

THE APPEAL TO REASON

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EVER SINCE THE Enlightenment, some three centuries ago, ‘reason’ has been a driving force for change and social betterment in the Western world. Whenever an appeal to ‘reason’ is made we immediately take notice because we think the real state of affairs is about to be uncovered. Yet ‘reason’ can be a weasel word, hiding more than it says, when, for example, it becomes a catchword, as it does when used by the New Atheists.

They misleadingly identify ‘reason’ with scientific or instrumental reasoning to the exclusion of its any other forms. In doing so they are using the guise of ‘reason’ to smuggle in a whole intellectual framework and agenda of their own.

The British philosopher, A. C. Grayling, while perhaps not the most colourful or best known of the New Atheists, has been arguably the most committed to establishing an alternative to religion, even publishing in 2011 *The Good Book* as an atheistic replica of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures.¹ Recently he published *The God Argument* in which he reprises the modern arguments against theism and makes a case for ‘reason’ as the alternative to ‘faith’.

Grayling, like all the New Atheists, defines ‘reason’ in naturalistic terms, thus automatically disqualifying all religious claims:

The deliverances of common sense, practicality and science... are based on evidence gathered and vastly confirmed by experience, whereas the beliefs of various religions are untestable, inconsistent with each other, internally contradictory, and in conflict with the deliverances of common sense and science... If these claims have content they should be testable. Yet they are untestable, and at sharp odds with everything that science and common sense show us about the nature of reality.²

Many believers, of course, see things differently; they are comfortable with the findings of genuine science, yet see that there is more to the universe and to human life than scientific methods are able to uncover. Their faith too they see as having its own testimony and evidence as they live it out.

This New Atheism version of ‘reason’, however, is not simply an expression of naturalism or scientism, but is camouflage for a radical Liberalism, which maximises individual freedom to the fullest extent compatible with the rights of other individuals to be free from ‘harm’.³ All else is to be left to personal preference and lifestyle choice, such as, in sexuality, drug use, pornography, abortion, and euthanasia.⁴

The ideal good life, Grayling argues, might involve such things as a life that seems meaningful and purposeful, love and friendship, activity, honesty, authenticity, autonomy, integrity, and a felt quality of life from an aesthetic point of view.⁵ But whether or not such values are present depends entirely on individual preference. He asks ‘what would it add, to any of the above, to say that in addition to these considerations there is a deity or there are deities?’⁶ His answer, unsurprisingly, is ‘nothing whatsoever’ because faith is not a legitimate form of reasoning. And, he adds, that his account ‘does not consist in a body of doctrines and prescriptions’ thus making it ‘as far from being like a religion as anything could be’.⁷ That is a very dubious claim, as we shall see.

‘Reason’ can’t be imprisoned in one only human purpose, namely scientific reasoning, no matter how successful and influential that purpose might be. Reason is as broad and multifaceted as human life itself is: we also seek relatedness, love, goodness, truth, faith,

beauty, music, art, literature, and a host of other interests, all of which require a different use of ‘reason’ from scientific experimentation.

Human beings use their ‘reason’ to find a way through a huge array of problems, needs, purposes, interests, values to live by, and practices. Much of this is means-to-end reasoning, with the criteria for success or failure provided by the particular end sought, *e.g.* if we play tennis we have some idea of what a ‘good’ tennis racquet is.

We can also reason about ends themselves, *e.g.* in choosing a profession: in such cases we examine the goal itself by specifying what it involves for us, how it fits with our other ends and values, what would count as achieving it, what it would exclude, and sorting out any real or apparent conflicts that emerge.⁸

In like manner, language skills, relationships, the arts, religion and culture generally, require us to immerse ourselves in them, to grow within them in ways we never fully understand, in order to learn, to exercise them, and to appreciate what they entail.⁹

By reducing ‘reasoning’ to means-to-end deliberation only the New Atheists exclude the real variety and richness of human reasoning and, even more significantly, disguise their own ends by doing so.

Nor does ‘reasoning’ exist in a vacuum, for as well as being something that individual human beings do in their own particular circumstances, it is also an ability constructed by culture and history. It emerges with language from particular intellectual and behavioural frameworks, so that much of what it contains consists of presuppositions, paradigms, unspoken rules, assemblies of values and traditions, which can never be made fully explicit, because the whole assemblage constitutes *who* we are.

There are degrees of personal involvement in reasoning as we can easily see in the variety of forms that reasoning takes: in science and technology, for example, it is curtailed to



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allow and safeguard ‘objectivity’, although it still demands the commitment, interest and honesty of the scientist or practitioner if it is to succeed. In most other areas of life, as in the arts or religion, it is the involvement itself that is crucial.

Each human purpose or practice has its criteria of success or failure embedded in it and will accordingly select its own relevant facts from the almost limitless array of features in the environment—the ‘facts’ of science, for example, are not the ‘facts’ of the arts, love or religion.

