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THE IMPOTENCE OF AGNOSTICISM

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Nowadays, Pascal's 'Wager' is not generally regarded as an argument of any consequence. Ever since Pascal's condemnation, by Pope Innocent X in 1653, his works have had a mixed or indifferent reception. I would like, however, to revive the argument by, as it were, turning it on its head.

The *Wager*, in brief, is this:

- (1) Either God exists or he does not
- (2) If God exists then the man who believes in him wins everything
- (3) While, if God does not exist, the man who believes in him suffers only a finite loss.

The *Wager* is designed to show that there is advantage in belief in God that is not available in not believing in God. I will attempt to show a similar conclusion from the other end of things, i.e., there is disadvantage in not believing because of the very nature of some forms of disbelief.

First, we must be clear about one or two terms central to the debate:

(a) *Agnosticism*: (a-gnostic-ism) means literally 'not-knowing'. This, as far as I can see, may take two forms:

(1) The claim that religious belief does not make sense for one; not that it is, in principle, incomprehensible, but that it simply means nothing to one particular individual. Now this might be the result of un-interest, and here it will amount to saying, 'It just doesn't move me', or it may be the result of the fact that the enquirer simply cannot make anything of religious talk. So, to the proposition, 'God loves mankind', he might reply, 'I'm sorry, I just don't understand what that means; it means nothing whatsoever to me.'

This form of agnosticism does not suffer the difficulties of (2) below, for it entails no epistemic claims whatever and, as a consequence, cannot be accused of the kind of linguistic duplicity I shall argue is involved in (2). The central issue here is that the agnostic does not claim to understand a notion he then rejects as untenable. He claims not to understand the notion at all. I can see nothing incoherent in this although I think it is not without its problems. As far as this paper is concerned, however, my argument is not with this kind of agnosticism.

(2) The belief that we do not have sufficient reason to know that there is, or is not, a God. It is this form of agnosticism on which I would like to concentrate, but I shall defer the main body of my argument about this until I have noted just a little about two other terms.

(b) *Atheism*: (a-theism) means literally 'not-Godism', and it is the belief that there is no God of any kind. This may rest, as far as I can see, on either of the following:

(i) *Scepticism*. The ancestor of modern-day scepticism is, for many, David Hume. Hume employs reason to demonstrate the limitations of reason. The 'idea of a substance . . . is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned to them, by which we are able to recall, either to ourselves or to others, that collection' (*Treatise* I.i.6). Thus knowledge is limited to sense-data and perception of anything beyond, because of this limitation, is not possible. Hume's famous denial of causation led him to believe that all that we are in the habit of thinking of as cause and effect is really a matter of sequence; a habit of mind. We know nothing of the external world but impressions and copies of impressions between which we can discover only succession, but not necessary connection. Causation is thus only a subjective belief maintained by memory and expectation. Yet this, as has often been pointed out, makes for great problems. On what foundation is Hume going to insist on the distinction between truths of reason and matters of fact? It seems that the sceptic is not quite sceptical enough. Since it is assumed that there is no necessary connection between states of mind, no persistence of the self from moment to moment, it is not possible to be sure that the conclusions of an argument follow from the supposed premises. It is only by lack of courage that the sceptic saves nature and history, indeed, the world about him, from the flames to which he commits the Divinity.

(ii) *Theological doubt and anti-theism*. I group these two together because they suffer similar difficulties. Both make epistemic claims and so, in this respect, as we will see, they resemble (2) above. The theological doubter, unlike the agnostic, thinks that there are good enough reasons to incline him to disbelieve the claims of theism. These reasons might not be conclusive, but they are enough to engender doubt; but doubt about what? We shall see that this constitutes the central problem for the theological doubter and the agnostic as well.

