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Is It More Reasonable for a Critical Rationalist to Be non-Religious?*

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that it is not reasonable for a critical rationalist to be a religious believer in the Abrahamic tradition. The argument is distinctive, in that it takes seriously the critical rationalist view that we should abandon 'justificationist' argument. What this means, is that the structure of argument then becomes a matter of offering theories as resolutions of problems, and then judging how they fare in the face of ongoing critical appraisal. The paper surveys issues in several areas, including God and what is good; homosexuality; mysticism; and messianic ideas. It argues that, unless the believer engages in intellectual retreat (something that is unacceptable for the critical rationalist), the problem-situation facing the believer appears to be so daunting that it would be unreasonable for them to hope that they can overcome it.

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* This paper was written in the form of a debate with Professor Paya.

Part I: My initial statement

1. Introduction

Let me start by explaining what I will be arguing. In my view, a critical rationalist – an approach which Professor Paya and I share, and which I will shortly explain – can perfectly reasonably be religious. Professor Paya is, himself, a critical rationalist, is religious, and is a perfectly reasonable man. But I am going to argue that it is more reasonable to be non-religious. Why? Essentially, because the intellectual problems facing people in the Abrahamic tradition who are religious seem to me daunting:[1] I will argue that it is not reasonable to think that they can be overcome

2. Critical Rationalism

Critical rationalism[2] is a view which sees us as aiming at truth, but sees all our views as fallible. It downplays the significance of personal feelings of certainty: they may matter to us, but they don't tell us what is true. Rather, we need to learn from others: from their criticisms, and from tests which both we and they agree are telling ways of evaluating our views. While getting impressive empirical confirmations of our ideas may encourage us, as we learn from the history of science, such success does not allow us to validly conclude that we have reached the truth.

Critical rationalism also suggests that we should evaluate intellectual positions in the light of how they fare in debate over time.[3] Clearly, if a particular view has not done too well – in a sense which I will explain – that does not mean that aspects of it may not, in fact, be correct. Someone who favoured such a view might find a way in which they can respond, creatively, to the problems that have been discovered about their viewpoint so far. But an objective evaluation of their situation might conclude that the prospects of their doing so are daunting. It is in this sense that a proponent taking up the heroic task of defending such a tradition might be judged unreasonable, in the sense that he would be taking on a task his prospects of success in which, look poor. One might, perhaps, suggest that there is a parallel here to my saying that, for my 75th birthday. I wish to climb Mount Everest. There are obvious problems about this: I am not a mountaineer; I am fat and unfit, and so on. It is not impossible that I could climb Everest, but it seems unreasonable to think that I would be successful! It is not a reasonable aim.

As I have indicated, a critical rationalist approach in my view involves an attempt to sum up – and to get agreement about – what the character of the debate about issues has amounted to, up to the present point. This is not something that any one scholar can expect to achieve in any field, on their

[1] I am concerned, here, with the Abrahamic tradition because it is shared background between Dr Paya and myself, and because I have an academic interest in it.

[2] I need hardly stress here that what could be said at the start of a short presentation is very limited in its scope. For a fuller discussion which brings out my own view of what might be made of this approach, see my 'The Logic of Scientific Discovery', in J. Shand (ed.), *Central Works of Philosophy: Volume 4: The Twentieth Century: Moore to Popper*, Chesham, Bucks: Acumen, January 2006: 262-86, and the ideas that I set out in my two sets of Zoom-based lectures on Popper and Critical Rationalism.

[3] See, for an argument to this effect, Lecture 1 in Series 2 of my talks, where I develop this point with reference to Lakatos and Whewell, and suggest that it should – seen as part of a realist approach to metaphysics – be added explicitly to what one finds in Popper's own writings.

own. Let alone someone who – as I do here – attempts to address the Abrahamic tradition, as a whole.[1] I am acutely aware that, I am not a specialist in any aspect of any of the traditions involved. And as a non-Muslim writing for what may well be a predominantly Muslim audience, I may make terrible mistakes.[2] But I am all too aware of my fallibility, and would commend that we here follow Voltaire's advice, and forgive each other our follies.[3]

I believe that the path to truth lies through advancing views which we think may be correct, and then getting criticism from other people. Above all, the critical rationalist aims at truth. He or she thinks that their attempts to reach it are fallible, and that we depend, crucially, on learning from critical input from other people who have views different from our own. I thus hope that my errors be corrected and forgiven.[4]

The best that we can hope for, is that our empirical claims can withstand criticism and testing so far. Our non-empirical claims should be opened up to criticism, by way of indicating clearly what problems they are attempting to resolve,[5] opening them up to serious criticism, and trying to show that they have withstood criticism so far. In each case, it is crucial to pay attention to how the debate has gone, so that we don't respond to difficulties by way of unacknowledged intellectual retreat

Outside of mathematics and logic, it is simply a mistake to think that we should be after 'proofs.[6] (And even there, these are fallible[7].) Rather, our aim should be to try to argue that the ideas which we are advancing are cogent, are to be preferred to alternatives, and have so far been able to withstand serious criticism.

