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PLURALISM AND PROBABILITY

It is sometimes held that there is something in the very nature of religious pluralism that undermines the rationality of religious belief. This view, I am happy to note, is beginning to receive the sort of attention it deserves from philosophers of religion. Various arguments from religious pluralism against religious belief have recently been canvassed.[1] But in all this activity, as in the relevant historical discussions, one argument – a *probabilistic* argument from pluralism – seems largely to have escaped notice.[2] In what follows I develop and discuss a version of the argument, and give an estimate of its force. As I hope to show, it is not an argument to be taken lightly.

PRELIMINARIES

But to begin, let us develop some points we will be needing along the way. Suppose we start with a fundamental fact of religious pluralism: that confronting virtually any religious belief r is a set of two or more religious beliefs whose members are *alternatives* to r and to each other – where p is an alternative to q just in case p records a way in which q can be false.[3] It is well known, for example, that for every religious person who holds that there is but one personal god, with no internal distinctions, there are others who claim that the one god is in some sense also triune, and yet others who affirm the existence of more than one personal god, and many others still who say

[1] See, for example, William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), Ch. 7.

[2] Hints of the approach I here discuss can with a little ingenuity be found in Hume's treatment of conflicting miracle reports in his first *Enquiry*, section X, and appear more clearly in a recent paper by William Hasker, 'On Justifying the Christian Practice', *The New Scholasticism* LX (1986), 129–44. But nowhere, to my knowledge, is there a clear and developed statement of the argument. As for discussion, Alston sets out in *Perceiving God* to answer Hasker's points, but as I see it, does not in the end take their true measure. He (mistakenly, in my view) supposes an argument devised for another purpose to be applicable to Hasker as well. That argument is in any case ineffective, as I try to show in my 'Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston', *Religious Studies* XXX (1994), 151–9.

[3] It seems necessary, for p to count as specifying a way in which q can be false, (i) that p be coherent, and (ii) that the truth of p be (contingently or necessarily) a sufficient condition for the falsity of q. These conditions leave room for not-q to count as an alternative to q, and some might think this a desirable result; but it seems to me that when someone says that there are propositions specifying different *ways* in which q can be false, she is clearly excluding from consideration – moving beyond – the bald proposition *that q is false*: the latter proposition is coherent if q is, and its truth is obviously necessarily sufficient for the falsity of q, but surely it does not specify a *way* in which q might be false and so does not count as an alternative to q on the relevant understanding of that notion. Instead, as we shall see, it should be viewed as equivalent to the *disjunction* of alternative to q. Hence we move closer to sufficiency and a complete definition by adding a third condition here: (iii) p must not be equivalent to not-q.

that the transcendent is exclusively non-personal. Each of the latter three beliefs is, on our definition, an alternative to each of the others and to the first. Indeed, taking the four beliefs together we have a set whose members seem mutually *incompatible*: the conjunction of any pair pretty evidently entails a contradiction.[4] And it is not hard to see that what holds for beliefs about the basic character of the transcendent like these holds for other religious beliefs as well.[5] Of course, as William Alston notes, it is possible to try to 'trim' each religious tradition of its exclusivistic claims, so that it presents 'only one possible way to salvation, only one part of the story as to what the Ultimate is like and how we are and should be related to it'. But as he responds, quite apart from the dubious prospects of this project, were we to embark upon it, we would be advocating a rather substantial 'revision' of each religious tradition, in the 'hope' that the various incompatibilities might be made to disappear; we would not be 'analysing or describing a situation that actually exists'.[6] Since the argument to be discussed here is very much directed to religious belief in the actual world, revisionist moves of the sort mentioned are simply irrelevant to it.[7]

Notice now the following logical point: that the denial of any claim is logically equivalent to the disjunction of alternatives to that claim. For example, to say that it is not the case that the Tigers will win the World Series is logically equivalent to saying that either the Blue Jays or the Indians or the Red Sox or one of the other teams will win (perhaps with an additional disjunct asserting that – because of some administrative foulup or dispute or other catastrophe – no team will win). Since to say that a belief is more probable than not is just to say that it is more probable than its denial, it follows that, for any religious belief r, to say that r is more probable than not is to say that r is *more probable than the disjunction of alternatives to r*. For example, to say that it is more probable than not that there is a single, undivided personal god is to say that this proposition is more probable than the disjunction of 'The one personal god is triune', 'There are many personal gods', 'The transcendent is exclusively non-personal', and similar propositions.

Observe next that, given some idea as to the probabilities of individual disjuncts, it is possible to determine (or at least estimate) the probabilities of

[4] Of course, as our explication of 'p records a way in which q can be false' (see n. 3) implies, one belief can be an alternative to another *without* being (in this sense) incompatible with it. 'Socrates ingested three gallons of cyanide at the age of two' is an alternative to 'Socrates was a great philosopher' – i.e. records a way in which the latter proposition can be false – even though the conjunction of the two propositions is not logically impossible.

