an inclusive rather than partial benevolence is not a possibility of our nature that

stands on all fours with our appetites, for instance. The latter present themselves already in the form of *temptations*. The sense of the whole expresses an orientation that determines what we take our nature to be and in the light of which we make judgments about what our demeanour in particular circumstances ought to be, and we explain the absence of that demeanour in terms of desires that we count as wayward just to the extent that they are obstacles.

v

It may be helpful here to consider a suggestion made by the Catholic theologian, Nicholas Lash, to the effect that we should think of the various religious traditions as ‘schools’:

...we would do well to think of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, of Buddhism and Vedantic Hinduism, not as “religions” but as *schools*, schools whose pedagogy ... “has the twofold purpose – however differently conceived and executed in the different traditions – of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire”.⁵

I want to suggest that secular humanism is also a school in this sense, one whose pedagogy would also in that case have ‘the twofold purpose ... of weaning us from our idolatry and purifying our desire’. You do not need to be a theist to warn against idolatry, and not all the ‘schools’ mentioned here by Lash are theistic. Theologians and religious leaders often warn us against the worship of false gods, and there is a long tradition, already invoked in this paper, that laments the unconscious propensity of believers to fashion God in their own (unregenerate) image, and it is often just these conceptions of deity that are the target of secularist criticism (though some secularists are justly criticised in turn by theologians who think that the real nature of theism has eluded them). But the notion of idolatry also has a moral content: it involves turning away from the paths of righteousness.

In suggesting that secular humanism is also a school, I imply that it is more than an intellectual position, and humanists in any case think of themselves as involved in a *movement* defined by its concern for

⁵ Lash, ‘The Impossibility of Atheism’ – page 29 of *Theology for Pilgrims* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008) in which he quotes from page 21 of his *The Beginning and the End of ‘Religion’* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

human flourishing. Richard Norman, for instance, has talked of the need to give an account of how we should live, but without religion, and he sees humanism as ‘the positive affirmation that human beings can find from within themselves the resources to live a good life without religion’.⁶ Notice, however, the collision between Norman’s talk of finding the resources within ourselves and Bacon’s complaint that atheism ‘depriveth human nature of the means to exalt itself above human frailty’. We shall have to return to this, though I think the issue turns on an equivocation about what we are calling human nature, about what belongs to our nature and what belongs to ‘the means’ that exalts it above frailty.

The idea of the purification of desire does not present itself in a vacuum and without context. The premise is that unless desire is purified it is inimical to our ends, eclipses our vision, undermines our power of action – the moral notion of purification is predicated on the lived experience of a divided self. This gives us the agenda for the training and *ascesis* of the spiritual life. In bringing secular humanism into connection with the religious traditions through the common notion of a school I do not seek to *assimilate* it to religion any more than I should wish to do in the case of the ancient Stoic or Epicurean schools that Lash no doubt draws his inspiration from. But once we take seriously the idea of secular humanism as a movement and as a school, we introduce the notion of the cure of souls, the well being of its members, and all this invites the question whether humanism should see itself, not as a religion among other religions, but at least as a spiritual community (the suggestion is probably too close to the idea of a church or sangha for some humanists to stomach, though it might also give them reason to reconceive such institutions). In any event, I suggest that what we are talking about are schools of *spirituality*.

For quite different reasons secularists and religionists will resist this term as applied to a humanist movement. But secular humanists can appropriate an operational notion, not only of spirituality, but also of ‘transcendence’, without being committed in either case to religious belief. Both notions can be understood in moral terms, though they also put pressure on our notion of what it is to be moral at all. Transcendence may be understood in the light of our experience of inner conflict *and the state of our self-knowledge*. This is important because it lies at the heart of doctrines of grace and accusations of humanist pride. Thus we tend to identify ourselves with our familiar ‘unregenerate’ impulses (we make our frailty our nature, if I might contend against Bacon), impulses which determine the horizon

⁶ See Richard Norman, *On Humanism* (London, Routledge, 2004), 18.

