

REASONABLE BELIEF WITHOUT JUSTIFICATION

Is it not a mistake to try to justify a belief where there could be no substance to a doubt whether it is true? Are not people who express a doubt in *such circumstances* expressing a doubt – more accurately *trying* to express a doubt – where there is no longer any *ground* for doubt? And is this not irrational?¹

If we start with our various social practices, our various language-games, the embedded and habitual ways in which we do things with words to fulfill various of our purposes, do we not readily push back or get pushed back in reflecting on them, and in a quest for justification, to some very fundamental beliefs – beliefs which are either constitutive or regulative of those practices – which we can perhaps best call framework-beliefs and which are beliefs we cannot justify? Indeed are they not beliefs it makes no sense to either try to justify or to doubt? Doubt here appears, at least, to be empty. No further *real possibility* exists which doubt might exclude.

The following are examples of framework-beliefs of a plainly non-religious and non-metaphysical kind. 'Things do not just vanish without cause', 'In situations of the same type a substance *A* (say snow) will react to a substance *B* (say heat) in the same way', 'There is a continuity of nature', 'My image of some *x* (say the Empire State Building) is an image of that *x* (say the Empire State Building)', 'I cannot fail to know my own intentions'.²

I want first to ask whether there are similar religious beliefs – beliefs which have a similar status and in a similar way are as unproblematical. But in asking that I wish first to make some preliminary points about how religious framework-beliefs function, though something very much like it applies to all framework-beliefs. We should, in trying to examine framework-beliefs, avoid isolating certain of them and in effect treating them like axioms. When we do this with 'There is a god' we treat that proposition as the lynch-pin belief of the whole system of religious beliefs with the consequence of making it appear that if this belief cannot be shown to be justifiable, then none of the other beliefs of that system which presuppose it can be known to be justifiable either. This isolation is a time honoured way of going about things shared by many believers and non-believers alike. But all the same it ought to be questioned. So to treat 'There is a god' is, according to D. Z. Phillips and Stuart Brown, in effect to think of God as if He were an object, though

indeed a very special and exalted 'supernatural object' among the objects of the universe.³

Questions about the reality of God must not be so construed and belief in God must be viewed, to make sense of it, as part of a whole system. Moreover, we should view these questions as questions about what *kind* of reality divine reality really is. What is at issue, Phillips and Brown claim, is comparable to the question of what *kind* of reality physical objects have. There is no *finding out*, they maintain, whether God is real or not, as there is a finding out of whether unicorns are real. If we are realistic, we will come to realize that there is no more any genuine *finding out* whether God is real than there is a way of finding out whether physical objects are real. In this respect both God and physical objects are very different from Santa Claus and unicorns, where such an investigation can be made. Moreover, where there is no possibility of finding out that so and so is real, there is no possibility of *failing* to find out either, and thus there is no possibility of *genuine doubt*. The real question in both cases is the question about the *kind* of reality physical objects and God have. Phillips and Brown take these questions to be importantly similar. The first is about whether it is possible to speak of truth and falsity in the physical world and the second "is a question of sense and non-sense, truth and falsity, in religion".⁴

To this it is natural to respond that if we start by asking what *kind* of reality God has, we commit the fallacy of the complex question. We assume, that is, that *God has* a reality and that God could be real when it is these very things that we want to query. Surely it is important to understand, if we can, what *kind* of reality we are talking about, if indeed there is such a reality, and it is, no doubt, a mistake to construe God as a 'super-object' among objects, but we also very much want to know whether there is such a reality, whether there is anything of that sort, whether that kind of reality has an exemplification or whether it is *simply* a conception in a conceptual scheme of a determinate language-game? (I take it that these are all facets of the same basic question).