[5] For a recent and rigorous defence of this view, see Alston's *Perceiving God*, Ch. 7, sections ii and iii. See also John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), Part IV.

[6] *Perceiving God*, pp. 263–4.

[7] It is perhaps worth noting that while the fact of alternative religious beliefs is often and quite naturally linked, as by Alston, with that of alternative religious traditions, the relation here is not one of entailment. Most religious believers need not look outside their own tradition to find alternatives to at least some of their beliefs. Take, for example, the different and conflicting views on baptism, authority and scripture in Christianity.

disjunctions like the one just mentioned. All that is required in this context is the addition theorem of the probability calculus, which in its simplest form reads as follows:

$$P(\mathrm{p} \vee \mathrm{q}) = P(\mathrm{p}) + \mathrm{P}(\mathrm{q}).$$

In words, the probability that the disjunction of two mutually exclusive propositions is true is the sum of the separate probabilities of its disjuncts. The addition theorem may obviously be generalized to apply to any number of exclusive alternatives: the probability of the disjunction of two *or more* mutually exclusive alternatives is still the sum of the separate probabilities of its disjuncts.

Now it might seem that the addition theorem is *not* all we need. For, it may be said, we cannot assume that the probability of all disjunctions of the sort in question – disjunctions equivalent to the denial of some proposition – can be determined by adding up the separate probabilities of disjuncts. Why not? Because there is nothing in our definition of 'alternative' to rule out the possibility of distinct alternatives that are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, this possibility would appear to be amply realized. Consider a simple example: 'Gore is the 42nd president' and 'Dole is the 42nd president' are distinct alternatives to 'Clinton is the 42nd president', and mutually exclusive; 'Gore is the 42nd president' and 'Gore is the 42nd president and fond of golf' are equally distinct alternatives to 'Clinton is 42nd president', but not mutually exclusive. Bringing this closer to home, we may point out that the complete set of alternatives to 'There is a single, undivided personal god' – *all* of whose members belong to the disjunction equivalent to that religious proposition's denial – includes not only the mutually exclusive propositions mentioned above, but also such propositions as 'The one personal god is triune and revealed in the Christian New Testament', 'There are many personal gods or there are no gods at all', 'If the transcendent is exclusively non-personal then prayer is religiously inappropriate, and the transcendent *is* exclusively non-personal', and perhaps infinitely many similar propositions, all of which could be realized together with (at least some) others in the set.

It seems to me, however, that this complication may be circumvented by noting that some idea as to the probability of any such disjunction can still be gained by using the addition theorem to determine the probability of the disjunction of any mutually exclusive alternatives it may include, or of those of its mutually exclusive alternatives known to us, or even of the most easily accessible of its mutually exclusive alternatives known to us. For the probability of any disjunction, no matter how large the set of its disjuncts, logically must be at least as great as the probability of the disjunction of any such subset thereof.[8] Call this principle about the probability of disjunctions P1. It follows from P1 that if the disjunction of some subset of mutually exclusive

alternatives belonging to the disjunction equivalent to a religious belief r's denial has a certain probability, the disjunction equivalent to r's denial has a probability *at least as great*. It also follows – and this, as we shall see, is important – that if some proposition such as 'There is a single, undivided personal god' is more probable than not, and so more probable than the disjunction of its alternatives, then that proposition must have a probability greater than that of the disjunction of its mutually exclusive religious alternatives or of its mutually exclusive alternatives known to us – such alternatives as 'The one personal god is triune' and 'There are many personal gods'.

One final preliminary. It may be wondered how all of this could possibly be relevant to large-scale religious propositions and their alternatives. Surely here assigning probabilities in the way required to gain some idea of the probabilities of the relevant disjunctions is out of the question. But it must be remembered in what follows that where the assigning of *numerical* probabilities to religious propositions is questionable, *comparative* assessments of probability can often still be made. In any case, they commonly are made – it would not be hard to find reflective Christians who consider their beliefs to be *as probable as* alternatives from within their own tradition, *somewhat more probable than* the relevant alternatives from within Judaism and *considerably more probable than* Buddhist alternatives – and, as we shall see, the existence of such comparative assessments is all the critic's argument requires.

THE ARGUMENT

With all of this in place, we may now turn to the argument itself. The extent of its applicability, it will be noted, depends on how many religious beliefs have a plurality of alternatives. Clearly many do,[9] but for simplicity's sake I will suppose that the argument is being deployed against religious beliefs

[8] This principle seems quite unobjectionable. For a disjunction claims that at least one of its disjuncts is true, and so in adding disjuncts we are only adding ways in which the truth of the disjunction may be realized. How then could we be diminishing its probability? By introducing disjuncts without any positive probability of their own? No, for in such a case we simply *fail to add* to its probability; we do not take anything away. By adding disjuncts that are not excluded by the originals? No, for in that case the only implication is that there is nothing barring one (or more) of the newcomers from being realized together with one (or more) of the originals. The probability that *at least one* of the disjuncts is true is not diminished. Since in any other case the addition theorem would seem to apply and the probability of the disjunction would be *increased*, I can see no way of plausibly objecting to the principle. Indeed, since it may plausibly be argued that the probability of a disjunction must transfer to any disjunction it entails, the principle would seem to be demonstrably true. For a disjunction of the form p v q v r v s must always be entailed by any proper part thereof (e.g. p v q). This is just an application of the rule of inference from the propositional calculus (vI) according to which we may infer from any proposition the disjunction of that proposition and any other(s).