within which our attention ranges – and our more regenerate ones are therefore experienced and received as *visitations* from beyond that horizon, as opposed to being thought of as the promptings of a ‘higher’ but not yet integrated self. This is the point at which believers invoke the notion of grace and Spirit, both of which are attempts, in a theistic setting, to make sense of the phenomena of *metanoia*, that switch in the balance of forces when we identify with universal and disinterested ends but find that they are not under our conscious control, or part of our conscious repertoire, part of the habitual and therefore effortless formation of our will. Richard Norman’s talk of humanism as ‘the positive affirmation that human beings can find from within themselves the resources to live a good life without religion’ needs to be qualified by integrating into that conception precisely this experience of transformation as included within what we take our resource *to be*.

Nicholas Lash is surely correct in his criticism of *some* talk of ‘spirituality’, and he puts his finger on the reason that makes me at least feel uneasy about using the term at all:

Nor is it surprising that, since the term [religion] nevertheless still carries ancient overtones of public life and conduct, of established norms and practices, many people prefer to describe the games they play in the private playgrounds of Cartesian consciousness not as religion but as “spirituality”.

However, what Lash draws attention to is a profound misunderstanding of the term. Spirituality does not properly belong within a private inner space but has an essentially public application. It relates precisely to ‘public life and conduct’ rather than to a Cartesian consciousness, and, although it is concerned with the development of the conditions for both vision and action, as a moral category it governs the nature of the relationships *within and between communities*. When St Paul distinguished between the gifts of the flesh and the gifts of the spirit he was referring to the sentiments and impulses that governed the conduct of an allegedly *exemplary* community.

2. How to be godless without being shallow

‘I had rather believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran’, declares Sir Francis Bacon, as his producer turns down the sound on his Elizabethan cultural perceptions, ‘than that this universal frame is without a mind ... God never wrought miracle, to convince atheism, because his ordinary works convince it ...’

The atheist will notice the sleight of hand in the invitation to look upon the world as someone's 'work' in the first place, even though, as we have seen, in a contemplative mood a person's mind might well turn towards the *imagery* of making, to the image, indeed of a wonderful artist. But the vivacity of an image, and even the state of wonder induced by good story-telling, can mislead us into taking it 'literally' – and yield what we now call 'creationism', though when we say that creationists take the text 'literally' we actually mean, I think, that they read it as belonging to the language game of information, historical reportage, rather than as the narrative which is creatively derived from and takes the form of that language game. However, to claim, by contrast, that we are dealing with metaphors and stories does not by itself imply that they are about *us* as opposed to a transcendental reality, dimly thus apprehended. And so we come to the very edge of the common ground between secularists and believers.

The idea of a maker comes from a movement of the imagination, and to conceive it or hold the image in one's mind is hardly by itself to be 'convinced' that there really is a wonderful artist at work. To return to Bacon, it is this image of 'work', mediating between the world and our wonder, rather than the world itself, that might 'convince' someone, who might see in it a revelatory symbol of our dependence on God.

Now, in defence of believers, I should want to deny that this kind of conviction is 'blind' and I do so because the linguistic stage-setting that would support that adverse judgment is absent. A belief is 'blind' when someone holds it without reference to evidence, whether confirming or disconfirming, and the judgment is adverse just because evidential avenues are open and determining. But where we are talking about the world as such rather than about contingent features *within* the world, then talk of evidence, or indeed of explanation, is misplaced. This is one reason why some philosophers have claimed, without adverse judgment, that such beliefs are ungrounded rather than 'blind', though I would myself rather not call them beliefs at all, mostly because of the way we conflate the notion with that of empirical belief and then confuse this with the quite separate notion of 'trust'.

'It is true', Bacon goes on, 'that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism; but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion':

For while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it

beholdeth the chain of them, confederate and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity.

But is it *true* that ‘the mind of man’ *must* ‘fly to Providence and Deity’? I think that the obvious answer is no, and that Bacon fails to see a middle position between his shallow atheist who rests in second causes and the deeper philosopher who flies to Providence and Deity – viz that of someone who beholds the chain of causes confederate and linked together but does not fly to Providence and Deity.