I suspect Phillips and Brown and Wittgensteinian Fideists generally would in turn respond that this is still in effect treating God as if he were a physical object or something like a physical object.⁵ But I do not see that this need be so and to show that it is so, if it is so, would require argument. Why can we not sensibly ask if what *is claimed* to be divine reality *is indeed* a reality at all? What is wrong with asking if that claimed reality is indeed something which actually exists? ('Something', we should not forget, has many different uses in many different linguistic environments). Perhaps belief in God is not

a belief in any *kind* of reality at all, but a belief in a kind of unreality arising from conceptual confusion and/or human need? (*Perhaps* there is trouble here with 'actually exists'?) Neither Phillips nor Brown have been able to block that question or show it to be a pseudo-question that no one would ask who had a good understanding of religious language-games.

We should also recognize that in talking about what Phillips – perhaps pleonastically – calls 'the physical world' we have a reasonable understanding of what speaking of truth or falsity comes to. In speaking of physical objects, e.g. the tomatoes are ripe, the swallows are late in returning this year, we perfectly well understand under what conditions these statements would be true and under what conditions they would be false. But it is not so clear that we know how to distinguish between truth and falsity in religion, e.g. 'God created Adam', 'All men are tainted by original sin'. In a certain way there is sense and nonsense in religion. There are deviant and non-deviant religious utterances. But what truth or falsity would come to in religion is not clear. Before we can confidently say that 'God created Adam' is false, we must have some idea of what it would mean to say it is true or probably true. But it is such questions that are bothersome. Moreover, *pace* Phillips, if we do not construe God's existence as a matter of fact, what are we to construe it as: a matter of convention, a notational demand of a certain conceptual system, a conception arising out of pressing behavioral needs or hopes, a matter of fiction or what? To say that it is a fact that God exists, as I believe most believers would say, is not to give to understand, as Phillips believes, that God is being construed as something within the conceptual framework of the physical world. God is thought to be a transcendent reality and to assert that God exists is to assert that there is such a transcendent reality – that it is a fact that there is such a transcendent reality.⁶ This does not, at least on the surface, appear incoherent or logically odd, and it is the sort of thing that most Jewish and Christian believers would say, and indeed on reflection would still want to continue saying, for, as Hägerström puts it, to abandon such a conception is to abandon what is pervasively and understandably felt to be the life-blood of Christianity of Judaism.⁷

Thus it does not seem to me to be true that either Phillips or Brown have given us good grounds for claiming that scepticism about the existence of God, conceived of as a being who happens to have created and continues to take an interest in the universe, is based upon or rests upon a misconception or a mistake. It does not seem to me that they have at all shown that one cannot, while properly using religious discourse, while playing religious-language-games, raise within that language the possibility of God's non-

existence.⁸ The sceptic's critique and questions are not to be taken as something which is *just directed against the language of religion*.

Pace Brown, scepticism about the reality of God need not just, or perhaps not even at all, be scepticism about whether it is possible to think and talk about matters in the way in which religious persons do.⁹ A sceptic could agree that many people do think and talk in that way but still could consistently deny one or another of the following: that they intelligibly, coherently, reasonably, justifiably or truly can, where the latter is a denial that they can succeed in so talking in making remarks – where fundamental religious claims are at issue – which (a) are either true or false or (b) are either true or at least probably true. The sceptic need not be reduced, as Brown and Phillips believe, to remarking that 'Religion doesn't mean anything to me' or 'I don't see the point of it'. He might, like some of Dostoevski's sceptical characters, very much see the point in such talk and yet remain quite incapable of belief.

