THE ARGUMENT FROM ABSURDITY: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN AN ATHEIST AND BELIEVER

Tim Miles

Why do believers and atheists seem to talk past each other? From what different perspectives do they see things? The following dialogue suggests that one deep difference is about whether or not the World must make a certain kind of complete sense.

In the course of a conversation between two friends, an Atheist and a Believer, this exchange develops.

Hal: You believe in God, don't you?

Bob: Yes, I suppose I do.

Hal: So what is it, basically, that makes you believe?

Bob: Well, it seems to me that either our lives and the World are entirely absurd and meaningless, or else God lies behind them somewhere.[1]

Hal: Perhaps the World is entirely meaningless and absurd.

Bob: But I don't think you believe that. Look, I can put my thought into a little syllogism – call it 'The Argument from Absurdity'. It goes like this:

> If God does not exist then the World and human life are meaningless and absurd
>
> The World and human life are not meaningless and absurd
>
> Therefore it is not the case that God does not exist.

Now that is a logically valid argument: it does not *prove* its conclusion, but it does force certain choices on you.

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You must either deny the premises or accept the conclusion. You must either accept that God exists, or you must reject the second premise and accept that the world is meaningless and absurd, or you must reject the first premise and show how life and the world can be meaningful without God. But I don't think *that* can be done.

Hal: But why not? You're right that I don't think of my life as meaningless and yet I don't believe in God. Why should things be absurd without God?

Bob: Well it seems to me that without God we can make no sense of either facts or values – that God provides a kind of *ground* of Being and Value. He provides a kind of backstop to two kinds of regress which would otherwise be vicious regresses – one about the existence and one about the point.[2]

Hal: Go on.

Bob: OK, so what have we got without God? Well, when we explain why anything is or why anything happens we do so in terms of other things. For instance, we may explain the fire in terms of a spark, but if we don't know what caused the spark, we don't really understand how the fire started. Of course we can enquire as to the cause of the spark, perhaps it was faulty electrics. But why were the electrics faulty? And if we use scientific laws in our explanations, one law can sometimes be explained in terms of another – but the fundamental laws will always lack any explanation. Something will always remain unexplained. Unless the series comes to an end nothing is really explained. There could be no explanation of why the World as whole exists because everything we would appeal to in explanation would be a part of the World. And there could be no explanation of why the World is the way it is, because one relationship within the World could only be explained in terms of another and so there could be no explanation of why

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all the relationships are as they are. But that would leave a World which fundamentally defies understanding, a world which, as a whole, is just a brute and meaningless fact – an absurd World.

The second kind of regress seems to threaten when we ask after the point of anything. In explaining the point of anything we refer to something else. My life can have a point or purpose – e.g. in the influence of my work or in my children. But these things which give point to a life lie outside that life, and to give it point they must have some point themselves. This obviously threatens the same kind of regress as in the case of the explanation of things and events. Does this series of one thing having point in terms of another go on endlessly, in which case we never seem to reach the point of anything, or does it end in something pointless, which again seems to leave everything pointless. This implies the absurdity that we live pointless lives within a pointless World.

Hal: OK – So you want God to somehow be the terminus of these regresses. But if God exists then He will be a part of the Whole – and by your own argument, the Whole will lack any explanation or point.

Bob: But that was not my argument. My point was that if we are to make any real sense of the World then we must reject the assumption that explanation and point are confined to the World, and we must reject the assumption that nothing could be its own explanation or its own point. We must accept that something is its own explanation and point. And we must accept that these are one and the same, or there would be no point to creation. And that is just what scripture says of God: he is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end,[3] that is to say, the origin and the point of the World.

Hal: OK, I see what you're getting at: I can see that in a way it might be nice to have all the loose ends tied up

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like this, but I don't think its possible. I think it's implicit in our notion of explanation that they do just 'run out' and that this is not just an assumption which can be rejected as you suggest. So I accept that there can be no explanation for the World as a whole. And I don't see how it could have point as whole either. but that doesn't mean that we cannot find meaning or a point *within* the World.