[1] I have here, deliberately, not gone into differences between the different traditions. It is worth noting that, intellectually, there are lots of overlaps and cross-fertilization, although Christianity has tended to put particular weight on matters of doctrine rather than practise.

[2] I should also apologise for any disrespect, which is not intended as such. But there is a risk that the impression of disrespect may be conveyed by the fact that I am writing in Western academic style, and also – in making a case against religious belief - I am of necessity raising issues that in themselves believers may feel are inappropriate.

[3] See Voltaire, 'Toleration', in *A Pocket Philosophical Dictionary,* tr. John Fletcher, New York, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 242.

[4] But not forgotten, as keeping them in mind is, in my view, something that plays a key role in how we should try to evaluate what is offered to replace them.

[5] Cf., on this, Popper's 'The Problem of the Irrefutability of Philosophical Theories' in his *Conjectures and Refutations,* London: Routledge, 1963.

[6] What I have in mind here, is the large literature on 'proofs of the existence of God', which seems to me fundamentally mistaken. This is not to say that the literature does not contain important arguments. But putting things, in this context, in terms of 'proofs' seems to me to misrepresent what we should be arguing about.

[7] I am far from being a specialist in this field, but it has seemed to me that issues raised by Imre Lakatos in his *Proofs and Refutations,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976 and in the papers collected in the first part of his *Mathematics, science and epistemology,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, need to be taken into account more widely. See also, for a lot of interesting information about how Lakatos's work relates to a broader Hungarian tradition in the philosophy of mathematics, G. Kampis et al (eds) Appraising Lakatos, Dordrecht etc: Kluwer, 2002, for a lot of interesting information about how Lakatos's work relates to a broader Hungarian tradition in the philosophy of mathematics.

2. Problems: I will speak only about six out of many possible issues

Let me turn to the substance of this debate. I will raise some problems for the theist.

2.1 God and What is good

My first problem concerns the relationship between God and what is good. We tend to think that there is more to what is good and bad than just our personal tastes, or what our particular society happens to favour, or behaviour which happens to have been to the advantage of our species in its development.[1] But there is, I think, a problem facing all of us, as to how the gravity and significance that we wish to give to ethics, fits into what we know about the world. A theistic view might offer some reassurance that objective values are real: that they are part of the fabric of the world.[2] But theistic views typically do not tell us *how* values fit into the world (i.e. they do not help with this problem that faces all moral objectivists). Theistic views face problems of their own: E.g. Just what is the relationship between God and what is good? The issue here is:[3] how do you steer a course between making God subservient to objectively existing values, and making values simply what God has decided – a bit like an arbitrary ruler might decide what the law is?

2.2 The Goodness of God

We take God, in the Abrahamic tradition, to be all-powerful, all-knowing and also good. There is a huge literature on how this relates to the problem of human and other suffering. Clearly, if the world is given a particular character, and people can act freely within it, this may produce difficult consequences, but these are not ones the existence of which poses particular philosophical problems about evil.[4]

What seem more of a problem are what one might say look like design faults – and ones which, over time, humans might be able to remedy. Consider, here, the terrible problems of cancer[5] and of Alzheimer's disease, which we may hope, over time, to address (as well as many less dramatic problems). That they can in principle be addressed indicates that things don't *have* to be like this; but why, then, if God is both all-powerful and good, are they there? It seems to me woefully insufficient, to say: well, people need something to stimulate them; or problems to work on – just because of the difficulty of the problems, and the countless generations of suffering that will take

[1] See David McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, Blackwell, 1991, for an interesting defence of moral realism.

[2] But this reassurance is, of course, no stronger than is the case for theism!

[3] This is, obviously, a kind of modern restatement of the Euthyphro argument. See, for slightly fuller discussion, my 'A Non-Religious Approach to Morality', *Viewpoint: Perspectives on Public Policy*, Issue 2, February-May 2010, pp. 29-33 and 47.