[9] More than one might think at first, for by extrapolation from modus tollens, any alternative to p is also an alternative to any proposition *entailing* p, and very many specific religious beliefs turn out upon inspection to entail fundamental beliefs about the nature of the transcendent – which, as we saw above,

individually, instead of collectively, leaving open the question of how *many* beliefs are vulnerable to it.

Consider first the case of one who supposes there to be a number of mutually exclusive religious alternatives to a certain religious belief r having probabilities *equal* to the probability of r. Contrary to what some may suppose, this is not an uncommon assignment of comparative probability. Sceptics frequently hold that one religious belief is as likely as another. Indeed, even religious persons seem at times to affirm such a claim. Take, for example, William Hasker, in 'On Justifying the Christian Practice': 'Certainly a good deal of recent Christian apologetic seems to be devoted to showing that… there is no good reason for thinking [Christian belief] less likely to be true than various alternatives. And… to show this much is no mean achievement'. (144) Since the sum of any number of equal probabilities is equivalent to the product of any of those probabilities and that number, the argument from religious pluralism may for this sort of case be stated as follows: 'Where 'P(r)' represents the probability of r, and 'n' represents the number of equiprobable and mutually exclusive religious alternatives to r, the probability that the disjunction of alternatives to r is true is – by the addition theorem in conjunction with P1 – at least $P(r) \times n$. But as reflection upon religious diversity reveals, n is greater than or equal to 2. Hence the probability that the disjunction of alternatives to r is true is at least $P(r) \times 2$; hence (assuming that the probability of r is not 0) it is greater than that of r. But the disjunction of alternatives to r is logically equivalent to r's denial. Hence the probability of *r's denial* is greater than that of r, which is to say that r is improbable'.[10]

But – it may now be asked – what about the more careful believer or more discriminating agnostic? Surely such individuals may often justifiably suppose, for some belief r against which the argument is deployed, that r has a probability *greater* than that of each of its known alternatives. And so it may be said that the argument as thus far developed is not applicable to their case. But the critic may argue that even such individuals will find, upon reflecting on religious pluralism, that they are committed to the probable falsehood of r.[11] For so long as r is not held to be *far* superior in epistemic status to each mutually exclusive religious alternative available for inspec-

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clearly have alternatives. (Think, for example, of the many and diverse beliefs about Moses, Mary, Muhammad *et al*. which entail that there is a personal god.) Even if only fundamental beliefs had alternatives and so the argument had direct application only to them, similar reasoning would show that its indirect application was very wide indeed. For, as suggested above, virtually every religious belief that is not itself fundamental *entails* a fundamental belief, and the improbability of a belief must attach as well to any belief entailing it.

[10] A point of interest we might note here is that, for agnostics who rationally hold *every* religious belief to be confronted by equally probable alternatives (and surely there are some such), this argument provides grounds for supposing *every* religious belief to be improbable; and so the argument seems sufficient to move such agnostics to a position of rational universal (religious) disbelief!

[11] My recognition of this possibility is due to a suggestion of Terence Penelhum's.

tion, it would seem possible for the probability of the disjunction of these alternatives (and so, as we have seen, of the denial of r), to add up to the point where r is positively outweighed. Suppose (somewhat arbitrarily) that some individual S holds r to be *twice* as probable as any such alternative. This may seem like quite a margin, but the critic can point out that so long as S recognizes at least *three* of these alternatives, it follows from the probability calculus that r is probably false. For as we have seen, the minimum probability to be assigned to the disjunction of r's alternatives (and so to the denial of r) may be determined by adding the separate probabilities of any of its mutually exclusive disjuncts; and an elementary calculation reveals that if p, q, and s are mutually exclusive and members of a disjunction logically equivalent to the denial of r, and if each is half as probable as r, the probability of that disjunction must be greater than that of r. And similar reasoning shows that even if S considers r to be *three* times as probable as each of the relevant alternatives, it would only take four alternatives to produce the same result; if four times as probable, it would take five; and so on, until we run out of probability estimates and alternatives! Summarizing (and allowing also for a non-uniform assignment of probabilities to alternatives), we can say quite generally that the following may be held by the critic to be a sufficient condition for the improbability of any religious belief r with an epistemic status superior to that of each of its alternatives: r is improbable if the number of times by which its probability exceeds that of each of the available mutually exclusive alternatives (or the average of their probabilities) is exceeded by the number of those alternatives. Now, rarely do any of us make such careful estimates with respect to the probabilities of religious beliefs.[12] But what we can derive from all of this, the critic may say, is that even for those who consider some religious belief to be considerably *more* likely to be true than each religious alternative, reflection on religious diversity may rationally compel the rejection of that belief. To advert once more to the example used above, even if a Christian were to suppose her trinitarian belief to be significantly *more* likely to be true than each of various Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist … alternatives, the application of the approach here described could still yield the conclusion that her belief was probably false. For it might upon reflection seem intuitively obvious or at any rate very likely to the Christian that the degree of superior probability she could credibly claim would not be sufficient to prevent the combined probability of the relevant alternatives from outweighing that of the belief she holds.

