

TERENCE PENELHUM

RESPONSE TO CHAPPELL

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to Dr Chappell for the encomia he has so kindly included in his notice of my book. It was especially kind of him to include them when we appear to disagree so fundamentally on the two issues he has chosen to discuss. First, he does not think, as I do, that the world is religiously ambiguous. Second, he thinks that religious beliefs can be, and are, chosen, and I do not.

Before beginning, I should perhaps say that I do not see the book as an attempt to steer a middle course between literalist and anti-realist extremes. From the outset I assume, with believers and their critics, that faith is, at the core, a matter of having certain beliefs about the cosmos and our relationship to it, and that it is especially controversial because the way in which these beliefs are held by those who have them does not seem to conform to the standards of rationality that both groups agree in applying to other beliefs. I think the words ‘literalist’ and ‘realist’ are appropriate enough to apply to this assumption. I also happen to think that anti-realist philosophers of religion like Cupitt and Phillips have responded to the criticisms that faith has generated by trying to replace its cognitive core of belief by other elements, like serenity or personal liberation, that are in actual faith combined with it. The book presents no arguments for this opinion, but I would be distressed if anything I have said in it savours of an attempt to lean towards an anti-realist view.

I turn first to the question of religious ambiguity. When he first summarises my view on this, Chappell says I think the world is ‘(at least *prima facie*) equally well interpretable by a whole variety of theistic and atheistic views’.

I do not think that the thesis of ambiguity requires one to assert that the views whose multiplicity creates that ambiguity all interpret the world ‘equally well’; it only requires one to admit that each world-view can be held without violation of doxastic obligation, that each has rational procedures built into it to respond to others’ criticisms, resources to explain the apparent strength and persistence of the others, and so forth. I think it is possible to recognise all these features of other world-views without being committed to a judgement of total equality between them. One can still prefer one’s own view and offer reasons for this; but to say the world is ambiguous is to say that these reasons will be persuasive only within one’s own world-view, and are likely matched by parallel defences and criticisms within the others.

Chappell raises the question of how many systems one is forced to admit into competition if one accepts the reality of the world's ambiguity. I freely concede that I have offered no list of criteria that would make such a question easy to answer. One consideration that would limit any list is that candidates need to be of a fairly systematic and developed character to incorporate the diagnoses, defences and explanations of other stances that generate the ambiguity. I would think tree-frog worship would not extend to all this, but without investigation I cannot be sure. I also freely admit to some unclarity about the status of moral criticisms of religions. We all know, at least since Kant, the difficulties in the way of suggesting that any particular moral position is definitive of practical rationality; so although nothing is more intimately connected with religious commitment than the moral choices that flow from it and lead to it, I am inclined to feel that moral rejection of some competing religion is another internally-based argument against it, and not a promising method of disambiguation, since the moral stance from which I might attack a faith I reject will probably be paralleled by a stance within it that will have its own rational sources and defences.

Chappell confronts me with a supposed dilemma: (1) if the world is capable of disambiguation, it probably never was ambiguous, since some single view will always have been unambiguously correct; (2) if, on the other hand, the world does manifest ambiguity, there is no reason ever to expect its ambiguity to be resolved. I would answer as follows. (1) If the world is ambiguous, it is because those of us who live in it are faced with a number of interpretations of it, and of ourselves, that are each capable of rational support, and which are each held by people who need not have violated any doxastic obligations in adhering to them. That situation is quite compatible with only one of them being true (which is what I take to be meant by 'unambiguously correct'). If the ambiguity were resolved, by the core beliefs of one of them being proved true, and/or those of some or all of the others being shown to be inconsistent with scientific knowledge, then it is indeed the case that the one thus selected out was true before as well as after, and that its competitors were false before as well as after. But this does not show that the world was not ambiguous before, because ambiguity is not only a function of what the truth is, but of what it is rational for people in their epistemic circumstances to think it is. And prior to the proofs and the refutations, these are circumstances in which ambiguity obtains.

(2) Regarding the other horn of the dilemma, the reason that Chappell offers for pessimism about disambiguation is that if the great formative religious figures did not provide it, it is too much to expect anyone else to. Here my answer has to be more complex. I have not suggested disambiguation is necessary for conversion, nor, of course, that it is necessary for the rationality of the new stance that conversion generates; but the best possible illustration I can offer of the reality of religious ambiguity is that it is rational

to make a positive response to *any one* of the great figures Chappell lists, and that an informed adherent of any of the traditions that they have generated can recognise the rationality of adherence to each of the others. It seems to me to follow from this that ever since they have all proclaimed their messages, the world has been religiously ambiguous between the traditions they have generated; what is different about the present era from those preceding it is that many of us are now in a position to understand traditions other than our own, and can recognise the ambiguity to be a fact. That we may not have much in the way of resources to respond to it is indeed unfortunate for us, and indeed makes the ambiguity a Bad Thing.