[4] C. S. Lewis's *The Problem of Pain*, London: Bles, 1940, and *Miracles*, London: Bles, 1942, are well worth reading. One issue about the former, however, is that the Christian idea of the Fall of Man seems to have been an invention of St Paul's, rather than something that was found in that form in the Jewish tradition. On my understanding, it is not found in Islam, either. It is worth bearing in mind that it could be objected that not only is it morally problematic to blame people for things which are outwith their control (i.e. if 'ought implies can', then if we are fallen, it is not clear how we can be held culpable for the consequences of this), while the idea of the Fall also affecting the cosmos – and being responsible for imperfections in it, as we experience it – seems to suggest that the 'argument from design' then becomes problematic.

[5] Which, of course, seems to be a single term referring to a variety of conditions.

place until they are resolved. If issues of this kind were within the power of any good parent to address in respect of their children, they would surely do so immediately, not say: the children might be able to deal with them when they grow up.[1]

The problem for the theist, here, looks to me to be that if God is both good and all-powerful, why did he leave us facing various horrors? For the particular kinds of problems to which I have referred could on the face of it have been addressed *without* upsetting the fundamental order of things, or undermining our autonomy (as, after all, our own limited medical discoveries make clear, where we have been able to develop remedies).[2]

There might, of course, be some deep reason for all this. But as far as I can see, if this does exist, God in the Abrahamic tradition had not explained what it is – and this would seem to me to be another fault. After all, if humans have been able to understand – albeit imperfectly – deep issues about the structure of the world, why no indications as to why we are expected to live with what seem to be obvious design faults in creation?

2.3 Homosexuality[3]

On my understanding, this, on traditional views in the Abrahamic tradition, is condemned in dramatic terms. Some liberal Christians have tried to get round this; but those, it seems to me, with more intellectual integrity,[4] say that people who are sexually attracted to members of their own sex, have no option but to be celibate, and to ask for support and fellowship from their co-religionists in trying to cope.[5] The problem, as far as I can see, for the theist is that homosexual orientation seems to be either innate, or to be an involuntary product of certain social circumstances.

People who are homosexually orientated feel just the same way about some members of their own sex, as the rest of us do towards some members of the opposite sex. To the conservative-minded, one might say: one is not, here, dealing as one might with something that is a gratuitous indulgence in something perverse. Rather, it is something that plays a key role in people's orientation to others – and which could be the vehicle for deep love, affection and relationships that last over time, in the same kind of way as do those between heterosexual couples.

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[1] It is, here, perhaps worth reminding the Christian that Matthew 10:29-31 says: 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

[2] I.e., to spell this out, the issues that I am raising are ones which take into account the kinds of arguments that Lewis, and other theists, have offered.

[3] My discussion, here, just because I am involved in a debate with a friend who champions conservative moral views about these matters, will be concerned just with that strand of the argument about homosexuality.

[4] The basis of my concern about liberal religious views will be made clearer later in the discussion. It is not their liberalism with which I am in disagreement so much as that their views seem to me in danger of amounting to degenerative problem shifts within the traditions that they represent.

[5] Two useful books here, written by conservative evangelical Christians who are themselves attracted to members of their own sex, are Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem*, Nottingham; IVP 2015 and especially Greg Johnson, *Still time to care*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021.

The British – now American – writer Andrew Sullivan has offered a powerful, and basically conservative, argument for gay marriage.[1] He argues that it is better for all involved, if homosexuals can be in stable loving relationships which are socially recognised and re-enforced. The problem, here, with the Abrahamic tradition, is that we are offered a picture of an all-knowing God simply condemning people for orientations which, whether genetic or a social product, seem involuntary at the level of the individual, and cutting them off from some of the deepest aspects of human life.

2.4 Mysticism

Next, I'd like to say something brief about mysticism. I think that mystical experience is real, in the sense that similar phenomena have been described by many different individuals, and across different traditions. However, the problem about those in the Abrahamic faith invoking this in support of their views seems to me to be that what people experience is strongly influenced by the religious traditions in which they are operating. (It is striking that followers of Theosophy reported experiences of encounters with 'spiritual masters' whom the founder of Theosophy, Mrs Helena Blavatsky, turns out to have invented!) However, there is a lot reported by mystics within the Abrahamic traditions which seems more Pantheistic than should make those in these traditions feel happy. In addition, there are obviously Pantheistic reports from Hindus and Buddhists. In addition, many experiences which seem to fit pantheistic ideas, have been reported by people who are completely secular, but who have experimented with certain hallucinogenic drugs.[2]

All that I would want to argue, here, is that it seems to me that if someone wishes to claim mystical experience in support of their specific religious views, they need to offer us a cogent theory about the character of *all t*hese reports and their relation to reality, rather than just picking experiences that support their own favoured views and ignoring the rest. This I would take to be a standard application of a critical rationalist approach to empirical support, to these phenomena.