However, it could be responded that the sceptic owes us some account of his uses of such terms as 'intelligibly', 'coherently', 'reasonably', 'justifiably' or 'truly'. If these terms, in part at least, take on the distinct meaning they have, or come to have the criteria they have, because of the distinctive language-games or practices they enter into, and there is little in the way of cross-form of discourse criteria for their proper employment, then, Brown and Phillips could respond, the sceptic's challenge about coherence, reasonability, justifiability and the like is an empty one, for the criteria for what is reasonably, coherently and justifiably done or believed in and about the substance of religion is determined by the constitutive rules of the religious discourse itself. In this important way religious discourse is *sui generis*. However, it is by no means evident that the criteria of such concepts are so totally context-dependent and form-of-life relative.¹⁰

However, let us for the occasion assume that they are so form-of-life relative and with this assume with Brown, as it is at least somewhat plausible to assume, that the sceptic's challenge reduces to the complaint that religion doesn't mean anything to him, that it seems to him to have no point at all. If that is the case, it may well be, as Brown argues, that there is not a sufficient community of judgment – that is agreement in judgments – for the believer and the sceptic to argue out their case against the bar of reason and come, even in principle, and with infinite patience and attendance to the facts and their implications, to a reasoned and justified conclusion as to who is right or even to such an agreement concerning who is more likely to be right or wrong. No determination of truth or justifiable belief on either side may be

possible here. The conflict, Brown would have us believe, may be like his construal of the conflict between an art lover and a boor.¹¹

Brown describes that conflict as follows: when the matter to be argued is about what is the most reasonable way to construe a situation or interpret the facts, there can be no rational resolution between the disputants unless there is a considerable community of judgment. That is, there must be a considerable agreement, albeit often implicit and unarticulated but still operative, between the disputants in their reactions, attitudes, framework-beliefs and whole ways of looking, talking and behaving. Within a given culture or cluster of cultures — say in the West today — there is such a community of judgment between art critics even when they very fundamentally disagree. They all belong within a more or less common tradition of art. But — or so Brown contends — “there seems nothing for the boor and the lover of art to discuss about art”. If the boor says that the only pictures he likes are those with fishing scenes in them that remind him of his fishing expeditions or those with plump women in them, there is no room for dialogue and argument between him and the lover of art. They just have incommensurably different ways of looking, talking and behaving, with no way of showing or justifying that one way of doing these things is the more adequate or the more reasonable. The believer and unbeliever, he claims, are in the same or at least in a very similar situation to that of the art lover and the boor.

Brown in his *Religious Belief* puts his central claim powerfully as follows:

Corresponding to the fundamental religious belief in the existence of a god there is, in art, the belief that there are objects worthy of aesthetic appreciation. In each case the belief is so embedded in a way of looking, talking and behaving that to doubt it is to question the point of that way of looking, talking and behaving. For the possibility of God's non-existence no more occurs within religion than the possibility of there being no works of art (in the normative sense of 'objects worthy of aesthetic appreciation') occurs within art. Furthermore the point of worship can no more be specified in non-religious terms than the point of attending to works of art can be specified in terms acceptable to the boor. One can only explain in religious terms why the behaviour described as 'worship' is appropriate, i.e. why thanksgiving, repentance and so on are appropriate. There is, then, a point beyond which the demand for justification becomes too radical even to make sense. And the questions 'Is there really a god?' and 'Are there really works of art?' do not have sense in the way in which 'Are there really any angels?' and 'Is Anti-art really art?' have. For these latter questions can be raised within the appropriate way of thinking and discussed in its terms. But the former questions are detached from the ways of thinking to which they purport to relate. We understand them not so much as demands for justification or as doubts to which there could be any substance but as expressions of an attitude, of a failure to see any point in what goes on in art or religion.¹²

It is tempting to say what Brown says, but it also seems to me to be the case that this Wittgensteinian move deserves querying. Is there really no common ground between the boor and the art lover? The art lover can ask the boor why he only likes paintings with fishing scenes and plump women. When the boor explains why it is he likes only these he can in turn be asked why he should go on only liking these. If he responds that these are the only interesting or good pictures, then there is, of course, room for argument and reasoning and judgment. If, alternatively, he says, 'For no reason', then he in effect concedes his liking is arbitrary. And again there could be argument, discussion and dialogue. Why, after all, should he continue to be so arbitrary? What we need to recognize is that all along the line there is room for dialogue and argument. There is no *a priori* reason why in such contexts there even could not be what Habermas calls undistorted communication.

