

Of Constructs and Reconstruction in Religion: Thoughts on Basil Mitchell's Theory of Religious Belief

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Introduction

Is the faith of the theist justifiable, or is it ultimately an unjustifiable choice, one of the free elections we make which it would be fatuous to attempt to defend by systematic argument? With the failure of the so-called proofs for the existence of God to convince all men and women of goodwill and good mind, it seems like the more attractive position to maintain that one chooses a theistic position in much the same way that one has a propensity for blue over pink – without the pretense of having “proof” of the correctness of the choice.

This is of course not new to the philosophy of religion. Non-cognivist theories of religious belief have been around for some time now, but somehow they do not square with the experience and avowals of believers. It is true however that showing how faith in God is rational is not easy as showing that *modus ponens* is a valid argument form.

What we ask about is the nature of faith. What is it to believe? Is it ultimately a matter of what I feel about the universe? It certainly is this, but is it any more? In view of the “linguistic turn” that philosophy is supposed to have taken, we may also ask: What are the ground rules for God-talk?

Basil Mitchell (*The Justification of Religious Belief*) is one contemporary thinker who has addressed this question and has offered important insights.

Now, I see... Paradigms and Faith

The argument for theism is not a deductive argument. It is not even a formal argument at all. But this is not to say that it is a logically defective or a flawed argument. The problem therefore is whether we encounter arguments of this type outside the realm of belief or we must admit that the argument for theism is of a peculiar – dubious? – kind.

While Mitchell thinks that the duck-rabbit, or face-goblet sketches and what we perceive when we perceive them are suggestive, he calls attention to an important difference between what happens when we perceive the rabbit after having perceived the duck (or vice versa) and he contrasts this with what occurs when, to bring Kuhn's interesting theory of scientific revolutions into the picture, we change or shift paradigms. In the case of the "ambivalent" (not really ambiguous) sketches, the lines are clear. It is merely a matter of looking at them one-way rather than the other. Not so with scientific paradigms, because unlike fixed lines, the data that science must deal with are not stable.

There is then an important difference then between Hick's theory and Mitchell's, though the epistemological kinship cannot be denied. Hick makes faith a matter of "interpretation", just as unfaith or unbelief is its own kind of interpretation. For Kuhn, interpretations do occur, but within normal science, when a scientist, working with an accepted paradigm, interprets the data that are available to her. Working with the paradigm of planetary motion that was in place at the time – and still is in considerable measure today – scientist "interpreted" the delay in the orbiting of Saturn as the retarding influence of a yet farther planet, eventually called "Neptune."

Working with the paradigm of galactic matter that appears to be prevalent among scientists today, they interpret otherwise weird phenomena as the presence of a "black hole" which precisely because

it is “black” and is a “hole” is not visible, but is a matter of interpretation.

What Mitchell is getting at is that the transition from unbelief to belief (or the equally possible shift from belief to unbelief) is very much more dramatic than an excursion in normal science. It is more than looking at things in one-way rather than another which, though itself already exciting, does not account sufficiently for the radical, life-altering difference between belief and unbelief. It has all the elements of the drama accompanying a shift in paradigm: scales falling from one’s eyes, an unexpected flash of brilliance, everything falling into place at once. And I think that the “interpretation” in science that results in the postulation or positing of such things as “black holes” or quasars or even outer planets is not necessarily the interpretation that takes place in religion. To interpret religiously is NOT NECESSARILY to posit the existence of a Being BESIDES the world, a being beyond the assemblage of beings, *ens qui sibi nomen imponet* “Deus.” To shift paradigms it is not necessary that one or the other datum be added to the picture. A shift in paradigm is rather a shift *in what one does* with the data. It is to start anew with a different model.

In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur has a very useful thought on “models” in science. “Now in scientific language, the model is essentially a heuristic instrument that seeks, by means of fiction, to break down an inadequate interpretation and to lay the way for a new, more adequate interpretation. In the language of Mary Hesse, another author close to Black, the model is an instrument of redescription... The model belongs not to the logic of justification or proof, but to the logic of discovery.” To introduce a model is to introduce a new way of thinking of things. It does not entail the postulation of the existence of a new or additional *thing*. “Fiction” may be worrisome because it might suggest that when applied to theism, God is some sort of “convenient fiction” heuristically demanded to enable us to handle the data in a conceptually more adequate manner. But I suggest that we take “fiction” not as the antonym of “real” or “objective” but as referring to “construct.” Every model is a construct, and if belief is always a symbol-system it too is a construct, and there need not be anything wrong with it. We need not press the analogy too far, after all, because the only point that this entire excursus on “models” makes is to establish

that there is argument akin to the argument for theism in the realm outside religion, that is science.

