

Religion after atheism

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Abstract: This article reflects critically on some of the claims of J. L. Schellenberg's trilogy and on the fundamental decisions lying behind them. Some of the latter are found to be tied to his earlier work on atheism in ways that can be questioned.

J. L. Schellenberg's trilogy is an astonishingly original and well-argued series of books, which ought by rights, and I suspect will indeed be in fact, the centre of debate in philosophy of religion for many years. I shall not attempt here to match his rigour and meticulous planning, and cannot keep repeating how much I admire both of these features of his work. Exigencies of age and time have prevented a more comprehensive or insightful contribution. I much regret this. Instead, I will respond to some of its claims and, in a few cases, to what may lie behind them.

Atheism, not naturalism

Let me begin with some general remarks about the development of Schellenberg's thinking. I had the privilege of being one of Schellenberg's teachers during his undergraduate and Master's studies, and one of the themes of our discussions then was the world's religious ambiguity, the fact that it appears reasonable to interpret it both theistically and atheistically. We agreed that this fact is itself a problem of some significance for the theist – a problem to which the standard answers do not seem satisfactory. Schellenberg produced a definitive formulation of it, *the problem of divine hiddenness*, now known as 'the hiddenness argument', and a finely reasoned case for the view that it entails atheism, the core claim of which is that the existence of non-culpable non-belief is incompatible with theism. I do not wish to add to the debates that this work has engendered, except to say that it has always seemed obvious to me, from knowing so many

unbelieving friends and colleagues, that there is indeed such a thing as non-culpable non-belief, and that it is widespread, even though not all of it is non-culpable. I have not found any of the responses to his argument that I have read more than marginally persuasive.

The trilogy is the result of the fact that Schellenberg has not rolled over and espoused naturalism, as one might have expected. He has instead produced a meticulous case for adopting an open form of religiousness for which the earlier work has freed us.

To me the most outstanding reflection in the trilogy is powerfully simple. Theisms typically embody the claim that we are living in a linear universe that is heading towards an end-point, and that we are almost there. The night is far spent. Schellenberg tells us that we are in a quite different situation. Unless we are all blown up by nuclear lunatics, or suffocated by unchecked carbon emissions, we are at a very early stage in the span of human existence, and our spiritual lives should be lived in constant awareness of this fact. I think this shift is an immensely liberating one.

Implicit trust

Before I turn to my criticisms of Schellenberg's programme, I would like to comment briefly on some criticisms of my own work in the *Prolegomena*.¹ One of the fundamental theoretical claims in this first volume of the trilogy is that belief is involuntary. I agree. A related claim is that religious faith-in is a form of voluntary action, characterized particularly by the exercise of trust. Trusting is something that we *do*, and it entails risk. I receive criticism for suggesting that not all trust is like this.

I admit to having had before me a particular paradigm of faith, namely that expressed by Jesus as he is presented to us in Mark's Gospel. It has two features: it is commended in so far as it is unquestioning, and those who have it are said to be encountering the kingdom, or reign, of God. The disciples are rebuked for discouraging the presence of children, and Jesus says in Mark 10 that the kingdom belongs to such as these. I inferred that children manifest what I called *implicit trust*, a state of mind in which, I think the text implies, they have innocently never raised any question about what Jesus is teaching them, and I supposed Mark's Jesus commended this as a model of how the ideally faithful adult should be in these matters. I am not interested in rearguing this. I am, however, concerned to note that the childlike acceptance (a clear form of innocence) that Jesus blesses is commonly thought of by his followers as an ideal against which other kinds of faith are to be measured. It is clearly not to be thought of as a choice taken by the children in the face of alternatives. Hence, I think that when Schellenberg commends to us an understanding of faith and the trust it requires, he is involved in a significant degree of normative tidying-up of the evidence. That's inevitable, and the result of engaging in it is the liberating possibility of a sceptical faith.

Two further remarks. First, I accept what Schellenberg has said against my earlier view that having faith yields serenity in the face of negative experience. It might well yield courage, as Tillich famously says, but the ultimate counter-evidence to the suggestion that it yields serenity is, of course, the Cry of Dereliction. Second, in defence of my use of the notion of implicit trust I am reminded of the flawed heroine of *Brief Encounter*, who makes a misleading phone call to her husband and reflects to the audience that it is ‘so easy to lie when you know you are trusted implicitly – so easy, and so degrading’. Here is an adult example of trust as not-thinking-to-question, which may make my choice of terminology excusable.