However, the ethical *form* of the impulse to fly thither *can* be shared by the atheist. As we have seen, part of the interest of the Creation story is that it presents the Creator in terms that rely on the experience of aesthetic achievement and protective care, a natural widening of the moral sentiments, a universal benevolence.⁷ What informs the narrative is, if you like, an ethic of care – except that patriarchy enshrines a contaminated conception of protective care that we have still not overcome. The story embodies a *conception* of its subject-matter – it expresses an ethical perspective, endorses the providential care that it narrates, and informs us that we are made in the image of the God who extends to us that providential care, and thus commends this attitude to its hearers. It then laments our moral failure, and our tendency to live lives in conflict with this ideal, lives that are destructive and careless rather than creative of this care. The theologian James Mackey⁸ has written very powerfully about how the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament together testify to the history of this struggle between the contending impulses of benevolence and ruthlessness – contending impulses with which the history of philosophy is also familiar.

But the particular interest of Mackey’s analysis lies in his insistence that this heterogeneous collection of writings testifies to the progress of these contending impulses in more than one way: they give expression to and celebrate the original ideal; they record, from the point of view of that ideal, its conflict with our tendency to self-aggrandisement, to use Mackey’s word, but they are also in many places contaminated and overwhelmed by that tendency and its distortions of vision. In other words, the scriptures reveal the divided self, in the sense of exposing it but also in the sense of betraying it.

⁷ See Richard Norman, ‘Secularism and Shared Values’, in Cornwell & McGhee (eds.), *Philosophers and God* (Continuum, 2009).

⁸ See his *Christianity and Creation: The Essence of the Christian Faith and its Future among Religions: A Systematic Theology* (Continuum, 2006). I should like to record here my indebtedness to his writing more generally.

But now, before reflecting further on spirituality and ethical ideals, I want to say more about the role of wonder in philosophical theism, since the idea of the world as God's creation is already an imaginative expression of wonder: some god has done this!⁹ Bacon's complaint was that atheists are shallow because they do not press their questions far enough, and this sentiment is frequently echoed by theistic philosophers. But though it might be thought that the very existence of things is as plausible an object of wonder as the *suchness* of things, wonder at the existence of things does not naturally take the form of or lead to the question *why* there is anything at all. It is not even clear that the idea of wonder at the existence of things isn't simply a variant expression for wonder at what exists rather than at that it exists. Wonder at the suchness of things, by contrast, *can* express itself in the form of the idea of an artist Creator. Theistic faith consists in taking this image as a revelation or intimation of the nature of things. However, it is only in the light of this idea, already formed and furnishing the mind, that it makes sense to raise the question *why* is there anything at all – and it makes sense to raise it, the question suggests itself, because we now have an answer ready to hand. To someone who is not already a theist, however, it is not obvious that the question is well-formed.

The late Fr Herbert McCabe is associated with a revival of interest in the question – and he certainly thought, in the spirit of Francis Bacon, that it is a failure of rationality not to raise it. Those who pursue this line of inquiry tend to treat the question as though it were the most general form of – and had the same logic as – the question, why are things thus rather than so, where the implication is already that things could have been otherwise, and are as they are because of the nature of the conditions which have given rise to them. But the latter kind of question is raised in the context of, and is predicated upon, an already acknowledged experience of contingency: that things come into existence that might not have done if the conditions had been different, that things fall out in a particular way and we can find an explanation for this by inquiring into the conditions. The significant thing in such cases is that we presume, take ourselves to be justified in assuming, that there *is* an explanation even if we do not yet know what that explanation is. But such a presumption applied to the existence of the totality of contingent things

⁹ To say this is to remain neutral about the question whether the world 'really is' God's creation.

lacks its original conditions of intelligibility and simply begs the question, though it is the conclusion that the line of questioning invites.

