

Agnosticism and the Uses of Religion by Michael Mulvey

“I believe in an aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. They represent the true human tradition, the one permanent victory over cruelty and chaos.” (E.M.Forster)

A Theist speaks

“I enjoyed the supper together yesterday and have been pondering since whether an agnostic stance is a practical option. Since there is no absolute proof of the existence of God, agnosticism is no more than acceptance of the obvious. From a practical standpoint, it begs the question: ‘Is there an afterlife?’ If the answer is ‘No’, then there can be no ultimate purpose for the individual beyond this life. Human life becomes no different from that of plants, except for self-awareness. It is the same conclusion that the atheist would reach.

If the answer is ‘Yes, probably or possibly, there is an afterlife’, two further questions present themselves: ‘What could be the form of the after-life?’ and ‘Could there be a connection between the before and after?’ These, of course, are the questions which concern the theist. In effect, the agnostic is in an inconclusive position, which seems to me unsatisfactory. As you yourself said, it is sitting on the fence.”

An Agnostic replies

Part 1

Is it very helpful or strictly accurate, I wonder, to speak of an agnostic “stance”? Agnosticism - the state of not-knowing - is more in the nature of something that is thrust upon us, that we are constrained to, rather than an option we take or a position we adopt. Your use of the word “stance” seems to imply that we have some sort of choice in the matter. I don’t believe we do. We can choose to attempt to know more, to ponder further and more deeply, to garner more information about, to seek the views of others, but ultimately “not knowing” is a place we find ourselves in, not something we opt for.

You say that from a practical standpoint it begs the question: is there an afterlife? Is the existence of an afterlife a necessary consequence, I wonder, of a belief in the existence of God? Whatever the case, the theist *believes* there is an afterlife, the atheist *believes* there isn’t, neither of them *knows*, and that they have in common with the agnostic who doesn’t *know* either. One is bound to say, however, that the theist has a sight more believing to do than the atheist unbelieving, as philosopher A.C. Grayling has very ably demonstrated in his *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (Bloomsbury, 2013). About which more later (1).

But, why from a “practical” standpoint? This seems to suggest that the agnostic in his failure to reach for religious belief is being impractical. But the agnostic never sought to be practical or to enjoy the comforts and conveniences that practicality might bestow. He seeks only to be honest. Agnosticism is more than anything an act of honest recognition, a taking cognizance of the fact that we do not know, and, in the case of the existence of God, of the fact that, for the time being at least, we cannot know because, as you rightly say, there is no absolute proof either way.

In this light, I am not sure either that “acceptance of the obvious” is a very satisfactory description of what agnostics do. Whether what one has accepted is obvious or not rather depends on how much thought one has given it. It is only after much reflection, I would suggest, that most agnostics come to an acceptance of the limitations of human knowing, of the unfitness of our finite knowledge system to confront the infinite, of the inability of human beings to look beyond their finite state with any certainty. It is precisely this point that the former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway, makes in a recent interview with the philosopher Brian Appleyard: “ I am now an agnostic”, declares Holloway, “which for me is

acceptance of ignorance and uncertainty as the *inevitable* basis of the human condition.” The italics are mine.

So, yes, I agree, agnosticism is a “sitting on the fence”, but it is hard-won. It is acceptance, yes, but a humble and honest acceptance of the inherent limitations of human “knowing”, an acceptance of *doubt* as the end-point of all human epistemological endeavour. To my way of thinking, as I hope to show below, it is not so much the agnostic’s *acceptance* of not knowing that is potentially problematic, nor the atheist’s regrettable abandon of open-mindedness in refusing to acknowledge doubt, as the theist’s tendency to flee the “here and now” and seek refuge in a “hereafter”, in narratives that, alas, prove all too frequently divisive distractions.