2.5 Messiahs and the End of the World

I can discuss this issue here only briefly. But that it seems to me that *all* speculation about Messiahs, and ideas about the immanent end of the world within the Abrahamic tradition, should be treated as an embarrassment, and dropped.[3] There has been a history of almost endless such speculations, all of which have been wrong. They have disturbed people, and led them to do silly things. It is also interesting that those who wish to advance new such speculations, typically don't concern themselves with the pre-history of such ideas, explain what went wrong in the past, and explain why their ideas are better. And – in my view – they have distracted people from the important task

[1] See Andrew Sullivan, *Virtually Normal*, New York: Knopf, 1995. See also Andrew Sullivan (ed.) *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro and Con*, New York: Vintage, 1997, and Robert M. Baird and Stuart E. Rosenbaum (eds), *Same-Sex Marriage: The Moral and Legal Debate*, New York: Prometheus, 1997. Clearly, however, what is argued for here – e.g., by Sullivan – is something that he thinks it important should be available to gay people, rather than something that if it were available, would necessarily be expected to be the norm.

[2] This might, indeed, be apt to lead the non-theist (and non-pantheist!) to suggest that mystical experiences of this kind are, in fact, reports by individuals of their experiences when their brains are being disturbed in certain distinctive ways.

[3] I have an unpublished paper which discusses this in relation to conservative Protestant Christianity.

of developing institutions and ethical codes which make for good behaviour in our changing concrete circumstances.[1]

2.6 Theism and our Knowledge of the World

Finally, there is the problem of Abrahamic theism and our developing knowledge about the world. If the world is God's product, as the Abrahamic tradition tells us, then on the face of it, our revealed knowledge of this should surely offer us a programme for how it should be understood: a key to how the world actually is. But in the Christian Middle Ages, and on my understanding, in Islam, it was basically to classical Greek philosophy – Platonic, NeoPlatonic and Aristotelian - that religious people went for leads (i.e., not to their own religious ideas). While subsequent to the scientific revolution, huge – but fallible – strides have been made, making use of ideas which have no obvious link with the Abrahamic tradition, at all.[2]

If I am right that these are problems that have to be taken seriously, then scholars attracted to the Abrahamic tradition might try to respond to these issues: the options are open. But two tendencies, here, seem to me to be terrible.

The first is what I might call the ad hoc re-interpretation of one's tradition, in the face of failure,[3] so as to claim that things which were initially understood literally, are, in fact, just to be understood as poetry or some kind of symbolism. Clearly, there is poetry and symbolism in all the Abrahamic traditions. And material may be open to many different levels of understanding. What, it seems to me, is problematic, is to retreat from what seem to be empirical, historical or metaphysical claims, simply in the face of the fact that they don't seem to be correct. It puts one on a par with a fortune teller, who simply dismisses all forecasts that they made which were wrong, as not really having been proper forecasts at all!

An alternative, is, also, to simply seek for parallels between odd aspects of contemporary science, and what is to be found in the Qur'an, or the Bible. This is typically done in an arbitrary manner. Alternatively, one might have what, in principle, is a serious agenda, like that of the proponents of 'intelligent design', in taking issue with Darwinian approaches in biology. The problem, here, is that in my view they don't take seriously what they would actually have to accomplish, to produce a genuine alternative to what they are criticizing. All told, here, my argument is for intellectual adventure: that the proponents of theism should say something

[1] I might add that what was clearly the expectation of a dramatic change in the world, which it would seem that Jesus expected in the very near future, seems to me to make totally futile those who wish to embrace the ethics of Jesus, while rejecting Christian theology. What one is to make of Christian theology, and the tenability of the kinds of views set out in the Church's early creeds, is an interesting matter (see, for a lively account of some of the issues, Geza Vermes, *Christian Beginnings*, London: Allen Lane, 2012). But on the face of it, a lot of Jesus's ethical injunctions would seem to make sense only if it could be expected that the Kingdom of God would arrive shortly, and disrupt day-to-day life.