It is interesting to note that in any of the cases we have described, it is always possible for the critic to add to the set of mutually exclusive religious alternatives the *non*-religious alternative of naturalism. The claim of naturalism clearly belongs to the disjunction equivalent to r's denial, for it clearly

[12] Though why this should be taken as having any great significance or even relevance in relation to the assessment of the argument is quite unclear, as I emphasize below.

excludes any and all religious beliefs: religion by (almost any) definition involves reference to a transcendent reality, and naturalism denies the existence of any such thing; hence the truth of naturalism is, necessarily, a sufficient condition for the falsity of any religious belief whatever. Naturalism is also, obviously, excluded by each religious belief, and so if it were added to the set of alternatives, nothing about the mutual exclusivity of the relevant members of the set would change. This move might come in handy for the critic were the set of mutually exclusive religious alternatives to some r ever to be too small for her purposes; and the fact that it is available shows that the argument from religious pluralism need not operate in isolation, but can be used in an attempt to augment any argument from the plausibility of naturalism the critic may already be inclined to make.

OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

The argument we have developed, like virtually any other, will have to contend with objections. But the relevant objections known to me, while forcing certain refinements and qualifications, do not seem capable of overcoming it.

Perhaps the most obvious objection is that since religious belief need not involve any probabilistic assessment – a person may hold religious beliefs and be justified in so doing without holding corresponding beliefs about probabilities – *religious believers*, at any rate, may reject this argument. But while I grant its premise, I do not think that this objection's conclusion follows. No doubt many believers have not deliberated about probabilities and are nonetheless justified in their believings, but it is clear that *if confronted with this argument* they would (rationally) be required to engage in just such deliberation, and to incorporate the results into their network of beliefs. Among the results would certainly be beliefs about probability, and these might in many cases lead the rational inquirer to disbelieve various religious propositions. For I take it as uncontroversial that any proposition must rationally be disbelieved when held to be improbable,[13] and the proponent of the argument we have developed purports to provide a way of arguing from pluralism to improbability in the case of virtually any religious belief. In this context, the fact that those presented with the argument may not have given any thought to the probabilities of religious beliefs *prior* to hearing the argument is neither here nor there. I would add that the sort of estimation of probabilities the argument requires is not as 'unnatural' for believers as one might think. Nor – to emphasize a possibility left open by the objection's

[13] Indeed, given the way that belief and disbelief are bound up with seeing the world as – so to speak – coming out in favour of, or against, a certain state of affairs, and their general involuntariness, an individual could not *fail* to disbelieve a proposition upon coming to hold it to be improbable. For more on this and related matters, see my *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), Ch. 1.

premise – is it uncommon. Of course, a moment's reflection will reveal that precise numerical assessments of probability are not eagerly sought and would be difficult to achieve in an area like this. But as noted earlier, *comparative* assessments of probability can often still be made and commonly are made.

Suppose our answer to the first objection is successful. The rejoinder may be that the argument will *still* be impossible to apply. Since different believers and non-believers may be expected to come to *different* assessments of probability, how can the critic hope to show that religious belief in general is unjustified? The quick answer to this is that the critic need not cherish any such hope: the argument may instead, as suggested above, be applied in individual contexts of belief, wherever it is seen to have a bearing, and be construed as providing a justification for disbelief in many such cases. But the critic need not even be this modest. While it will be difficult in this as in many other epistemic contexts to achieve assessments of probability – even comparative – which just any rational inquirer must accept (you may rationally consider x to be marginally more probable than y, but it may seem otherwise given the evidence *I* rationally accept), it is still open to the critic to take various possible assignments of probability and to argue, along the lines I have followed, that when taken in conjunction with the facts explicated in the first section of this paper, negative results follow from them all. Since most believers and non-believers may be expected to fall into one or other of the categories dilineated, a quite high degree of generality for the conclusion of the argument can in this way be ensured.

A third objection finds this all overly sanguine, to say the least. Certainly, given the assessment that one's belief is, say, twice as likely as relevant alternatives, with the knowledge that there are at least three such alternatives, one may with some confidence draw the improbability conclusion. But when we get back to the real world and notice the much greater vagueness with which actual comparative probabilistic assessments are made, everything changes. How *do* we go about finding the 'category' into which to place the judgement that one's belief is *somewhat* more probable or *significantly* more probable than alternatives? I have been operating on the assumption that there is some natural way of linking up such vague judgements with the more precise judgements from which conclusions *may* be drawn, but there is no support for this assumption, and indeed, it seems clearly false.