But it is your “except for self-awareness” that worries me most. To my way of thinking it is precisely human self-awareness, our capacity for reflexion, that sets human beings apart from all other created beings, whether they be plants, animals or inanimate matter, irrespective of whether their creation is the result of a blind process or has come about through the agency of some Independent Being. Self-awareness makes us special irrespective also of whether or not we are created in the image and likeness of God. It makes the world around us special as well because we humans depend on that world for our continued existence. So, it is not acceptance of our ignorance about the *life beyond* that makes us more plant- or animal-like, it is rather the very fact of our being able even to conceive of the possibility of a *life-beyond* in the first place that removes us light-years from animal and vegetable existence and makes our species very, very special.

Janus-like we humans with our self-awareness are destined to sit upon the fence of our human condition, simultaneously to contemplate, on the one hand, the *world within* with its intimations of transcendence, of something bigger beyond, and, on the other, the *world without* which we claim to “know” progressively.

This sense of transcendence, our sense of there being something bigger beyond, is, I would suggest, something that all human beings experience in varying degrees and ways throughout their lives. That sense is, after all, one of the things that make us human. It is what some philosophers and humanist thinkers have termed the “God-shaped hole”. What we pour in to it, whether we consider ourselves members of a religious community (that is of a shared belief system with God at its centre) or not, is always intensely personal, inevitably subjective. Few - and here I would include many atheists and certainly most agnostics - would feel the need to deny the existence of such a “spiritual” space within ourselves. It is where our deepest beliefs, our personal or shared notions of meaning and purpose reside. What is so remarkable, so special, about humans is that they have this space at all and that they need to fill it with “meaning” in order to give direction to their lives, one might even say in order to be able to live at all. Not even the insane can live entirely without purpose of some sort, however trivial or misguided the sane judge such purpose to be.

Whence, then, is life’s meaning or purpose to be derived? Let us take the case of the theist. He finds that, absent any reliable evidence either way, he *believes* even so in the existence of God and, as a consequence, is entitled to posit the possibility of an afterlife. He will be free thereafter to speculate about the nature of that afterlife, about the possibility of there being a connection between it and the life he is living here on earth, and he will be free, unrestrained by any imperative of reliable evidence (for we are ultimately entitled to think and believe, if not to do, what we will) to speculate about the nature of that connection. At the end of the day he may even discover that, in diametric opposition to what his catechism taught him as a child, he has created a God in his own image and likeness. Was it not Voltaire who said that if God does not exist then man must invent Him?

The second thing you say that worries me, indeed puzzles me, not a little is: “if there is no after-life then there can be no ultimate purpose for the individual beyond this life”. I presume that you did not mean to state the obvious and that what you really meant is: without an after-life to be moving towards can there be any purpose for the individual in this life? Or, to put it another way, do we need a belief in an afterlife to make life meaningful?

The answer, as far as I am concerned, is, decidedly, no! Indeed, even among believers in God and the afterlife, one is inclined to suggest that the man or woman who derives life’s meaning

directly from a preoccupation with the afterlife is the exception rather than the rule. One is minded of the Trappist monks described by Leigh-Fermor in his revealing and sensitive study of monastic life - *A Time for Silence*. Every morning, Fermor tells us, each member of the community without fail removes a shovelful of earth from that allotted spot in the monastery grounds which is to be his last resting place. An extreme of "otherworldliness", admittedly, but one which points to a potentially problematic detachment from the "here and now".

The idea of belief in an afterlife giving meaning to life may turn out indeed to be the least, or at best the lesser, of religion's uses. Karl Marx saw religious belief as the opiate of the masses, a tool of political oppression and subjugation. Throughout human history and still today, church establishments of all kinds, unable or unwilling to improve the lot of their faithful, have deemed religious belief a useful distraction from the harshness and injustices of life's realities, and the putative beauty of the afterlife just reward and compensation for acceptance of this life's "vale of tears". The Muslim terrorist, however psychologically unhinged we believe him to be, partakes in this respect of a long and established tradition of detachment that so often seems, admittedly in milder form, to accompany religious belief.