However, I am inclined to think that the real point of this line of questioning is not so much to compel us to a conclusion as to invite us to think in a way congenial to a confession of theistic faith. In other words, it invites us to *think the possibility* that the totality of contingent things – ‘creation’ – is contingent upon the activity of a creator, to think the possibility that there *might be* an explanation even if we cannot assume in advance that there must be. Someone who professes belief in God already sees humanity and the world we live in as dependent creation, as contingent upon God’s sustaining and creative power, but there is no rational failure in not thus flying to Providence and Deity. But, to repeat, whereas in the case of an empirical feature of the world that we seek to explain we presume that there *must be* an explanation even if we do not know what it is, this presumption is not available to us in the case of the world itself – we cannot presume that there must be an explanation. This does not imply that there isn’t one, but the question is pressed by those who think there is one – but not because they originally asked this question themselves.

A more plausible route to theism derives from wonder at the suchness of things. Thus we might have a sense of wonder at the *immensity* of the starry heavens or at the *loveliness* of a meadow in early May, or at the *charm* of a young child. And the point about the wonder is that it is an experience associated with rejoicing and care. *Genesis* expresses wonder, not at the existence of things but at the *suchness* of things, the *glory* of Creation, and tells of its fashioning. It is a story about how things came to be as they are rather than about how anything came to be at all – specifically a story about how *we* came to be as we are, and how we became divided and wayward beings. The categories are moral and aesthetic. The story *invokes* divine agency but does not argue to (the very idea of) a divine agent. In the face of wonder at the beauty of the world the idea of the work of a creative intelligence suggests itself as a natural metaphor, as I said earlier. So, then, what is in favour of Bacon’s claim that God’s ordinary works ‘convince’ atheism?

I have no doubt that the original *Genesis* story can strike a person with what we call ‘the force of truth’ *and* change their lives. It does the latter partly because its conception of Deity already embodies a conception of human ideals, and it can awaken or recall the hearer to their deepest impulses. But there are two things here. In certain contemplative moods the image of a maker naturally suggests itself, and

might do so for *anyone* because we are naturally anthropomorphic. But, as I just suggested, it can also strike someone as a revelation or intimation of the ultimate nature of things.

I use the phrase ‘strike with the force of truth’ to imply that for those who are struck in this way, the story, at least initially, *compels assent* and this is what is called ‘Faith’ – which is also the natural arena of religious doubt. Those who struggle with this doubt struggle precisely with whether what was received as a revelation is genuinely so. However, the reference to an assent that is ‘compelled’ implies that there is no voluntarism involved here (as distinct from the theological virtue of ‘belief in God’ that consists in an attitude of trust in God’s saving power). The story impresses itself upon someone as a revelation of how things are, whether it is understood as a mythopoeic or symbolic representation of the providential care of an eternal being, or, more naively, as a likeness of what it represents. Thus, if I might repeat my earlier remarks about ‘blind’ belief – it might be objected that just because something strikes you as true it doesn’t follow that it is true! That is surely right, but the model invoked by the objector is that of a hunch about a particular, contingent feature of the world that actually stands in need of independent verification, and where this necessity is being disregarded. But there is no such empirical context here, only an ungrounded vision of the world seen as a whole. I do not share this vision, but calling it a vision, or a picture’, does not imply that it cannot be a revelation of how things ultimately are – but ‘faith’ is the bottom-line, faith in the form of a compelled assent. The assent can wax or wane, can appear less than compelling, and then be restored – or dissipate entirely. As far as religious doubt is concerned, it can take the form of a scepticism directed at a literal interpretation in favour of the symbolic, or, more radically, of the symbolic representation also. In either case doubt, like assent, dawns over the whole system of propositions and doubting the existence of God in that case should not be construed on the model of doubting the truth of a single existential proposition – doubt is cast on the revelatory nature of the whole vision.

3. Conclusion

Bacon’s ancestral voice lingers on, but it is worth seeking to accommodate it to some degree. There *is* a sense in which attention only to ‘second causes’ is in some way shallow, and that to behold them confederate and linked together requires reflection and depth. The

shallowness Bacon complains about is that of someone who lives a life of unreflective immediacy, *resting* in second causes, immersed ‘in the world’, which expression implies moral criticism of the associated formation of subjectivity – one that determines the horizon within which one ranges. Depth, by contrast, is found in the *contemplation* of the world as a whole that belongs to wonder and its associated attitudes. Our immersion in what we call the world distracts us from what lies beyond that horizon of interest, and when we do see beyond it this comes, as I said earlier, in the form of a visitation, and traditionally, and following Paul, the visitation has been taken to be from the Spirit and its influence. Spirituality is the derived term that refers to the discipline of protecting the conditions for the possibility of that distinctive perspective on the world.