In reply, I would offer two points. The first attacks the objection head-on. Certain clear (and, for the critic, usable) implications can under realizable circumstances be drawn even from the claim that one's belief has a somewhat greater probability than that of alternatives or that it has a significantly greater probability. And this is because the 'link-up' mentioned by the objection *can* be made. Take the former assessment, for example. Clearly

'somewhat greater' designates a lower degree of probability than 'twice as great', and so if in certain circumstances the number of alternatives to a belief of which the former assessment is made is seen to be such as to render it improbable even on the assumption that it is *twice* as probable as each alternative, then, having only a *somewhat* greater probability, the belief in question is *a fortiori* improbable. Consider also 'significantly greater'. This sort of judgment is very vague, one might say, but it may in certain circumstances be perfectly obvious to one making such a judgment that what she claims for her belief is a degree of probability less than would be indicated by 'twice as great' or 'three times as great'. And if so, then again the critic's conclusion will be seen to follow if, as may well be the case, there are three or four or more alternatives to contend with.

The second point is this. While a great variety of comparative assessments are in principle possible, and many of these may be quite vague or even unhelpful from the critic's perspective, in practice we are likely to find that reflective religious believers conclude *either* that other beliefs are close in probability to their own (possessing roughly the same degree of probability or only somewhat less) *or* that their own beliefs are vastly more probable than the alternatives – inferring this from the availability of considerations indicating the probability *simpliciter* or certainty of their own beliefs. (Since the support for this claim emerges naturally in my response to the next objection, I will not give it here, but proceed immediately to implications.) If this is so, then typically we will either be in a situation where the argument developed here is inapplicable (because the believer is in a position to infer that the alternatives must have whatever much lower degree of probability is required to preserve the probability of her own beliefs), or (a more likely scenario, I think) we will find that the alternatives' combined probability outweighs that of the belief in question. If there are, say, more than three or four alternative beliefs, each having a probability quite close to that of my own, then their *combined* probability pretty clearly must be the greater. (This could be developed along the lines of the first point.)

A fourth objection to the argument is presented by the believer: 'You (the critic) have only succeeded in revealing an incoherence – albeit a repeated incoherence – in my set of beliefs. I have been inclined to suppose, upon encountering them, that various religious alternatives are somewhat less likely than my beliefs or at parity with them only because I have mistakenly considered this to be compatible with holding, of each of my beliefs, that it is more probable than not. Your argument shows that these positions are *in*compatible; so I now hold that the disparity between my beliefs and their alternatives – probability-wise – is much greater than I had thought. That is, it is now my view that each of the various alternatives to my beliefs known to me is *much*, *much* less probable than the corresponding belief. Thank you for helping me to clear this up'.

How may the critic respond to this? She would be wise to point out that, when we find ourselves with incompatible beliefs, we are not rationally permitted to choose one arbitrarily (or to choose the one we would *prefer* to be true) and reject the other.[14] In a situation of doxastic incoherence we can only rationally resolve the problem by rejecting one belief and retaining the other if upon careful reflection it seems to us that one is better supported than the other. Can the objector rationally judge that her preferred view would, in many cases of belief or in all, win out if this test were applied? Can she in every case, or at least in most, judge that view to be better supported than the (incompatible) view that a certain other, alternative, belief is not very much less probable than her own? Clearly, many available facts of religious pluralism (which the objector would have now to consider or reconsider) seem to reinforce the latter sort of claim: the critic may point out that the proponents of competing beliefs are often at least as honest, sincere, and intelligent as herself, and that the considerations believers in other traditions (or her own) are able to adduce in support of competing claims are very like those she takes to support the beliefs *she* cherishes – such considerations as non-discredited miracle reports, apparently (Divinely) inspired writings and well-argued interpretations thereof, the witness of learned and saintly authorities, seemingly convincing philosophical arguments, profound religious experience, and so on. What this suggests, the critic may say, is that unless she notices an apparent *incoherence* in the competing claim under consideration (and none in her own), or takes there to be inductive or deductive arguments supporting her own belief that are clearly successful (with no apparently successful arguments on the other side) and so is in a position to infer from the probability *simpliciter* or certainty of her belief that it has whatever degree of vastly superior probability is required, she will, if she considers the facts, come out in favor of the view she does *not* prefer – namely, that her own claim does not have an epistemic status *far* superior to that of the alternatives.[15] And in doing so, she will, if she is without the sort of support described, be doing no more than is (epistemically) required of her. But if that is the case, the critic may conclude, then many believers, at any rate, cannot rationally resolve the doxastic incoherence under consideration by employing the strategy suggested by the objector. For surely many will upon reflection find themselves without the sort of support described.[16] (Or at the very least, many will find themselves in this position in respect of many of their religious beliefs.)