Faith, risk, and ultimism

As he introduces faith in the *Prolegomena*, faith that *p*, where *p* is a religious proposition, has as one of its preconditions the absence of evidence causally sufficient to generate belief that *p*, plus a positive evaluation of *p* and a determination to adopt a policy of assent towards it – a faith that becomes operational when the subject is regularly motivated to act upon this policy.²

It is very important to note that this form of sceptical faith is not through-and-through beliefless. On the contrary, there has to be at least weak support for *p* for me to have sceptical faith that *p*. Otherwise it would not be different from mere acting-as-if *p*.³ While I cannot have sceptical faith that *p* if I have been caused to believe that *p*, I also cannot have it if I have been caused to believe *p* is false. For in this latter case, if I continued to act on *p*, whether consistently or merely occasionally, I would merely be treating *p* as a source of pictures of a desirable state of affairs that would inspire me to pretend the world was like *p* says.

R. B. Braithwaite recommended something like this. He held that the form of meaning that the convictions of a believer have is to be reduced to an adoption of a policy to follow, in the Christian case, an ‘agapeistic’ way of life. The stories that inspire the Christian may well not be literally true and may even be thought to be false by the Christian. Rather, their role is to serve as a source of inspiration.⁴ It is possible to present this behaviour as an alternative to actual religious faith, but it can hardly be judged as equivalent to it. I mention it here only because it is quite clear that in telling us to imagine bare ultimism – according to which there is a metaphysically and axiologically ultimate reality in relation to which our greatest good can be attained⁵ – Schellenberg is not giving us something as insipid as this. I can have sceptical faith if I think that the propositions I imagine are only weakly supported; I can view them as unlikely, but I cannot imagine them in the way Schellenberg recommends if I have come to the conviction that they are false.

This prompts a difficult general question, at least one that I find difficult. Given all the aeons of time we have in which to exercise our faith, what exactly would show that bare ultimism *is* false? Some sort of answer seems critical if we are to

find in Schellenberg's programme the reconciliation of faith and reason that he seeks. We need to know the nature of the risk that sceptical faith runs. But at present I am not at all clear how we would recognize that such a point had been reached. He speaks with atypical vagueness of 'some obvious breakthrough in favour of ultimism or its denial', but I am left at a loss to determine what this could be.⁶ Is this something about which we properly remain agnostic until it reveals itself?

Why not theistic scepticism too?

I must say that I feel some tension between all the powerful arguments Schellenberg puts forward in favour of refraining from premature commitment at what may well be a very early stage in human life and his demonstrations of atheism in *The Wisdom to Doubt*.⁷ Can a true sceptic be so sure there is no theistic God?

Atheism seems to be an inherited rather than a natural feature of the book's arguments, inherited especially from *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.⁸ I am left with a paradox: atheism is the occasion of the whole trilogy; yet the powerful and elegant arguments for the scepticism that is at the heart of the trilogy's programme are forced by atheism's pre-existence to incorporate not merely sceptical but rather dogmatic considerations in favour of atheism. Perhaps the paradox is not real. But I feel discomfort. Let me try to articulate it.

Imagine the history of Schellenberg's reflections to have been different. The actual history is one in which, having concluded that theism is false, he finds a place for religion that most thinkers who have reached that conclusion have lacked the imagination to envisage. Suppose, however, that the liberating recognition of the fact that we are almost certainly at a very early stage in the history of humanity, and that we would therefore be wise to refrain from hasty judgements on ultimate matters for a long time, had come first, without the prior conclusion that theism is false. Most forms of theism do not accommodate themselves easily to this fact, but the same could be said for other religious traditions as well.

Had Schellenberg's reflections evolved in this way, I would suggest that it would be wholly appropriate to let theism, including Christian theism, stew in its own juice for the time being. If scepticism on ultimate matters is the wise response to our being at an early stage in human history, refuting theism would be inappropriate at the outset, a detour in the overall argument. I know this is not how things actually evolved. But hasn't the actual evolution produced discordance – I do not say 'inconsistency' – in the overall case for his scepticism?

Scepticism about naturalism

I think that Schellenberg makes a good case for scepticism about naturalism. He shows, indeed, that it represents an over-hasty judgement in the

face of such progress as our early history has enabled us to make. But it has been challenged recently by J. J. MacIntosh, who argues that there is no parallel between the continued successes we can predict in science in future generations and the progress Schellenberg argues for in a sceptical religion based on ultimism.⁹ MacIntosh's argument is analogous to the common view that our successes in science-based technology have not been matched by similar advances in moral knowledge. But this latter view can be contested. All the clear signs of scientific advance can be matched by similar signs in moral thinking – such as progress through the generations on matters like slavery, not returning evil for evil, and the like. And the obvious facts of confusion and disagreement to which the critic of our moral thinking might point can be matched by the history of disagreement and confusion in science.