[2] One issue, here, relates to objective indeterminism – and, for example, the kind of propensity theory that Popper has embraced.

[3] Obviously, it would be a matter of historical argument as to whether this was, in fact, what was taking place.

interesting, which challenges current secular ideas, if they are to expect anyone to take them seriously.[1]

Instead, my worry is that we will get more and more of what one has experienced within 'liberal' Christianity. I.e., a steady intellectual retreat from a religious approach which once made serious claims to knowledge about the world, about history, about theology and ethics, to a systematic shedding of any interesting claims about anything: a retreat into moral platitudes and into an echoing of the changing secular wisdom of the day. In contrast to this 'conservative' Christians simply fail to engage seriously with the intellectual challenges that have been offered of their views.[2]

The key issues facing the religious believer who is interested in intellectual issues look to me to be, first, to say something interesting to an increasingly secular world: to tell us what, in their view, things are actually like and then to explain how these claims of theirs are to be assessed. Second, to review the debates that have taken place over history, to see whether the traditions of which they are a part have been in intellectual retreat. And, third, to set out in the light of those debates what the problem-situation is that they face, and how they think that it should be addressed.

In my view, it is in the face of the sheer challenges of this that while the individual courage of religious scholars might be admirable, I think that their hope that they can meet this challenge is not a reasonable one. I thus think that there are real problems to be addressed. As, indeed, there are facing non-theists – who, in my view, tend also to duck them.[3] It seems to me that on neither side can we expect that there will be knock-down answers. But – and this is why I take the view for which I have argued here – it seems to me that the problems facing the believer are particularly daunting. I can wish a believer who sets out to tackle them all the best. But the task before them looks to me so daunting that I don't think that their hope of overcoming it is a reasonable one.

Accordingly, while I think that a clever and able man such as Professor Paya can be both a critical rationalist and a religious believer, I don't think that it is *reasonable* for him to take this view, just because the problems facing him in dealing with such matters look so difficult that it is unreasonable to judge, in the current circumstances, that they can be overcome. His prospects look to me about on a par with my hopes of successfully climbing Mount Everest on my seventy fifth birthday!

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[1] See, on this, my 'Why the "Hopeless War": Approaching Intelligent Design', *Sophia*, 49, Issue 4 (2010), pp. 475ff. See also my 'Steve Fuller and Intelligent Design', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, September 2010, 40, pp. 433-45.

[2] This is not the place for an extensive discussion. But those who rest on a conservative and relatively literalist understanding of the Bible, might, for basic information, usefully look at John Barton's *A History of the Bible*, London: Allen Lane, 2019, and James Barr's *Escaping from Fundamentalism*, London: SCM, 1984. Catholics might look at Geza Vermes's reports on Church pronouncements about research on the Bible, as reported in his *Providential Accidents*, London, SCM Press, 1998.

[3] An obvious issue seems to me to be how we make sense of the kinds of accountability for – and thus responsibility for – our actions, that we regularly assume in our day-to-day lives, and what is to be made of the status of ethical claims. It is, I think, worth noting that most religious believers in the Abrahamic tradition will also be faced with the task of making sense of these, same, problems.

Part II: Response to Professor Paya

1. Introduction

I'd like to thank my friend Professor Paya very much for his interesting response to my opening statement. As both of us have noted, the issues with which we have been dealing have been widely debated, over many, many years. Accordingly, each of us is just touching the surface of the issues with which we are dealing. Further, from a critical rationalist perspective, a proper evaluation would involve reconstructing how the debate has gone, over history, and making our cases in the light of the problem-situation as we could agree that it should now be understood. This would be a mammoth task that could only be undertaken by teams of scholars. But let me, nonetheless, offer a brief response to what he had to say.

2. Evil, Pain and God

Here, I am afraid that I don't agree with how Professor Paya has tackled the problem. I wrote as I did with an eye to work which has been undertaken by some able Christian apologists – such as C. S. Lewis.[1] The issue which I highlighted takes for granted that there will be some unfortunate things that happen, simply as a consequence of the combination of human freedom, of the world having a certain structure, and God not intervening to protect us from the consequences of particular human actions. Rather, I raised the problem in terms of what I referred to as 'design faults'.