Nor is the end result, as Michael Polanyi points out, always simply the sum of all the facts—a new solution to a problem, a scientific discovery, a new composition, all go beyond the facts to a totally new conception of what all those facts *mean* when taken or put together:

The admonition to look at the unknown really means that we should *look at the known data, but not in themselves, rather as clues to the unknown; as pointers to it and parts of it.* We should strive persistently to feel our way towards an understanding of the manner in which these particulars hang together, both mutually and with the unknown.¹⁰

Scientific reasoning, therefore, has its own kind of facts, but it cannot have a stranglehold on all facts. Success or failure in the appreciation of art or music or religion will be far less tangible, more personal, more open-ended, than science, but nonetheless real, nonetheless vital for all that, more a matter of ‘gradual appreciation’ than scien-

tific ‘verification’.¹¹

Reasoning in religion is embedded in practices and traditions, such as prayer, worship, rituals, sacred writings and belief systems, where we allow ourselves to be drawn into and become attentive, not to the particular ‘parts’ of our world, but to what all these parts taken together convey to us of the ‘whole’.

The ‘facts’ of religion are the pointers or clues that draw us to the whole and reveal to us the meaning and value that comes to us from the whole, such as, a sense of God’s presence, deeper meaning and purpose in our lives, values for living, spiritual and moral energies and resources, or a sense of communion with the divine. Like music and the arts this can only be appreciated to the degree the person allows him or herself to participate in the practice.

The exclusion of all other vital forms of human seeking from the realm of ‘reason’ is not the only quarrel with this New Atheist appeal to ‘reason’. The other issue is precisely what is being advocated under the guise of ‘reason’ as if it were ‘reason’ itself.

The particular version of Liberalism espoused by Grayling is a driving political philosophy in the English-speaking world. It prioritizes individual freedom of choice, personal autonomy, equality of opportunity, especially gender equality, individual human rights, an ethic of reciprocity and utility, and tolerance, even of religious and other beliefs, despite their being seen as illusory or superstitious.

This Liberalism, however, is only one strand of the many political theories and belief systems that have influenced human history, and, as such, has to be argued for, not simply assumed as the only ‘rational’ position.

Other systems, some secular, some not, recognise different values and priorities, such as family, honour, community, solidarity, authority, economic equality and tradition. From the viewpoint of many of them, Liberalism is

seen, amongst other things, to undercut social and family ties, to empty out of human freedom all consideration of standards, to reduce morality to utilitarian calculations only, and to depreciate tradition and the sacred.

The Western nations, the most powerful of which are strongly influenced by Liberal ideals, and despite, or perhaps because of, their huge material successes, seem to their critics to be mixed with intractable problems, such as ecological disasters, economic imperialism at the international level and growing economic inequality on the homefront, burgeoning arms expenditure, the loss of binding moral standards, and a system of corporate competitiveness and acquisitiveness that is undermining their social fabric.

The point is not whether any or all of such allegations are or are not correct, but rather that you can’t feasibly rule them out of court, unless, of course, you assume from the start that Liberalism is the umpire, which is precisely, according to John Gray, what Liberalism does:

It is a mark of an illiberal regime that conflicts of value are viewed as signs of error. Yet Liberal regimes which claim one set of liberties—their own—is universally legitimate adopt precisely that view. They treat conflicts among liberties as symptoms of error, not dilemmas to which different solutions can be reasonable. Liberalism of this kind is a species of fundamentalism, not a remedy for it.¹²

This strain on Liberal ‘tolerance’ shows particularly in the more intemperate New Atheists, such as, Sam Harris on the ‘war’ with ‘Islam’ and Christopher Hitchens on religious education as ‘child abuse’.¹³

Even from the evolutionary point of view, much employed by the New Atheists to support their case, although not in fact by Grayling, the values picked out by Liberalism have only ever been one strand of the full evolutionary scenario according to Gerd Gigerenzer, the Director for Adaptive Behaviour and Cognition at the Max Planck

Institute in Berlin:

The psychologist John Haidt proposed five evolved capacities, each like a taste bud: *a sensitivity to harm, reciprocity, hierarchy, ingroup, and purity*... In a society with an individualistic ethic, only the first two buds are activated... In a society with family-oriented ethic, moral feelings concerning harm and reciprocity are rooted in the family, not in the individual... In a society with a community orientation, concerns about harm, reciprocity, and hierarchy relate to the community as its root... Its ethical view activates all five sensitivities...¹⁴

Here again it is not a matter of who is right or who is wrong, but that, contrary to what Liberalism believes, not only is it not the umpire, but in fact there is no independent umpire at all, as Alasdair MacIntyre concludes:

It is an illusion to suppose that there is some neutral standing ground, some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions.¹⁵

Liberalism not only claims to be the neutral ground of reason, but also sees itself as the high ground from which all competitors can be vanquished, as Grayling himself shows:

Humanists distinguish between individuals and the wide variety of belief systems people variously adhere to. Some belief systems (those involving astrology, feng shui, crystal healing, animism, religion... the list is long) they combat robustly because the premises of them are falsehoods—many indeed are inanities—and, even more, because too often belief...serves as a prompt to discord and strife, and at last even murder.¹⁶

Richard Dawkins tries his own conjuring trick when he appeals to ‘a somewhat mysterious consensus’, existing in society and evolving over time, which he terms the ‘*Zeitgeist*’, the ‘spirit of the times’.¹⁷ When the ‘rabbit’ appears out of the hat, however, it too is Liberalism in disguise.