As Phillips has himself come to concede, the various language-games, within a given family of languages at least, are not insulated from each other.¹³ There are all sorts of overlapping of criteria and rationales and relevant shiftings of perspectives. Justification does come to an end in any given dispute, but justificatory questions from a shifted perspective can start up again and it seems doubtful that it has been established that there are any fixed points at which all justificatory questions for *whatever purposes* must simply come to an end and that all we can say is this is what we do. No doubt in certain circumstances for certain determinate reasons we can reasonably say just this and break off discussion and be justified in terminating a request for justification. Life is short and all sorts of practical and human considerations intervene. But that is a different matter from the one that we have been discussing. What is less evident is that there are points at which justification *must* come to an end because (a) it makes no sense to ask at this point for any purpose or reason, for any kind of justification at all and (b) no intelligible questions are possible in such a context about what it is we are doing and thinking. Why, after all, should the boor so limit himself by being so arbitrary? Isn't it very possible that he is missing something worthwhile in life that might enhance his human flourishing? For understandable *causes*, we, in our bourgeois and pluralistic cultures, are inclined to be wary about comparative judgments about such choices or preferences. But it is surely far from evident that there is nothing to be said here and that decision is king. This claim itself should come up against the bar of reason.

Granted, at least for the sake of this discussion, that religion, art, morality and science are forms-of-life and that their fundamental beliefs are distinctive and interlocked ways of looking, talking and behaving such that to challenge

any of these beliefs is to challenge this whole way in looking, talking, and behaving. Yet, why is it not possible to do just that? Can one not quite rationally, from a prudential or class point of view, challenge taking the moral point of view?¹⁴ It certainly seems at least that one can. Even more evidently, one can challenge the point or the rationality of taking a Christian or Jewish point of view. And indeed one can do it even for taking any religious point of view at all. It is, to put the matter cautiously, not evident that argument cannot develop about such matters. And it is not evident where or even that there is a distinct point where argument must stop and we can only take sides in accordance with certain attitudes.

Brown claims that questioning concerning the possibility of God's non-existence *cannot* legitimately occur *within* religion.¹⁵ But this cannot be correct, given the doubts and wrestlings of many of the most profound men of faith. Some of them were torn by doubt. Sometimes they even affirmed their faith when they felt that the probability of God's non-existence was very considerable indeed. Their acceptance was rooted in trust and commitment, not in a knowledge that God exists. A Jew or a Christian, to remain a Jew or a Christian, cannot renounce his faith in God, but his faith can be tried. He can surely come to wonder and to be filled with doubts concerning whether, after all, there is a God, while still fervently praying to that God of whose existence he is so unsure. This can and does happen within religion.

Such a doubt is so central that it can put into question *the point* of a whole way of looking, talking and behaving, though, as Dostoevski's *Shatov* dramatically shows, it is quite possible, while not believing in God, all the same to *want* to believe in God and to see very clearly the point of that religious way of viewing the world while still recognizing, or at least believing, that such a belief is belief in a myth and, because of this, also coming to believe that, after all and regrettably, there is no point in so looking at the world, since God does not exist. One can quite consistently believe this and be fully convinced that if only God did exist, there would very much be a point in so looking, talking and behaving. And plainly, if God were a reality, such activity would have a very considerable point.

In sum, it does not seem to me that a good case has been made for the claim that with the question 'Is there really a god?' we have reached a point where the demand for justification is too radical even to make sense. The key framework-proposition, the most fundamental belief of the Judeo-Christian tradition, has been broached. It is indeed deeply embedded in distinctive religious language-games, but we can — or so it seems at least — perfectly intelligibly ask whether there really exists such a reality or whether

there is anything of that sort at all. That does not, even within religion, appear to be an unintelligible or even an idlying question. 'Is there really a god?' need not be just an expression of an attitude but can, as well, be a genuine doubt concerning whether there is in reality a reality of a certain determinate kind or whether there in reality even could be. The sceptic, or at least certain sceptics, e.g. Santayana or Hepburn, *pace* Brown and Phillips, could very well see the point of religion, if only there were a god. In that way a sceptic can be very unlike the boor.