I had in mind things that cause terrible pain and destruction of the human personality – including, indeed, its capacities for worship, which don't seem to be products of deliberate human action. Further, they look as if they can be remedied (if one had the relevant knowledge and capacities) without this giving rise to systematic problems for the structure of the world. I referred to two fairly obvious examples: Alzheimer's Disease, and many kinds of cancer, just on the grounds that they are the kind of thing for which one can imagine humans, in due course, being able to design remedies, without this upsetting the structure of the world. However, there are many more, both serious and more trivial.

My claim, here, was that if God is claimed to be

(i) all-powerful;
(ii) all-knowing, and
(iii) benevolent

It is simply not clear how one can avoid the kinds of things that I highlighted as constituting counter-examples to his existence (if these descriptions of him are correct[2]).

[1] See, for example, his *Miracles*, and *The Problem of Pain*.

[2] I know of some Christians who, in the face of this, have suggested that, perhaps, God's powers in respect of the material world are limited. But this seems to me a huge retreat from what, historically, was claimed for God.

3. Homosexuality

I think that to address this issue in terms of 'non-conventional lifestyles' (as Professor Paya did) is totally inadequate. The problem is constituted by people who find that they have exclusively same-sex attraction.[1] We are dealing here with issues which – whether there are genetic or developmental reasons behind them – are experienced by the individuals concerned as simply given. There have been elaborate efforts – both psychological and religious – to effect 'cures', but they are reported as having been unsuccessful. And this by people who would have the strongest personal and religious motivations to hope that they should be effective.[2]

We are given what are taken to be religious revelations, that such people should remain celibate (along with ideas about people being put to death for acting on the basis of such dispositions). Such ideas seem to be standard within all parts of the Abrahamic tradition as traditionally interpreted, but they seem to me to be terrible. I.e., given that it is known to God that, for one reason or another, people will be like this, to condemn such people not just to celibacy, but not to be able to enjoy the kinds of relationships that mean so much for our development as people – with their combination of love, sexual fulfilment and friendship – is dreadful. What is needed, is, surely, recognition of what people are actually like, and the encouragement of the development of institutions which, given that, will enable them to live the best kinds of lives. It was in this context that Sullivan argued the case for gay marriage.

4. Mysticism

First, I think that Professor Paya over-rates the role of individual experience in his account of critical rationalism. Our experiences doubtless matter a lot to us. But that I have a vivid experience of a particular kind is not, in itself, an indication that if I describe what I have experienced, the claim that I make will be correct.[3] Rather, for the critical rationalist, our claims need to be inter-subjectively appraised, and our favoured theories assessed in relation to other competing theories. As I indicated in my initial statement, I think that, here, one needs to undertake a comparison with both experiences and theories from *other* religious traditions, and with the ideas of those who claim that what is taking place has, in fact, *no* religious significance at all. Talking just about our own tradition is not good enough.

5. What can we hope for?

I would be inclined to say that this life is all that we have. If there is some kind of an afterlife, the picture of it which was held in Classical Greece (and also among the Jews, before ideas about life after death came in) looks plausible (if not attractive). I.e., that we end up in something like a

[1] I need hardly say that there are many other possibilities. My concern, here, is with someone who is, say, a conservative (or observant) believer in one of the faiths in the Abrahamic tradition, but discovers themselves to have exclusively same-sex attraction.

[2] See on this Greg Johnson, *Still time to care.*

[3] See, on this, Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery*, London: Hutchinson, 1959, section 29.

celestial retirement home, in which the process of physical and mental crumbling continues, until there is nothing left of us.

I cannot make any sense of the idea of personal survival. We are people of our own times and have specific backgrounds. Our personalities and concerns are, very much, tied to this. Personal relationships are important to us. But they, equally, are tied to specific times and circumstances. The Catholic writer Ronald Knox reported[1] that Catholic theologians have speculated that, in the afterlife, we would all be 33 years old. We might, individually, then be at our best (but hardly our wisest). But how, then, could we relate to our parents or, if we have them, our children, if everyone is the same age?

Should the prospect of extinction in the very near future (e.g., by a comet) have any implications, in terms of our moral behaviour? I would think, not much. Clearly, there may be some utilitarian concerns which would no longer matter if we could be sure that the world would end very soon.[2] But issues about respecting other people and other creatures, and behaving with integrity, would in my view matter to the end. Moral behaviour of this kind, it seems to me, is something that should be undertaken for its own sake. And I don't see that the impending end of my life, or that of other people, should make the slightest difference to how we should behave.