Dawkins, Grayling, and the other New Atheists, may be right about the pervasiveness

and influence of Liberal values in English-speaking countries, but it is far from being a ‘consensus’ as John Gray explains:

the fact of pluralism is not the trivial and banal truth that individuals hold to different personal ideals. It is the coexistence of different ways of life. Conventional liberal thought contrives to misunderstand this fact, because it takes for granted a consensus on liberal values.¹⁸

Pluralism means not just the fact that increasingly in the modern world different groups and individuals with different cultural viewpoints and value systems inhabit the same place, but that it is accepted as an ideal that no one viewpoint may dictate the terms of coexistence to the others, and that consensus, justice, juridical procedures and rules, be achieved by free and impartial dialogue and cooperation of all stakeholders. The ‘reality’ in any given country will be governed by history and demography and hence will only approximate the ideal, but it is an ideal that applies to all groups, secular and religious, and hence to Liberalism itself. It does not help of course that the New Atheism regards all theists and its other secular critics as deluded.

It also means, however, that in a pluralistic world religious groups must remain open to dialogue and cooperation. The Catholic Church’s social justice tradition is pivotal for us in this regard, particularly, Pope John XXIII’s *Pacem in terris* on human rights, and the Second Vatican Council’s *Decree on Ecumenism*, and its Declarations on *Religious Liberty* and *Non-Christian Religions*. Over the past one hundred and twenty years the tradition has attempted to work out the principles needed for us to enter fully into the modern pluralistic and increasingly secular world.

The question still remains: How able is ‘reason’ to the task put before it? Grayling recognises the dark side of human life, ‘the unkind, angry, hostile, selfish, cruel side’, but the remedy offered is for ‘reason’ to rid humanity of ‘the superstitious, tendentious, in-

tellectually captive, ignorant side.¹⁹ It is not difficult to guess who he has in mind there! Given the complex issues facing the modern world, it seems a rather ‘shallow’ diagnosis. But, more significantly, it is very doubtful that ‘reason’ alone is up to the task, as Terry Eagleton argues: ‘it is only if reason can draw upon energies and resources deeper, more tenacious, and less fragile than itself that it is capable of prevailing, a truth which liberal rationalism for the most part disastrously overlooks.’²⁰

To talk of ‘reason’ in the abstract overlooks the fact that it is always vulnerable human beings who reason amidst the challenging and complex circumstances of their times. Modern consumer societies, heavily influenced by Liberalism as they are, promote competitiveness, free choice, the acquisition of wealth, individual rights and interests, reciprocity, and self-fulfilment. A deeper and broader sense of humanity also requires a concern for compassion, family and community networks, care of the earth, economic equality, and concern for the disadvantaged, which other viewpoints and

value systems will foster and promote to avoid sliding disastrously into individual self-absorption.

Our inner subjective lives can run shallow or deep. It is both the strength and the vulnerability of religion that it is able to create and penetrate to the depths of human guilt, aggression, insecurity, and the needs and desires that drive us. The history of religion, even to the present, is fraught with the ways these forces have been misdirected or unleashed with devastating effects. Nor will such forces disappear just because religion disappears. Rather, they inevitably resurface from the depths as the Twentieth Century witnessed so tragically.

Culture and life have many more uses for ‘reason’ than New Atheism is willing to acknowledge, and many of these uses, especially in religion, are not just to pursue our own material needs and desires, but to preserve and promote our inner, personal, subjective, spiritual, and relational lives which can all too easily be lost sight of in our scientific, technological, commercial, Liberal world.

NOTES

1 *The Good Book*, New York: Walker Publishing Co. 2011.

2 *The God Argument* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 55.

3 *ibid*, 177-197.

4 *ibid*, 199-236.

5 *ibid*, 161-2.

6 *ibid*, 174-5.

7 *ibid*, 149.

8 See Henry S. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning About Final Ends*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

9 See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

10 *ibid*, 127-8.

11 *ibid*, 202.

12 *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity

Press, 2000) 20-21.

13 Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 108-152; Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2007) 259-73.

14 *Gut Feelings: The Intelligence of the Unconscious* (New York: Penguin, 2007) 187-8.

15 *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame (Ind): University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 367.

16 *The God Argument*, 256.

17 *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 265.

18 *Two Faces of Liberalism*, 13.

19 *The God Argument*, 256.

20 *Reason, Faith and Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 110.