Religious belief can, and undoubtedly does, give meaning to many peoples' lives. Yet let it never be said that without "religious" belief life need be meaningless. Even if defined religious belief is unconvincing or arbitrary as far as the atheist and agnostic are concerned, neither would be so foolish as to suggest that life can be lived without belief of any kind. That would be to deny man his humanity. For even atheists and agnostics know (evidence enough exists) that human beings are by nature believers.

So where do atheists and agnostics stand? What life-creeds and beliefs do they put into the "spiritual" space within themselves?

On inspection we find the list to be long and varied. Einstein appears to have believed in a God, but a God of cosmic power, of the underlying unity in the physical universe, an It which, unlike the theist's Sistine God, cannot be blamed for all the terrible things It does. A similar stance is adopted by two very notorious atheists - the philosopher Daniel Dennet and Richard Dawkins explicator of things scientific - who set enormous store by the beauty of the universe. They stand in wonder and awe at the complexity, balance and diversity of the world of nature. It is their sense of being part of that nature, of an awesome and transcendent whole, that apparently gives meaning to their lives.

Another atheist, Judy Marsh, a Guardian reader (Letters, 18-01-2014), puts it this way: *Recently a woman I know looked me in the eye and said: "We are all God's children you know." I was dying to say, but didn't (for fear of seeming rude): "I wouldn't presume to tell you you're a grown-up and you should take responsibility for yourself". Atheists don't want that weird certainty over the big questions and answers. I don't give a toss what happened before the big bang. My own preoccupation is how on earth are we going to take care of our planet because, sure as anything, God is not bothered about our potential destruction of it. Being an atheist is about taking responsibility for our own actions ..."*

Agnostics have no time for that "weird certainty" either (1).

Over the ages, men and women of creative and altruistic bent - artists, musicians, philanthropists, philosophers, physicians, poets, writers - have frequently been unable to say *why or to what end* they do what they do. The joy and self-fulfillment they experience is reason enough, the sheer sense of purpose they experience when exercising creatively their human physical and mental capacities becomes its own reward. At best their lives lived in this way become a celebration of their humanity. Underpinning their creativity and altruism is a belief in the intrinsic worth of what they do, a belief that gives meaning to their lives.

Then there are the members of ecological and oriental persuasions (Vegans and socially-committed Buddhists, for example) whose engagement with the here and now, whose belief in a sustainable and peaceful future for humanity is by any standards "religious" in all but name. Yet, for most of them the notion of, as you put it, "an ultimate purpose for the individual beyond this life" simply has no meaning.

Finally, and this list is but a drop in the ocean of observable life-creeds, there are the increasing millions of rank-and-file members of latter-day less-authoritarian creeds and cults - Anglicans, Adventists, Evangelicals, and so forth - for whom it is no so much a belief in God or theological conviction that are important as the warmth, the inclusiveness, the sense of kinship that comes with belonging to a community, a belonging that becomes a valued part of their way of life.

The very recent Sunday Assembly movement has recognized this. Can we, secular humanist agnostics and atheists that we are, they ask, not have the camaraderie and inclusiveness of Sunday church-going without the grey-bearded Old Man and the stories of the life beyond that time and religious tradition have weaved around Him?

I believe the Sunday Assemblists are on to something important, not to say crucial, in today's globalised, commoditized and fiercely individualistic Western world. And I would argue that, yes, they can have their "cake" provided certain prior conditions are met. If their movement is to take root and prosper they will need a **unifying narrative**. Nick Spencer, director of *Theos* (the think-tank looking at religion's role in society), has put it this way: "... you need more than an absence to keep you (people) together. You need a firm common purpose ... I suspect what brings them together is a real desire for community when in a modern, urbanized, individualised city like London, you can often feel very alone. That creates a lot of camaraderie, but the challenge then becomes what actually unites us?"

My purpose in Part 2 of this piece will be to make a modest contribution to meeting the challenge Spencer identifies. Drawing on my 40-year work experience as an interpreter with the United Nations, where I have had occasion to observe international consensus-building on a daily basis, I shall attempt to define the broad outline of a unifying narrative for our species. I hardly need add that many of the ideas and beliefs I shall be alluding to are part of my own life creed.