Part III: Concluding reflections

1. Is belief in God a Consolation?

In his second response to me, Professor Paya raises three issues

1. Is a belief in a merciful, all-knowing, all-powerful God a consolation?

To this, my response is twofold.

(a) The key issue, here, would seem to me to be: are the claims made by those in the different branches of the Abrahamic tradition *true*?[3]

I have, in my contributions to this discussion, argued that while such claims might be true, it would seem to me unreasonable, in the face of the kinds of problems that I have raised, to think a telling case has been made that they are. I would add: to believe in things just because one thinks that if they were true, it would be nice, is what one would expect from the feeble-minded, but obviously not from someone of the calibre of Professor Paya. One should, surely, require that it is reasonable to hope that one's views could be true, or close to the truth. And in my view, in the face of the sorts of problems to which I have referred, the case against them being reasonable looks to me a tough one to meet.

(b) Second, is what is offered by the Abrahamic tradition something that, if it were true, should actually offer anyone consolation? In my view, the answer is: no. I have already argued that the

[1] In his *The Creed in Slow Motion*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1949.

[2] E.g., I would not, in that setting, be constrained any longer by, say, the consequences of emitting CO_2 for the Earth's climate.

[3] It is worth noting that there are important incompatibilities between Christianity and Islam, which I will not discuss here, other than to remark that on my understanding while Jews traditionally took the view that if non-Jews obeyed the Noahide laws they would be OK, both Christians and Muslims took a dim view of the prospects of those who did not join them.

picture of a God who is all-powerful, omniscient and benign seems less than telling. Think, again, of the issues of terrible but avoidable disease, and the situation of homosexuals. If we were actually in the power of a being who considered what the Abrahamic tradition believes about such things to be good, I would consider it very, very bad news for us, not a consolation!

That being said, I have great respect for observant religious people in the Abrahamic traditions, and their moral behaviour. Their devotion to observance – including charity – and a disciplined moral life seems to me admirable. (This is, despite the fact that I have reservations about aspects of what is required as religious practise, concerning all three Abrahamic traditions.[1]) I have great respect these people's maintenance of the decencies of conservative moral practises in the face of the challenges of the modern world. I would be happy to live among them, and I would be happy to count them – if they would be willing - as my friends.

2. The Richness of the Religious Life

In my view, some of the greatest works of art and literature have indeed been religious in their inspiration. Mystical and other religious experiences mean a great deal to those who have had them.[2]

I, personally, think that some of the greatest works of music, are those from the Christian religious tradition. If I were asked to take recordings with me to a desert island – after the fashion of a popular BBC radio programme 'Desert Island Discs' – I would certainly include religious music, not least Verdi's *Requiem* (his dramatic orchestral and choral treatment of the old-style Catholic Mass for the dead).

To appreciate properly such a work, in my view requires, *inter alia*, that one understand the theology involved in it.[3] However, I can well believe that, for a devout Catholic, Verdi's *Requiem* might have an aesthetic power that it could never have for me. But we can, after all, come to an understand something of what is involved, if one learns about other religious traditions, and, particularly, has the guidance of those who are involved in those traditions, to understand what

[1] There are aspects to both Jewish and Muslim requirements of ritual observance which seem ethically pointless. I have indicated that the Abrahamic tradition's treatment of homosexuality seems to me gravely defective; more generally, it is not clear that there should be any particular restrictions on sexual behaviour, unless there are other moral reasons for them. While Christian ideas about getting rid of specific moral codes in favour of 'love' seem to me idiotic, because it is totally unclear what this amounts to.

[2] It turned out, from some remarks that Professor Paya made in the unstructured part of the discussion, that I had misunderstood the thrust of his concerns here, and that his particular concern was with the religious experience of a work of art for a believer. My concern with this, however, is as to whether, in his view, this would just apply to Muslims, in respect of Muslim works of art, and whether this itself rests on the idea that Islam is, itself, correct. I.e., consider a Roman Catholic's religious experience when hearing Verdi's *Requiem*. Is this included in what Professor Paya had in mind – considering that, for him as a Muslim, Catholicism is in many ways substantially false? Or is all that is required that someone **believe** that the religious views which inform a work of art are correct?