Let us now take a somewhat different tack. Certainly the study of Wittgenstein encourages us to believe that there are fundamental beliefs, including fundamental religious beliefs, which are deeply embedded in our language. As children we, in acquiring a language, are simply trained to think and respond in a certain way. We learn, as we learn to speak, certain beliefs and they are learned in such a way that alternatives are not even envisioned. We do come subsequently to revise and even reject *some* beliefs we so learn, but the suggestion is that other beliefs and indeed whole systems of belief are so deeply embedded that, learning our language as we have and having the language we have, we have no means for a justification or a criticism of such whole systems of belief. As Brown well puts it:

Someone who does not share such beliefs simply stands outside the tradition of those who do. It is, for instance, part of our tradition to believe that we ought not to do what is harmful to others. What could we say to someone who asked us to justify this belief? It would be no good telling him that it is in a man's long term interests to avoid doing harm to others. For even if that were true it would not be to the point if what is to be justified is the belief that it does in itself matter whether harm results to others from what we do. From the point of view of those who share this way of looking at things someone who demands justification of such a belief is beyond the pale. The appropriate response to him would seem to be, first to explain why there could be no answer to his question and then, perhaps, to try to change his way of looking at things.¹⁶

There are many human practices, such as the above moral practices, or the viewing and prizing of art, which are not, except perhaps incidentally, a means to some further human end and which could not, as some other practices can, be justified by reference to the end they serve.

These last claims seem to be at least plausible – though in some other context I would like to see them argued out – but what I am now concerned with is their application to religion.¹⁷ Brown tells us that belief in God, indeed even the belief that there is a god (understood as the belief that there is an object worthy of worship), like belief in the value of art or the belief that

we ought not to harm others, is a belief “which neither admits of nor requires justification”.¹⁸

It does not seem to me that the analogy is a good one. People with a deep need to believe, people who see (or think they see) the point of religion and the point, more specifically, of believing in God, are sometimes just unable to believe. Such people think that the belief in the alleged transcendent reality denoted by the term ‘God’ is such a scandal to the intellect, requires such credulity and intellectual evasion, that they cannot believe and indeed would not wish to be able so to dupe themselves so that they could in time come to believe. There are in our culture believers and non-believers and there are many people struggling in between. Many of them very much want an account of that admitted mystery denoted by the term ‘God’, which is at least sufficiently plausible not to require a crucifixion of one’s intellect or, alternatively, a justification on moral grounds for accepting such an account, even though it does require such a crucifixion of one’s intellect. Moreover, and independently, they – or at least some of them – are perplexed on moral grounds whether any object (any being) could be *worthy of worship*. That perplexity comes from reflecting on morality and religion itself. In such contexts the engine is not idling. And it is not analogous to the case of someone who is just indifferent to moral or aesthetic considerations and can see no point in either activity. Some doubters and some critics of religion can see the point of it very well and are not indifferent to the considerations underlying religion, but they also recognize that, in contrast to morals and aesthetics, in religion certain cosmological claims are quite evidently and unequivocally a part of that religion and that these claims at least appear to be so problematic as to make their acceptance of questionable rationality by people with such an understanding. Such a sceptic wants to ascertain, if it can be ascertained, whether it is indeed irrational for him to continue to accept these fundamental religious beliefs. Brown and Phillips, and those other philosophers whom I have (perhaps tendentiously) called Wittgensteinian Fideists, have not, as far as I can see, blocked these questions. Because of their at least apparent reasonability, it seems at least to be the case that the belief that there is a god – or indeed belief in God – is a belief which does require justification for its reasonable acceptance. To put it minimally, it does *not* appear, at least, to be a belief that we can reasonably accept as groundless but still perfectly in order.