Atheism that takes the form of anti-theism is the claim that there could not possibly be a God. Its *locus classicus* of recent years is Professor J.N. Findlay's famous, and, I believe, now recanted paper, 'Can God's Existence be Disproved?'¹ This kind of belief is that not only is there no God, but, given the concept of God as religion requires it, *there could not possibly be a God*. This, I believe, has been shown to be wrong on many occasions but the argument, quite simply, is this: Findlay's view is that God, defined as religion requires, necessarily does not exist. The reason for this is 'that Divine Existence can only be conceived, in a religiously satisfactory manner, if we also conceive it as something inescapable and necessary, whether for thought or reality. From which it follows that our modern denial of necessity or rational evidence for such an existence amounts to a demonstration that there cannot be a God' (p.48). This conclusion follows (so Findlay) because, if the concept of God requires that not only *actual* independent realities stand opposed to it but that such opposition is totally inconceivable, i.e. not only must the existence of other things be unthinkable without him but his own non-existence must be unthinkable, then if this is seen in relation to 'modern notions' of necessity it will be shown to be palpably false. Necessity in propositions merely reflects our use of words, the arbitrary conventions of language: 'on such a view the Divine Existence could only be a necessary matter if we had made up our minds to speak theistically *whatever the empirical circumstances might turn out to be*' (p.54). Thus the religious mind is in a quandary: 'it desires the Divine Existence both to have that inescapable character which can, on modern views, only be found where truth reflects an arbitrary convention, and also the character of "making a real difference" which is only possible where truth doesn't

have this merely linguistic basis' (p.55). Yet this is the kiss of death for religion, 'for if God is to satisfy religious claims and needs, he must be a being in every way inescapable. One whose existence and whose possession of certain excellences we cannot possibly conceive away. And modern views make it self-evidently absurd (if they don't make it ungrammatical) to speak of such a Being and to attribute existence to him' (p.55).

Now this argument has, I believe, been shown to be wrong². I can, however, do no more at this point than say that its falsity lies in the fact that appeals to 'contemporary' or 'modern' views which 'show' that all existential propositions are necessarily contingent and all necessary propositions are necessarily non-existential does not constitute a sufficient premise to support the conclusion he draws. He simply has not argued his point. But this is not the main deficiency. All Findlay's argument amounts to is a denial of the ontological argument and, of course, the invalidity of this argument (if, indeed, it is invalid) does not entail the falsity of its conclusion. Even still, Findlay has not shown that there can be no classes of necessary propositions, other than the ones he mentions, that *are* in fact, existential.

The point of significance here is that if it is impossible to establish that there could not possibly (in whatever sense of 'possible' you like) be a God then this form of atheism is wrong. I do not want to argue that because Findlay can't establish his conclusion that it can't be done (i.e., that because his argument is false the conclusion is also false). I think there may be other reasons why this form of atheism is, in principle, incoherent³.

These then are the terms about which we should be clear in assessing the merits of the *Wager* and its revision which I shall now argue.

I will return to the question of the second form of agnosticism we have noted [(2) above]. This is the belief that we do not have sufficient reason to know that there is, or is not, a God. Now this form of agnosticism has several important consequences⁴. If the agnostic claims that we do not have sufficient reason to know that there is, or is not, a God, then this would seem to entail that he knows what it would be for a being to be God. If I say, 'We do not have sufficient reason to believe there are, or are not, fairies' then this means that I do not believe there is adequate evidence for the existence of beings that are, say, approximately six inches tall, are equipped with wings, and who live at the bottom of my garden. Presumably it makes no sense to affirm or deny, or to state that there are insufficient grounds to affirm or deny, the existence of something about which one knows nothing, or which one comprehends not. In other words, the agnostic is questioning the grounds to support the existence of a certain being *which has certain properties predicated of it*. Now if he claims to comprehend the *concept* of God he may find himself in some distinct difficulties. Will he side with the school of thought, of which Findlay is one, which holds that God's non-existence is logically impossible, or that the concept of God requires necessary existence? If so, he will become embroiled in the perennial debate whether a belief that God's non-existence is logically impossible is inconsistent with a belief that God might not exist. *One* way of construing this may take the form of accusing the agnostic of implicitly denying the principle of non-contradiction, i.e. (1) if God exists then his existence is necessary, (2) God might not exist. (1) is incompatible with (2) because if God's existence is necessary then it is not possible that he might not exist (not both p and not p). But this latter belief (2), that God might not exist, must surely be a minimum thesis of agnosticism.