[14] This sort of move is not even *psychologically* possible – but let that pass.

[15] That the believer's own *religious experience* does not constitute overriding support for her own beliefs in a situation of religious diversity I have argued elsewhere. See 'Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston'.

[16] This is indeed borne out, the critic may add, by what we know of the experience of many contemporary believers who encounter and study the (incompatible) beliefs of other religious believers, for example, many of the persons who study such views in our universities.

We can look at this from another angle. With respect to any rational religious believer S experiencing doxastic incoherence of the sort described and religious belief r to which there are alternatives there are really three main possibilities: (1) S may upon reflection find herself with the support required to retain her preferred view – that r is much more probable than each of its alternatives, has whatever degree of superior probability is required to make it more probable than not – and reject the parity or close-to-parity view and so escape the argument; (2) S may find herself required to accept the parity or close-to-parity view, and so fall prey to the argument; or (3) S may find that she is unable to make a judgement as to what the relevant probabilities are, and so slip into agnosticism with respect to r, even if not disbelief. (3) is interesting because it shows that not just one but *two* of these possibilities are inimical to the rationality of religious belief: even if the critic's argument cannot be applied because no probability judgement has been made, the reflection it has generated may still (rationally) lead to non-belief. With respect to these possibilities the critic may point out that it would surely be unrealistic to suppose that situation (1) will be realized for all S and all r, and that we may measure the resilience of the argument in the face of the present objection by considering in how many cases (2) or (3) will be realized instead.

A fifth objection poses the following question: Don't the critic's *own* beliefs fall to the same sort of argument? The critic presumably holds a naturalistic view of the world. Clearly there are plenty of alternatives to *that* in the very religious beliefs she criticizes. Or perhaps she faces a problem of *secular* pluralism. Shouldn't this lead her, by the very reasoning she has utilized, to the conclusion that her *non*-religious belief is improbable? And the objection can be broadened. If the critic's argument is successful, *most* of our beliefs (if not all) turn out to be improbable, for surely in most cases we can turn up the required alternatives if we try hard enough; and isn't this result absurd?

In its latter, broader, form the objection is clearly a reductio argument. The narrower form can be seen as a reductio, but it is perhaps more plausibly viewed as simply a sort of 'epistemic revenge', quite compatible with the success of the argument as an argument against religious belief. The differences are not all that important, however, for the same point applies to both. It is that we require more than *alternatives* for the success of the objection: we need alternatives to which we are rationally obliged to ascribe some non-negligible measure of probability. No doubt the various forms of religious belief represent alternatives to non-religious views of the world (at least insofar as the former are coherent), and no doubt there are plenty of alternatives to other of our beliefs. But to many of these we are not required to ascribe any probability at all (think, for example, of the alternatives to many common scientific beliefs offered by the Flat Earth Society) – indeed, many seem no more than logically possible. To others we may ascribe very

little probability. (This is no doubt where the critic's response to religious beliefs would be encountered.[17]) And of course there are other cases still where we will find ourselves unable to judge the relevant probabilities, and so for *that* reason avoid a conclusion of improbability.

Suppose, however, that we come upon (enough) non-discredited alternatives in this or that area of our cognitive life. Suppose that the *critic* encounters non-discredited secular (i.e. naturalistic) alternatives to her preferred view of the world. Why should this be viewed as an absurd result, rather than as a quite unsurprising feature of our epistemic existence? Perhaps we should not expect, in such areas of general concern, to have positive beliefs – beliefs affirming some picture as correct. And perhaps the same goes for other areas distant from the concerns of everyday life, where theories proliferate. In these areas it may be enough that we *accept* some view – act on the assumption that it is true – in order to see where it leads, and leave (positive) belief for another day, when our vision is clearer and the alternatives to be reckoned with fewer.

Now perhaps the objector is assuming that if the critic is forced to view her nonreligious perspective as improbable, it follows that some *religious* view of the world is correct; and that this is incompatible with the conclusion of the argument. But first of all, as I have alluded, if the critic reaches the conclusion that her own positive view is improbable, it is likely to be by comparing it with *naturalistic* alternatives; and in that case it does not follow at all that some religious view is correct: perhaps some *other* secular view is true. And even if it is by comparison with religious alternatives that the conclusion is reached, the alleged implication fails to follow, for again, what holds for one secular view may not hold for others. Suppose, however, that we succeed in showing, quite generally, that naturalism (i.e. the *disjunction* of secular views) must be viewed by the critic as probably false. Then it does follow that she must hold that some religious view or other is true. But note that it does *not* follow that any particular one of extant views must be accepted – it is compatible with the implication that they are all false, for the correct religious view(s) may not be held by anyone. Finally, even if we assume that the critic must hold that some one or other of *extant* religious views is true, it does not follow that she must hold, of any particular religious view, that it is correct. For one may allow that the disjunction of religious views is true while continuing to disbelieve each of its disjuncts – just as one may believe each of a set of propositions while disbelieving their conjunction (while allowing that one has probably made a mistake somewhere).