I should like to be more precise and emphatic about this idea of contemplating the world as such. Elsewhere I have described it as ‘aesthetic perception’ and have cited Paul Valéry’s remark about how poetry gives us ‘the sense of a universe’. I have also cited Kant’s notion of aesthetic ideas¹⁰ in order to indicate the interplay between universal and particular. The thought is that in both art and nature universals can be evoked in and by particulars which are their instantiations. So the beauty of *this* landscape may sometimes be perceived in its exemplary as well as individual presence as disclosing the beauty of the world itself. The terrified face of this child in Gaza evokes in its particularity the dreadful political world in which it is trapped, and all such worlds. But the interesting thing here is that one is at once moved by the plight of the individual child *and* by the state of the world that its plight discloses. These kinds of aesthetic perception can be startling because they happen to us and change our mood. By contrast, under the influence of Hamlet’s depression, this goodly frame the earth becomes a stale promontory, this most excellent canopy the air becomes a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours. What we have here is an example of Nietzsche’s symptomatology of emotions. It is not so much that here are two equal options as that here are two aetiologies, a condition in which one’s inner disposition determines how one sees the world – as precisely contaminated by that disposition – and one in which the sight of the earth’s glories determines one’s inner condition, or, more realistically, gives one a sense of that possibility.

What I have tried to do is present a picture of a moral vision that *informs* the religious picture we associate with the Abrahamic

¹⁰ McGhee, *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

religions. I suggested that this moral vision informs theology, and I should like to end with a few comments on that.

It is hardly surprising that the scriptures reflect the moral attitudes and self-understanding of their authors, though we know that in so doing they also endorse and justify some of our most brutal tendencies. But nor is it surprising that the engulfing urgency to revenge that follows carnage and slaughter and is perceived as justice, should give way to calmer reflection on the atrocious consequences of escalation, reflection that engages compassion for the human condition. It is hardly surprising, in other words, that what we think of as the ethical development of human beings and the changing conceptions of Deity that reflect that development, should be expressed and even worked out in the history of scriptures that represent some of our earliest forms of self-consciousness. These latter changes are the product of creative imagination and calm reflection, this time on the perceived dissonance between our conceptions of the divine and our experience of dreadful realities. Thus the Lisbon Earthquake in the eighteenth century and the Holocaust in the twentieth have occasioned creative but existentially fraught theological renewal as thinkers have tried to make sense of the problem of evil. But these reflections are arenas for the development of moral insight. Thus the question where was God in the Holocaust finds resolution for some in the thought that God can only act through human hands, a reflection which turns (deflects?) the attention of the believer to the moral condition of humanity. It seems to me that the doctrine of *kenosis*, the doctrine of God's 'self-emptying', or of Christ's making himself powerless, is precisely a way of fixing or projecting a moral insight about the nature of power, specifically power over others. When we have someone in our power, so that we can do with them just what we want to do, or when we know that they are eclipsed by our power, then that power needs to be renounced if compassion, or any other moral virtue that allows others to *be*, is to emerge or flourish. The religions are, then, among other things, expressions of the state of moral insight, and it is obvious that moral reflection can be disconnected from what we call religious belief. But a religious picture that belongs to story-telling about origins can be undermined when it is confronted by the phenomena of natural and human evil, and theologians seem to be people who make adjustments to the story in the light of events and in accordance with their own moral judgment.

A moral philosopher will typically defend an intellectual position, make distinctions that are liable to be overlooked, describe and seek to resolve conceptual difficulties and confusions, and then stand aside.

Michael McGhee

However, as I said in the body of this paper, secular humanism presents itself as more than an intellectual position about the independence of ethics from religion. It also seeks, as a movement, to promote a moral vision. In that case it needs to take seriously the responsibilities of its role as a school of (godless) spirituality.

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