If, on the other hand, he sides with the other camp and does not construe God's non-existence as logically impossible, it is hard to see how this belief amounts to little more than atheism. A view which asserts the contingency of God's existence is compatible with those held by, say, Sartre or Nietzsche. For Sartre, 'Dieu n'existe pas', he says, 'He (God) is dead, He spoke to us and is now silent. . .' And, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche (following Swinburne before him) tells the parable of the madman announcing the death of God in the market place and entering the churches of the realm to sing a *requiem aeternam deo* in recollection of the God who once was, but is now slain.

Now surely that is the whole force of saying that God's existence is contingent? It means that God might cease to exist. Yet when Sartre and Nietzsche affirm the logical consequence of the contingency concept of God's existence they are not being agnostics, but atheists. To say, 'God is dead' is the same, materially, as saying 'There is no God'. It could also be argued that it is the same, logically, as saying 'God might not exist'. It will not do to claim that the difference between the atheist and the agnostic in this respect is simply that one (the atheist) claims that God is dead while the other (the agnostic) holds a view which entails the possibility of God's death. This, after all, is an argument about the *nature* of God. It is clear that both Sartre and Nietzsche construe God's death as the *work of man*. This is an argument which can be enjoined by anyone who philosophizes; one can argue about whether God's existence is necessary or contingent without being a committed atheist, theist, or agnostic. So what makes the agnostic different from the atheist in this respect?

Agnosticism in the sense we are talking about is the belief that we do not have sufficient reason either to affirm or to deny God's existence. Presumably this sufficient reason, among other things, applies to the linguistic reasons about the nature of the concept of God. And therefore the agnostic must remain agnostic about the linguistic arguments. If this does not mean that the agnostic must be irrational over one area of linguistic debate (which I take it, it does not mean) it does mean that he might find it difficult to be committed to a view ('there is not sufficient reason to know that. . .') which requires non-commitment ('neither God is nor is not. . .') and yet to which, if he is to claim to understand the view about which he is uncommitted (there is nothing incoherent about being committed to a view which is one of non-commitment). Or is there? Compare Marcus Aurelius: 'there is only one thing of which you can be certain and that is that there is nothing of which you can be certain) then there must be, at least, some level of commitment (i.e. if God is, he is this, rather than that. . .).

(Frege⁵ draws a distinction between first-level and second-level concept-expressions. Concept-expressions of the first-level are those which require completion with a name (or singular term) to yield a grammatical sentence. Those of the second-level require completion by a first-level concept-expression to yield a grammatical sentence. There is no difficulty in identifying predicates with Frege's first-level concept-expressions. 'Exists', however, has a strong claim to membership of the second-level. The ordinary predicate calculus treats '(Ex) (-x)' as a second-level expression, with the gap to be completed by a predicate. One consequence of this, which I have argued in 'The Logical Status of "God"' (op.cit.), is that once a Descriptivist Theory of Names is abandoned, it is no longer possible to treat positive and negative existentials as about concepts—as say, of a particular concept, that it is or is not uniquely instantiated. Accordingly, 'exists', can no longer be treated as a second-level predicate requiring completion by a first-level predicate; it must be seen as on a par logically with ordinary first-level predicates, requiring completion

by a singular term to form a sentence. This, besides raising difficulties such as those surrounding the possibility of a valid ontological argument for the existence of God, widens the gap between quantificational logic and the ordinary language sentences it is intended to symbolise.)

Now what does all this do for the *Wager*? We might restate it as follows:

- (1) If God exists then his existence is necessary (because if it were possible that he might not exist then he would not be God).
- (2) If a man believes that God's existence is necessary and yet believes that God might not exist then he is maintaining a view which is self-contradictory (both p and not p).

We have seen that one form of agnosticism at least amounts to this view. Therefore, one form of agnosticism, at least, is self-contradictory.

But suppose that I am wrong about (2) above. Suppose it is possible to maintain both:

- (a) that God's non-existence is logically impossible (i.e. that his existence is necessary) and,
- (b) that God might not exist.

At this point I am not really interested in *how* this might be possible but one can imagine various arguments, say, that (a) is a notion which relates to propositions only, whereas (b) is an existential proposition. Whatever the reason may be, however, suppose that it is possible to maintain both (a) and (b) without contradiction. I suggest that the agnostic, in asserting (b), is espousing a view which amounts to little less than atheism⁶.