[3] It is worth noting that it is not clear that Verdi himself was a religious man. The power of his work relates, in my view, to his making use of a rich religious tradition, rather than being related to his personal religious faith. (Compare, on this, Popper's anti-expressionism in his writings on aesthetics, and also E. M. W. Tillyard and C. S. Lewis, *The Personal Heresy*, London: Oxford University Press, 1939.)

might be meant by things which feature within them. Muslims, if their understanding of Islam allowed them to learn about and listen to Verdi's *Requiem*, would, I believe, also find it superb.[1]

Clearly, these aesthetic benefits are extras that someone who is a believer for other reasons may also get to enjoy. I think that we should all be taught what different religious views amount to, not least so that we can appreciate these cultural objects. Theology also seems to me really important,[2] and those who I believe incorrectly represent religion as being just about moral teachings, seem to me, in addition to being factually wrong, also to risk diminishing our understanding and appreciation of important religious works!

Indeed, a friend of mine who is a Methodist minister (a Protestant Christian) is now so theologically liberal that he thinks that the real content of Christianity amounts to: 'we should be kind to one another'.

As ethical sentiment, I think that this is admirable. As theology, it seems to me hopeless. And it is worth noting that, if it was what people are taught that Christianity amounts to, they would have no more of an understanding of the religious significance of Verdi's *Requiem,* than would an avowed atheist. I also wonder whether one can expect anything of aesthetic interest to come out of liberal religion.[3] It should be said, however, a lot of material that has been produced by people who are of orthodox Christian belief, is aesthetically terrible.[4]

3. Justice and Life After Death

(a) Morality seems to me to be something that should be practised for its own sake.[5] Indeed, any notion of reward or, indeed, of praise, seems to me inappropriate – other than for children, as part of their moral education. In my view, we need on-going appraisal from, and discussion with, others, to determine what is the right thing to do. But praise, reward and so on, for an adult, when they do what is right, seems to me demeaning. We do, however, need ongoing discussion about what good conduct amounts to, in changing social conditions. There also seems to me a need for discussion about issues concerning what else should be expected of everyone, and about supererogation[6] – and its proper limits.

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[1] I would also commend the very different 'Im Hashem Lo Yivneh Bayis' by the Shira Choir; a striking setting of material from the Psalms by a Hassidic Jewish choir: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckVYO9oI8vc

[2] And also, a knowledge of what different things mean in the practise of religious life within different traditions. Compare, on this, Neal Robinson's *Discovering the Qur'an*, second edition, London: SCM, 2003.

[3] It would seem to me a bit like trying to put the (British) *Guardian* – a newspaper of unremittingly liberal views, in the U.S. sense – to music.

[4] Consider, here, the grotesque plaster statues of saints that used to adorn Catholic Churches, to some of the aesthetically grimmer hymns and 'choruses' in non-conformist Christianity.

[5] I should also stress that I would see correct moral judgement as something that requires inter-subjective appraisal. In addition, I am not advocating some form of virtue ethics in which the object of moral action is, in some sense, one's self. Rather I'd take a key element of ethics to be the issue of moral patients and what one owes to them.

[6] I should make it clear that this is not in the Catholic sense of accumulation of a store of good which can, then, be put to other purposes, but just about what is involved in doing more for others than can be reasonably required – and its proper limits.

All told, I don't see that life after death, or, indeed, God, has anything to contribute to morality, although it may be useful, at a practical level that some people refrain from terrible conduct because of religious-generated fears (though I would prefer that they believe what is true, even if we all have to suffer bad consequences from this!).

(b) As to punishment, I'd see three elements involved in this:

(i) First, its being something involved in a process of education concerning how we should behave towards one another. This can involve a public affirmation of what acceptable conduct would be, and the imposition of something like a penance for non-compliance.[1]

(ii) Second, as trying to do our best to avoid people profiting from wrong-doing (e.g. by imposing fines, and improving our institutions).

(iii) Third, protecting ourselves and others from predators, including those who have no instinctive moral concerns. This, it seems to me, could in some cases involve imprisonment or indeed the imposition of a death penalty.

From my perspective, it seems to me important that we discuss, affirm and entrench institutionally what behaving well amounts to. But I am dubious about punishment, other than in the context of (i) – (iii). I think, say, that if people have done terrible things in their youth, then there is no point in punishment – beyond a kind of performance of a token penance – once they have become elderly. For they are in most respects a different person from what they were like when they committed the offence. Once they are dead, any notion of punishment seems to me pointless. Although it would seem important – if they seem to have got away with terrible behaviour – to explain what they did, and just why it was so bad, to those of us who are still alive.

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[1] This seems to me to make sense of what is often seen as the retributive strand in punishment.

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