It seems to me that although many naturalists are quite content in their naturalism, there may nevertheless be grounds to expect a deepening and refining of religious experience and aspiration along the lines that Schellenberg offers us, or perhaps by some other route. And the ingenious way in which he manages to utilize some of the famous past arguments of theists in *The Will to Imagine* shows how we can discern past progress in places where the naturalist only sees failure.¹⁰

Cannibalizing Christian thinkers

One might worry about the bareness of bare ultimism, but I do not. I think it is clear that if one is to be open to any spiritual opportunities presented by our situation early in human history, only bare ultimism provides us with the openness that we need. The case for scepticism is such that more specified ultimisms are bound to be premature. And Schellenberg has seen to it that, in parts III and IV of *The Will to Imagine*, the bare bones are fleshed out by incorporating aspirations that enable them to include humanly satisfying hopes and challenges. These two parts are very ingenious, and in them Schellenberg succeeds in detaching these aspirations from the mostly Christian settings in which they are originally found. When in correspondence I expressed unease at the fact that these aspirations had almost entirely Christian provenance, Schellenberg rightly resisted, on the grounds that, as incorporated into the project, they would no longer be part of a Christian religious programme. They would (my language) have been appropriately cannibalized. The result is a vigorous and suitably demanding set of human challenges that could certainly stand all appropriate tests of rationality.

I think it is important that a religious project like the one Schellenberg has developed should be able to detach what is thus detachable from premature forms of ultimism. But I remain concerned that it is (with the exception of James) Christian thinkers whose thoughts have been thus cannibalized. Given the openness characteristic of his project, it would have been splendid had

Schellenberg used one or two non-western examples, from such thinkers as Sankara or Vasubandhu or the Zen tradition. As Ninian Smart has made clear,¹¹ there are numerous incompatible interpretations in the schools of spiritual experiences and techniques that appear very similar; and these could so well have been offered as cases of premature specifications of a search for an inner release that could also have been incorporated into the ultimist project. If they would not fit, why would they not? My concern is, once again, that the actual history of the project has distorted its detail.

Sceptical religion and the afterlife

I come finally to another consideration entirely. Schellenberg says that, given the way earthly lives are damaged or cut short, the sceptical religious life could only be said to be 'salvific' if there is an afterlife for at least some of us.¹² I take this to mean that one of the things that the life of sceptical faith includes is the faith that there would be an afterlife for those who are unable to pursue it for what we could count as a full lifetime. I have always felt that the belief in an afterlife, though indeed at the heart of so many forms of religiousness, is fraught with very great philosophical difficulties. In correspondence Schellenberg agreed, saying that the ultimist project could probably survive with a mere hope of an afterlife, and suggesting also that the obstacles to expecting it were associated with a physicalist view of the mind.

I fear this is not enough. A mere hope is as much in need of clear articulation as a well-grounded expectation; and the problems of getting one are, in my view, greater than would be solved by any reflections I know about on the physicalist view of the mind. I think there are deep logical problems both about disembodied survival and about survival with a body. I wrote about both many years ago, but others have pointed them out too. Butler thought that the answer to the question of whether we survive death is an obviously clear affirmative one, and many of us soldier on religiously as though that is true, because we have no alternative if we are to think religiously at all. So it is probably unfair of me to single Schellenberg out for criticism for referring to this. But it is not a small point that the project of sceptical religion has to face it as much as many traditional forms of faith do. On this the eyes of the sceptic must surely be open.

Conclusion

I must conclude by wishing that Schellenberg, and all who are persuaded by him to follow his form of religiousness, are rewarded for their courage and determined rationality by rich and spiritually fortified lives. The creation of sceptical religion is the most significant contribution of philosophical thinking to religious life in our generation, and it is a privilege to be present at its inception.

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Notes

1. Schellenberg (2005).
2. *Ibid.*, 138–139.
3. *Ibid.*, 135, n. 7.
4. See Penelhum (1971), ch. 11, for my reactions to this view.
5. Schellenberg (2005), 37.
6. Schellenberg (2007), 9.
7. *Ibid.*, chs 9–14.
8. Schellenberg (1993).
9. Macintosh (2011).
10. Schellenberg (2009).
11. Especially in Smart (1992).
12. Schellenberg (2009), 32.