A minimum requirement of atheism is that it is possible that God might not exist, which is entailed by 'God does not exist'. Both these propositions could be regarded as, respectively, the necessary and sufficient conditions of atheism (note here that old principle of modal logic: *ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*— whatever is the case can be the case). God does not exist, therefore it is possible that God does not exist. Now this minimum requirement of atheism (it is possible that God does not exist) is a simple statement of the contingency concept of God's existence embodied in (b) which is, in turn, a sufficient condition of at least one form of agnosticism. Therefore, one form of agnosticism is equivalent to a minimal requirement of atheism.

How, some might ask, does this relate to the *Wager*? The answer, in fact, is quite simple: the argument I have put forward is largely about *what is believed*, i.e. the things believed by theists [(i) that God's existence is necessary], by agnostics [(ii) that God might not exist], and by atheists [(iii) that God does not, or could not, exist]. The *Wager*, on the other hand, is largely about the advantages or disadvantages of certain sorts of belief, i.e. if one believes (i) then one stands to gain more than if one believes (iii). At the beginning of this paper I said that I would like to revive the *Wager* by 'turning it on its head', and by this I meant that while the *Wager* was designed to show that there is advantage in belief, I have attempted to show that there is disadvantage in certain forms of disbelief. My attempt, and the *Wager*, do not amount to the same thing because even if there is disadvantage in certain forms of disbelief or unbelief this does not mean that there is therefore advantage in certain forms of belief. Such a conclusion would be a simple logical error. I have tried to show that there is a certain inconsistency in one form of agnosticism and that this same difficulty does not apply to theism.

The agnostic gains no advantage in maintaining the sort of belief we have been examining for several reasons. One is the simple reason that it is undesirable to contradict oneself. The second has to do with a general observation I would like to hazard, but one which I cannot hope to substantiate. All I can note is that it is a view I have often heard expressed. It is that agnosticism is, somehow or other, more 'intellectually respectable' than, say, atheism; that the agnostic is 'keeping his options open' in that, unlike the atheist, he is not committed to a view which may prove false. In short, agnosticism is sometimes construed to be a detached, uncommitted view. If my argument against agnosticism is correct then this general presumption is false. Not only may agnosticism be more closely allied to atheism than is sometimes assumed, it may also, at least in the form we have considered, be wrong. There can be no 'intellectual respectability' attaching to a view which is wrong.

Agnosticism, therefore, if it is construed in the way I have outlined it (which I suggest it often is), is impotent.⁷

1. *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. A.G.N. Flew and A. MacIntyre, SCM, London, 1955.

2. See *New Essays*, op. cit., G.E. Hughes, pp. 56-67, and A.C.A. Rainer, pp. 67-71.

3. I do not have space to argue this here, but it is not essential to the general thesis I will presently argue, viz, that one major form of agnosticism is impotent.

4. On the consequences of this belief see my "The Logical Status of 'God'" in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 16., No. 2, June 1980, pp. 217-228.

5. *Foundations of Arithmetic*, para. 53, 'Function and Concept', p. 38 in Geach and Black, *The Basic Laws of Arithmetic*, para. 21.

6. Mr Christopher Kirwan of Exeter College Oxford suggested to me that if we take (b) as meaning 'God's existence is not necessary', someone who believes it will be committed to atheism if he also believes (1) (that if God exists then his existence is necessary). But, he argued, (b) could also be read, quite differently, as 'God's existence is not certain', which is a statement of agnosticism and which commits its proponent to no more than agnosticism even if he combines it with belief in (1). This, however, it seems to me, does not mitigate the force of my argument because 'God's existence is not certain' is elliptical for saying 'God might not exist'. Whilst the former is more a statement about an individual's beliefs and the latter *appears* to be a statement with ontological import the effects for the argument are the same. In modal terms, the two statements can still be expressed as 'It is possible that God does not exist' and this, after all, is exactly the statement I have considered throughout this latter section of the paper.

7. I have benefitted, in my consideration of this problem, from discussions with my students at Dulwich College, Adrian Crickmer and Richard Mico.