Take explanation, explanation does not just come in *chains* as your argument implies; rather we have *systems* of consistent and mutually supportive explanations which provide a perspective in terms of which we can make sense of the world. And we do not just rest in our perspective; we try to develop it, making it more general, more well integrated and generally better able to predict the run of experience. Of course, as you say, the most fundamental laws of nature have no explanation, that's what makes them fundamental – and although what now seems fundamental may come to be explained, or even rejected, there will always be *some* fundamental laws. I don't see what more could be asked, or how there *could* be the kind of ultimate backstop to explanation which you seem to want.

Bob: But I don't see how you can just accept that there is no possible explanation of why there is anything at all, and no possible explanation of why things in the World are related as they appear to be related. How can you accept the World as just an unintelligible brute fact?

And your 'developing scientific perspective' is, from your point of view, unsupported in another way too. I mean it works by something like appeal to the best explanation, which involves an appeal to intellectual values, such as simplicity, consistency, economy, conservatism and such? But how do you know that the simplest or most economical explanation is going to be true? Now, from my perspective I can see the fact that for us beauty in a theory is a sign of truth about the World as explained by

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the fact that we and the World which we are trying to understand both reflect the mind of God.[4] But if you try to prove such values by reason you must employ the same kind of values in the reasoning you use, which would be circular. And so there is an element of faith in your appeal to reason. But a faith in reason is only a faith that things *make sense.* So if we are to have faith in things making sense, why not have faith that things make a more complete sense than you allow? From your perspective the fact that beauty is a sign of truth must remain a mystery.

Hal: But you're theological perspective is I suppose also based in reason and in intellectual values – which are no more or less unsupported in your hands than in mine.

Bob: But they fit more coherently into my perspective than into yours. Anyway, how do you explain values of any kind in your Godless and pointless World? How can there be a moral right or wrong?

Hal: Well it seems to me that values – and the idea of something having a point – are developed from the needs and interests of people – and to some extent those of other creatures. Which, by the way, means that *before* the development of life in the world there could be no values or purposes or point and so life itself and the World in which it arises could have no point or purpose. But with life comes interests and I think that it is out of those interests that we develop our values. We reason about what is the best way to live and the best way to live together, and through a process of criticism we develop a moral perspective – again one open to revision and improvement.

And although I can't see how life could have a point, I think there can be point *within* a life. I do not see that something's having point always depends on its having some further point, or being part of some wider

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meaningful context – as if my life could have no meaning unless it were a part of some eternal cosmic drama! Perhaps the point of life partly implodes into its pointless moments – moments without any further point – like the pleasure of company, the joy of sex, the thrill of discovery, or in moments of contemplation – as expressed in Wordsworth's *Daffodils.* And aren't there some objectives which have a point in themselves? Does the point of comforting a distressed child, or of finding a proof of Goldbach's Conjecture depend on their having some further point, let alone on there being some *ultimate* point? I feel that its the demand for such an ultimate point and explanation which is absurd.

Bob: I think Wordsworth is a bad choice to support your case! Its clear that Wordsworth saw the beauty of the natural world as a window into some deeper meaning. For instance, in his *Tintern Abbey* he writes of seeing in such things 'a sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused', and of a spirit that 'rolls through all things'.

But looking at your other points: Your argument that there could be no point to life as such just assumes that there is no God. But after all some scientists have pointed out how the universe appears to be 'fine tuned' for life, and I see that as confirmation that the universe is the Creation of God and that the development of life is a part of the overall point of the World. Even if science could explain the 'fine tuning' in terms of deeper scientific laws, that would explain, but not *deny*, the 'fine tuning' and a question would remain of why the underlying laws are as they are, and why they are so favourable to the development of life.

Hal: But your saying that a scientific explanation wouldn't 'explain away' such fine tuning implies that what you are after is an explanation in terms of point or purpose. But there would be *no room* for such an

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explanation unless you already think of the World as a *creation.*

Bob: Well, I do think of it as a creation.