But maybe the objection is trying to get at something else. Perhaps the alleged absurdity is really a *contradiction*. How could we try to get a con-

[17] It is important for the objector to remember that it does not follow from the fact that the critic holds each religious belief to be roughly as probable as *each other* that she must hold each (or any) religious belief to be as probable as *her own secular view* – whatever that may be.

tradiction out of what the argument asserts or implies? Well, if (as the broader form of the objection suggests) it really committed us to saying that *all* our beliefs were (probably) false, the critic might seem to be in trouble. But here we have to distinguish two ways of understanding 'all our beliefs'. Are we talking about the set of *propositions believed by someone or other*, or the set of *propositions believed by oneself*? Only if we intend the former, rather larger, set – which, for example, contains both theism and atheism – are we straightforwardly led into contradiction by saying 'All our beliefs are false'; and there is no reason to suppose that the argument commits us to this interpretation. Perhaps it is conceivable that each of us, using the argument's form of reasoning, should arrive at the conclusion that all of his/her beliefs were false, so that, conjunctively, all beliefs whatever were held to be false. But this certainly does *not* imply that any single individual would be holding that all beliefs whatever are false (to suppose otherwise is to commit a simple quantifier fallacy), and only the latter claim clearly entails a contradiction.

Let's give the objection one last chance. Perhaps it is possible to develop the reductio as follows. (And here we return, for our example, to naturalism and religion.) Suppose we consider each of (A) a fair number of mutually exclusive religious alternatives and (B) a fair number of mutually exclusive naturalistic alternatives to be equally probable. The critic's argument would then have us hold that both

(1) Some naturalistic view is true

and

(2) Some religious view is true

are improbable. For given the judgment of equiprobability, the disjunction of religious alternatives – really the denial or part of the disjunction equivalent to the denial of (1) – would outweigh (1), and the disjunction of naturalistic alternatives – really the denial or part of the disjunction equivalent to the denial of (2) – would outweigh (2). But to say that we would be led to consider (1) and (2) improbable is equivalent to saying that we would come to view as *probable* the *negations* of (1) and (2), i.e.

(3) It is not the case that some naturalistic view is true

and

(4) It is not the case that some religious view is true.

Now, given the relations between naturalism and the concept of religion mentioned earlier, (3) self-evidently entails

(5) Some religious view is true.

And clearly, if we consider (3) to be probable and to entail (5), we will be forced to conclude that the latter proposition is probable too. But (5) is the denial of (4). Hence we would, by employing reasoning of the sort under consideration, be led to consider probable both (4) and its denial. But it follows from the probability calculus that a proposition and its denial cannot both be probable on the same evidence. Hence the form of reasoning under

consideration would have us believe an impossibility. But if so, that form of reasoning is seriously flawed and should be rejected. Hence it *is* seriously flawed and *should* be rejected.[18]

Does this form of the objection succeed? It would appear to suffer from flaws of its own. For we would not, according to the objection, be led into absurdity by premises from our argument alone, but by those premises in *conjunction* with the judgement of equiprobability. Hence avoiding the absurdity would not require rejection of the former: we could reject the latter instead. Why not simply conclude that, given the relations between naturalism and religion, it is logically impossible for the relevant propositions all to be equally probable on the same evidence? Now perhaps it will be said that we can often see very clearly that there is no good reason for supposing any one of various religious and naturalistic alternatives to be more probable than any other, so that if there is a false claim here, it must be in my argument. The point made by this little argument's premise may be conceded, since there is no way to derive from it the additional proposition required to yield the argument's conclusion, namely, that the alternatives in question should in the circumstances mentioned be viewed as *equally probable*. Again, we need to be sensitive to the possibility of concluding, given the available evidence, that we are not justified in assigning any probabilities at all – that the correct values for the relevant probabilities *cannot be determined*. This judgement entails that no one of the alternatives is justifiably viewed as more probable than any other, but it clearly does *not* entail that we have good reason to regard the probabilities as equal. Indeed, it denies this. Hence it is possible for the stated premise of the argument in question to be true while its suppressed interim conclusion (and premise) is false – which is to say that the argument is invalid. And since there exists this plausible alternative to the equiprobability judgement, which makes sense of the evidence the objector is able to adduce with respect to the naturalistic and religious propositions in question, perhaps we may recommend that the objector conclude that that judgement *is* false. Surely there is no reason to cling to it and seek to find new arguments to defend it in the presence of a plausible alternative, and where either it or propositions as intuitively plausible as the premises of our argument must be rejected.

Finally, two responses to the argument that are not really objections, but which propose, respectively, a way of circumventing and a way of coping with its claims.