NOTES

¹ Here I am deeply influenced by the powerful anti-Cartesian line about doubt and certainty and the need for a contextually dependent context for doubt taken by Peirce and by Wittgenstein in his neglected *On Certainty*.

² I am indebted to Norman Malcolm here both for some of the examples of framework-beliefs and for his discussion of framework-beliefs. See Norman Malcolm 'The Groundlessness of Belief', Stuart Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion*, London, The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1977. See as well in the same volume Colin Lyas, 'The Groundlessness of Religious Belief' and G. H. von Wright, 'Wittgenstein On Certainty' in G. H. von Wright (ed.) *Problems in the Theory of Knowledge*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1972, pp. 47–60.

³ D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970 and Stuart Brown, *Religious Belief*, London, The Open University Press, 1973. Paul Tillich in his cumbersome and often obscure way says similar things.

⁴ D. Z. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 3 and Stuart Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–39.

⁵ D. Z. Phillips would no doubt respond that the above remarks reflect how, given the dominant scientific paradigm of intelligibility, philosophical reflection itself easily falls prey to scientific pressures. To think, for example, that God is something that could be located or identified is to betray a misconception of the kind of reality God has. It shows, Phillips would have it, a misunderstanding of, on the one hand, the anthropomorphic and mythic conceptions of God and, on the other, of modern religious conceptions alive in genuine first-order Jewish and Christian discourse. Still, once we recognize that God is not the sort of reality that could be located, the problem remains how are we to understand – or even do we understand – what this putative ultimate reality is that we are talking about and do we understand at all what would justify our saying that the truth of 'There is a god' is even a trifle more probable than its denial? If the answer to this last question is in the negative and we do not understand what it is we are talking about in speaking of God, then it seems to me that it is not just a scientific or positivist prejudice to question the coherence of such talk. See D. Z. Phillips, 'Philosophers, Religion and Conceptual Change', in John King-Farlow (ed.) *The Challenge of Religion Today*, New York, Science History Publications 1976, pp. 196–197.

⁶ There would still be dispute about how to construe 'transcendence' here, but at the very least, many believers would find it essential to try to articulate some non-symbolic reading of 'transcendent to the world'. See Ninian Smart, 'Mystical Experience', *Sophia*, Vol. I, No. 1, April, 1962, pp. 24–26. Yet, it is doubtful if such a conception of 'metaphysical transcendence' can be given a coherent reading. To substitute, what Ilham Dilman calls, 'religious transcendence', is (a) in another way to fall prey to the pressures of philosophical reflection under the dominant scientific paradigm, and (b) to substitute a conception which will not meet the *religious* expectations of very many Christians and Jews. See Ilham Dilman, 'Wisdom's Philosophy of Religion Part II, Metaphysical and Religious Transcendence', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. V, No. 4, December, 1975, pp. 497–521.

⁷ Axel Hägerström, *Philosophy and Religion*, translated by R. T. Sandin, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1964, pp. 224–259.

⁸ Stuart Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Steven Lukes and Martin Hollis have shown that such an extreme contextualism cannot be correct. See their essays in Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1970, pp. 194–239. But, as I have tried to show, problems remain. See my ‘Rationality and Relativism’, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4, December, 1974, and my ‘Rationality and Universality’, *The Monist*, Vol. 59, No. 3, July, 1976, pp. 441–455.

¹¹ Stuart Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 36–41.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹³ D. Z. Phillips, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–79.

¹⁴ See my ‘Rawls and Classist Amoralism’, *Mind*, January, 1977.

¹⁵ Stuart Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

¹⁷ I do argue them out in the article cited in footnote 14 and in my ‘Rawls’ Defense of Morality’, *The Personalist*, Vol. 59, No. 1, (January, 1977), pp. 93–100, and my ‘Rationality and the Moral Sentiments’, *Philosophica*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1978), pp. 167–192.

¹⁸ Stuart Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 40.