But to turn to another of your points about value: You talk of developing a moral perspective, but by your own account this is just woven out of subjectivities, out of what we each happen to feel is in our interests, either our own interests or our view of the interests of others. I feel that without some point to the World itself this kind of subjectivity and relativity is inescapable. Without God there is really ground for moral values, because without God there is really no point to anything – nothing *matters.*

Hal: But what else is morality but the result of human efforts to think out how best to live and how best to live together? How would God help here?

If you're going to say that God's commands are the source of the moral law then there is the well known objection that either God gives commands because He sees that they are right – which means they are right apart from what He commands, or what is right is just right because God commands it – in which case God cannot be good and there is no justification of God's commands and only prudential reasons for us to obey.

Bob: Perhaps it doesn't work like that – I mean perhaps its not what God commands which is the source of value but God Himself. If God is the point of the World – we might say that God is The Good, not quite in a Platonic sense, but as a Perfect Being – then what leads to God is what is good, and vice versa. This means that in the sense in which what *we* do is good – in that it leads to God – in *that* sense God is not good. God does not lead to God: He is God.

My faith in God is, in part, a faith that the World makes sense – but more specifically it is the faith that the World

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makes sense through the *goodness* of God, the faith that the goodness of God is the point and cause of the world. Perhaps we can see a part of this good as the love of God for Creation and of Creation, via its sentient creatures, for God.

Hal: OK. So you feel that that the World would lack sense without the goodness of God, without the ultimate explanation and point which God would provide. But what reason could there possibly be for believing that there is such a God?

Bob: I suppose I might appeal to the so called 'Ontological Argument' – the argument that God's existence is entailed by His nature. For example it could be argued that God is a perfect being and therefore must have perfect existence. But such arguments seem question begging. I prefer to think that in some way God's nature must explain His existence, but that since we cannot grasp His nature, we can't form any argument along those lines.

Hal: But if we can't understand God's nature then how can He provide any kind of explanation?

Bob: But faith in God is not like belief in some scientific theory. Faith in God does not always *provide* explanations, rather it is the faith that there *are* explanations. To believe in God is to believe that the World makes sense – but it is not to believe that *we humans* can make sense of the World by using God as a kind of *hypothesis.* I see faith in God as, *in part*, no more than the faith that underlies *all* human enquiry – the faith that things *do* make sense. But that doesn't mean that my belief in God allows me to make sense of everything – it leaves many things still deeply puzzling.[5]

Hal: What I find it deeply puzzling is how anyone can believe in such a God. You begin by showing, in effect, how the concepts of explanation and point imply that there can be no final explanation or point. But you then

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go back on that and say that that can't be how it really is, so there must be something that makes it otherwise – i.e. God. Hoping that there is a God that will give the World the kind of deep sense you want is like hoping there is someone who can give you a four-sided triangle.

Bob: But I don't think that you've really *shown* that my idea that the World and our lives make sense through God is incoherent, in fact I think that my perspective is *more* coherent in that it affords some explanation of why we are able to comprehend Creation and find value in it.

Hal: I still think that we can make some sort of sense of the World without God and that the kind of *complete* sense you want God to make of it is incoherent. Nothing could give the World that kind of sense.

Bob: But I still feel that your 'some sort of sense' is no sort of sense, and that it is impossible to live without the faith that things really do make sense – as I believe they do, through God.

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Notes

[1] Borrowed from a similar remark attributed to Gerald Priestland, the late BBC religious affairs correspondent, in the *Priestland Memorial Lecture* broadcast 17.10.93.

[2] Bob's arguments along these lines resemble some of the 'Five Ways' of St Thomas Aquinas. And his view of the ontological argument (given later) is also like that of Aquinas.

[3] *Revelations* 1:8

[4] An idea proposed by John Polkinghorne (1991) *Reason and Reality* London, SPCK (Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge) – where he also gives arguments for 'fine tuning' as evidence of creation.

[5] Here I would like to thank my friend, John Sanders, who read an earlier draft and commented that his faith left him with many questions.

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