This brings us to the question of whether admitting ambiguity is consistent with serious commitment to any of the great world religions. As Chappell says, each is likely to have inner resources to demonstrate its superiority to one or more of the others. But the fact that each of them has such resources is one of the facts that *constitutes* the world's religious ambiguity, or so I have argued. I also suggest in the book that the fact of ambiguity might represent an inner problem for one or more of the traditions; that the sheer variety of options, each with its rational supports, does give an apparent reason for hesitation in the face of commitment; and that there is a possible analogy between the implications of religious ambiguity and the effect of some meta-ethical theories on the conviction with which we make our moral judgments. I do not know how far the fact of ambiguity does, or should, affect the nature of the intensity of the religious faith of those who recognise it; and my uncertainty no doubt emerges in the closing pages of the book, though I do say how those who adhere to a faith ought to respond to ambiguity when they recognise it. I wish now to say only that however it ought to be resolved, a wish for its resolution does not make the fact of ambiguity go away.

Chappell says that perhaps 'the reason why it seems (to some) that there is equally good evidence for at least several incompatible views about religion is not because there *is* such evidence, but because people *behave as if* there were'. I am not sure I understand this suggestion, but the natural reading of it is that the supposed ambiguity of the world is a consequence of enquirers being unwilling to take the steps necessary to attain to single conviction. There are, I have no doubt, some of us of whom this rather stringent judgement is true. I have suggested that a recognition of ambiguity is consistent with having such single conviction (subject to the reservations in the last paragraph); but, more importantly, I would say that the judgement that the world is ambiguous is a result of two facts: (1) the fact that enormous numbers have, even knowing of the reality of other traditions, embraced one of them wholeheartedly, and (2) the fact that others (mostly scholars and philosophers) have noticed that they have done so without violating doxastic obligations, and have thus managed to embrace a number of distinct and apparently incompatible faiths.

I turn now to the second theme: belief and the will. The position I adopted in the book on this is that believing is not an action and cannot be commanded or chosen, although the processes of forming and sustaining beliefs include many actions that can be commanded or chosen. Chappell thinks this is wrong. He even seems to think I am wrong in holding that beliefs are sometimes due to desires. He argues that my distinction between beliefs and belief-forming processes is untenable, except in simple cases like perceptual beliefs. It is, however, a key part of my argument that in those cases where the advent of belief is preceded by complex procedures of reflection and activity of the sort he describes (procedures I have classified as belief-forming processes), believing is not something we are in a position still to do or not to do when these processes are over; it is, on the contrary, already done and done with when they are. Hence they can be commanded and ethically appraised; but the believing is not something that can be commanded or ethically appraised *independently*. In *that* sense, I too think that there is no distinction between belief and belief-formation, but that *for that very reason*, the belief cannot be separately commanded or appraised when its preliminaries or its sustaining activities are. On the matter of believing from desire, I hold (contrary to at least a literal reading of what Chappell says) that it is impossible (not just grossly irrational) to choose to believe something simply because one wants to believe it; though it is possible, common, and usually irrational, to have a belief that something is so in consequence of a desire that that particular state of affairs should obtain. This is what we call wishful thinking, and it is one of the belief-forming processes we all know to exist, and against which rational beings are (by definition) on their guard. It needs to be distinguished, of course, from the prudential judgement that it would be a good thing if one had a certain belief, and the choice to initiate processes of belief-formation to bring that about – but this is another issue I explore separately.

I do not see that the overall distinction between believing and the processes of belief-formation is unable to accommodate the complex procedures of scientific reflection that Chappell describes; or that it cannot be used to interpret the ethically important decision that one has reached the point in one's reflections when it is time to stop reflecting; or that it faces any more difficulty than a voluntarist theory in interpreting the formation of beliefs about ethical first principles.

I do not agree that 'we are never...rationally free...to believe whatever we feel like believing'. I do not agree with this because it seems to imply that we might be free to do this *irrationally*. For reasons I have recalled briefly here, and argue at more length in the book, I do not think it is possible for us to believe whatever we feel like believing, in *either* way.

Nor do I think, finally, that 'the constraints on our doxastic freedom are...always fixed and always the same'. It seems to me evident that the

range of both rational and irrational processes of belief-formation vary with subject-matter, as Chappell says; and indeed with personal circumstances, education, culture and many other things. Where did I deny this?

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