The first comes from Richard Swinburne's *Faith and Reason*. In this work we find Swinburne arguing that propositions may be contrasted either with their denials or with other alternatives (hereafter, simply 'alternatives'), and

[18] A slight variation on this objection would of course argue that an individual making the judgment of equiprobability could be led by the form of reasoning in question to *believe* propositions – namely (4) and (5) – the conjunction of which is a *contradiction*.

that while in the former case to believe that p is to believe p more probable than not, in the latter it is only to believe p more probable than each of its alternatives. He applies this latter notion of (what he calls) 'weak' belief to Christian faith, arguing that even if the Christian only possesses weak belief (holding each of her religious beliefs to be more probable than each of its alternatives, but not holding it to be more probable than not), she should be viewed as a religious believer and (assuming other required elements are fulfilled) as a person of faith.[19] Swinburne's points will seem to many to be tailor-made for the occasion, providing, as they seem to do, a way of circumventing our argument. For, it may be said, while our argument shows that *strong* belief may often be (rationally) impossible in the face of religious diversity, it does nothing to touch weak belief (it is after all quite compatible with the conclusion of our argument that believers should rationally hold their beliefs to be more probable than those of others); and the latter is all that is required for religious faith. But it seems clear to me, first of all, that having Swinburne's 'weak belief' does not entail having belief *that p* , in any relevant sense of the latter term. S's believing at time t that 'There is a personal god' is more probable than each of its alternatives does not entail S's believing at time t that there is a personal god. If it did, then any possible world containing the former state of affairs would contain the latter as well; and this is not the case. In particular, as our argument makes clear, there is a possible world in which the state of affairs consisting in S's believing at t that 'There is a personal god' is more probable than each of its alternatives is realized in conjunction with S's believing at t that 'There is a personal god' is *improbable* (one may, as we have seen, hold a proposition to be significantly more probable than any alternative and yet, because of the number of alternatives, rationally view it as probably false). Surely *this* is not a possible world in which S believes at t that there is a personal god! Rather, I should have thought, it is a world in which S believes at t that there is *not* a personal god. Swinburne himself is committed to this conclusion, for he holds that viewing a proposition as improbable is equivalent to disbelieving it. Given these points, the only way Swinburne can avoid relinquishing the view that the putative entailment holds is by allowing that one can weakly believe that p while *strongly* believing that *not*-p. And I like to think that he would not allow this, for it seems to make nonsense of our language about belief. In any case, whether Swinburne's usage of 'weak belief' holds up or not, it seems impossible to have religious *faith* while disbelieving all relevant religious propositions. (How could one have faith in a god while believing that there is no god?) It is therefore impossible to accept that our argument applies to religious propositions while continuing to have religious faith; and

[19] Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), chs. 4–6. It should be noted that Swinburne's use of the word 'alternative' here is apparently in agreement with our own.

incidentally, by the same token incorrect to say that having 'weak belief' (supposing that notion to be coherent) entails that the doxastic requirement for having faith has been fulfilled – one might have 'weak belief' while *dis*believing the relevant religious propositions and so *lack* faith. Since the response presently under consideration requires us to deny all of this, that response may safely be rejected.

The second of the two responses mentioned above (and the last reply to our argument to be considered here) offers a coping strategy. Suppose we are forced to conclude, on the basis of the reasoning here discussed, that many religious beliefs held in the actual world are probably false. This need not prevent us from being religious believers. For the argument only succeeds against religious beliefs with clear, precise, and definitely expressible content: the more clear, precise, and definitely expressible the content of a belief, the more alternatives to it one will find. If instead of holding such beliefs we contented ourselves with somewhat more *vague* affirmations – if, for example, we held only that there is a personal god instead of saying that there is one *undivided* personal god or one *triune* personal god, or going further, if we held only that there is *some transcendent reality* – we would render our religious belief(s) immune to arguments from pluralism of the sort presented here.

This response may well be correct in its main contention – there no doubt are religious beliefs of the sort mentioned that are not vulnerable to the probabilistic argument from pluralism. But can these beliefs provide the spiritual nourishment required for the religious life? (Only if they can do they really offer the believer a *coping* strategy.) I myself seriously doubt it. The available indications suggest that, for their flourishing, religion and religious believers require something much more precise, detailed, and vivid. 'Some transcendent reality exists' does not come close to satisfying these conditions; and while 'There is a personal god' or 'Ultimate reality is nonpersonal' may come closer, we can see in the very statement of these alternatives an opening, once again, for the probabilistic argument from pluralism. So like Hume, I find myself inclined to allow that a certain vague form of religious belief may well escape the critic's net, while questioning whether that form of belief will have any real religious value or serve any useful religious function.

CONCLUSION

So much for the argument and for responses to it. In view of the power of the former and the failure of the latter, I conclude that the probabilistic argument from pluralism may – at any rate in many cases – function as an (adequate) basis for the rejection of religious belief. Detailed reflection on the beliefs of others is about as likely to prove problematic for the religious believer as has often (though, nearly as frequently, without justification)

been supposed, and it is therefore reasonable of the believer to approach it with some trepidation.

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