(1) A. C. Grayling's representation of the "existence of God" issue, and hence also, I believe, of agnosticism in the, in many ways excellent, study I have referenced above, is misconceived. In Chapter 5 entitled "Knowledge, belief and rationality" Grayling establishes a matrix by which to judge the rationality of the three available positions on the existence of God - atheism, theism and agnosticism. The rationality of each position is he claims a "clear-cut matter": we *disbelieve* and act accordingly, we *believe* and act accordingly, or we *suspend judgement* and act in whatever prudential way seems best on ancillary grounds (I presume for quite other reasons which have nothing to do with the existence or otherwise of God). "In connection with fairies, deities and unicorns", he continues, "the clear option is the first" (i.e. to disbelieve). But, notice: the "deities" are tucked in between "fairies" and "unicorns", between entities, that is, that believers (if there are any over the age of seven years) claim are part and parcel of our real everyday world, without of course a scrap of evidence to support that claim. Belief in "deities" would be as equally clear-cut as belief in fairies or Father Christmas, at least to many of us, if "deities" were confined exclusively to fairy- or unicorn-like creatures, the sort of creatures that the ancient Greeks believed inhabited Olympus or the old man with a grey beard that most Christians used to believe in. But the "deity" secular agnostics suspend judgement about is something quite different. It is by definition not part of, or connected in any way with, our everyday world or the natural order of things with which we are all familiar. And, at this point, the matter is not quite so clear-cut, in fact not clear-cut at all. Is it, after all, so irrational to posit the existence of a supra-natural entity, of a non-contingent first cause that might account for the origin of our universe? Can we be so sure that our human sense of transcendence, our intimations of something bigger beyond, are mere illusion, or, as some scientific materialists would have us believe, the useless by-product of evolutionary over-drive? Which is more reasonable: to keep an open mind on these issues acknowledging that, for the time being at least, an explanation of the ultimate origin of our universe is beyond the reach of science, or to ask, as Grayling does, why the universe cannot be its own reason for existing (*op.cit.* page 96-97)? Why not, indeed? Except that his question brings us back to a non-contingent first principle or to ... God (an entity which is its own reason for being). So, while getting us not much further ahead, the question, I would suggest, turns Grayling into something of a neo-theist! But my purpose is not to attempt to attach labels. For, elsewhere in his admirable study Grayling makes, to my mind, an entirely convincing case for rejecting traditional theistic religions as being no longer fit for

purpose, generators in today's world of more harm than good. My purpose is merely to show that for secular humanist agnostics like myself the important thing is to keep our minds open, to stand with doubting Thomas, happy in our lack of faith, content, in almost equal measure, to be condemned by the traditional churches and admired by atheists like Grayling, who writes (page 115, *op. cit.*): "one mark of intelligence is an ability to live with as yet unanswered questions." And I would add that it is also a mark of integrity and courage.

Indeed, to repeat what I have attempted to explain above, the agnostic position on the existence of a deity as on the origins of the universe and all such unworldly matters is part of a much broader epistemological stance - an overall philosophy of "doubt" that prefers to suspend judgement and retain an open mind on matters that are currently unexplained and may remain so. Most secular humanist agnostics would consider Bayesian contortions of speculation about probability in this connection (Grayling *op.cit.* page 52) a time-wasting distraction, and the "weird" certainties of both theist and atheist, if they matter at all, ultimately untenable. But above all, the humanist message of secular agnostics must be: mankind has surely not seen through theistic belief at last and escaped finally the epistemological clutch of the Church of God, only to run for cover behind the materialist "certainties" of a new Church of Science. We shall see how important such avoidance of "authoritative" opinion, whether mediated by priests or scientists, is when later in Part 2 we come to consider matters of human morality and above all a consensual definition of human nature as the starting point for a *speciel** narrative.

* The adjective "*speciel*" as far as I am aware is a neologism. I use it here in the sense of "that which pertains to *homo sapiens*, the human species".

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