A change in model or in paradigm does not necessarily entail the positing of yet one more being called “x”. Similarly faith or religious belief is not necessarily the assertion that besides the ensemble of things that science describes there is one more entity – unavailable to observation – called “God.” It can be this, true, but it need not be. For it is as plausible for religious belief to affirm of the universe of beings what is Divine, Holy, or Worshipful. In other words, the nature of religious belief does not settle the differences between that variety of theism that affirms a being called “God” and that which recognizes “God,” the “holy,” the “Divine” in the very workings of what is. Faith thrives on both monopolar and dipolar metaphysical ground!

But then what is left of the difference I thought I had discerned between Hick and Mitchell? First, the kinship: Every paradigm interprets. That is what paradigms are for basically. But interpretations can be co-planar, which is to say, that various interpretations lying on the same paradigmatic plane are possible, and Mitchell insists that theism cannot be on the same plane as atheism – albeit the opposite end of the spectrum. It requires a radical shift of perspective, a different model, the rug pulled off from under one’s feet to be a theist.

Is a new paradigm conjectural – and by this I mean “gratuitous”? Definitely not, for what happens is that the scientist takes up chunks of experience that are then organized according to the new paradigm. There is a definitely some sort of epistemic or paradigmatic circle at work here, for the data of experience suggest the paradigm, but it is the paradigm itself that allows for the new organization of experience. A circle for sure, but as I wrote elsewhere, not all circles are vicious!

Mitchell of course echoes Kuhn for whom the process of hitching on a paradigm is “intuition,” but that is a notoriously ambiguous, thankfully flexible term. It has always been so, and one only has to remember Aquinas’ references to “intuition of Being” and “intuition of First Principles” to understand that it has always suggested what is **DISTINGUISHED** from discursive understanding, deduction or formal argument. What its use – and the

falling back on “intuition – suggest is that deduction does not exhaust argument, not as a matter of logic – which would quite clearly beg the question – but as a matter of experiencing the way we do think and arrive at conclusions.

Belief and Truth-Claim

How does one keep at bay the demon of relativism? Newton’s paradigm – mechanics – and Einstein’s paradigm – relativistic space-time – are in a sense competing paradigms, but the history and the development of astrophysical science seems to have resolved the competition, at least thus far, in Einstein’s favor, which is not to say that Einstein is not himself facing new competition now. The point is that UNDECIDEABILITY does not necessarily follow from the availability of competing paradigms. So too the divide between a theist and an atheist need not be the divide between temper and disposition, upbringing and orientation, inclination and taste that rational discourse cannot resolve. Certainly the claims of theism will not be dismissed by *de gustibus non est disputatio*.

A choice can be made between paradigms because it is possible to choose between it is possible to ask – and to answer – which paradigm does a better job. A paradigm that calls for too many *ad hoc* explanations is not as efficient as one that eliminates them. No matter the disagreement between Kuhn and Popper the fact is that Popper’s criteria for selecting between competing theories – the theory that is able to explain more data, the theory that makes more predictions and is therefore more testable, the theory with the greater corroborative content – provides useful clues for choosing between paradigms. Is it not precisely because Newtonian mechanics could not explain the quirks in the sub-atomic level that a new paradigm was called for?

Kuhn’s *caveat* of course must be heeded. The problem with paradigms and competing paradigms is that what one paradigm considers problematic, another paradigm may dismiss as non-problematic. This of course is what I have always argued about “proofs” for the existence of God. Do they prove? The good ones do, but only if one asks the question they are formulated to answer. If one asks why there is motion in the world, the Thomas Aquinas’ first way offers an interesting – and logically plausible – answer.

The only problem is that an atheist may find the question a totally useless, unhelpful if not impertinent question, and then the proof will no longer prove, because that which it was designed to answer is not even raised at all! The fact that a question can be raised is no guarantee of its coherence.

Very usefully, I think, Mitchell finds the difference between the theist and an atheist paralleled by the difference between philosophies. There is no straightforward, logical manner of “demonstrating” the truth of one philosophy over another. And I think in quoting Waismann, Mitchell does us all great service by addressing a pressing concern squarely: Does a theist make a truth-claim?

Why this question at this stage? Because it is not always clear that paradigms make truth-claims. I do not always hear it said of one paradigm that it is “true” in contrast to another, much less of one philosophy that it is “true”, and that its competitor is “false.” But Waismann suggests that in evaluating philosophies – all of which tend to be internally consistent – one must ask of their consequences or entailments whether they are true or false, intelligible or not, applied to the relevant subject-matter. The theist does make truth claims. For him it is true that God exists, that there is something Divine about Reality, and it is certainly false for him that Being is bereft of the Worshipful.

Mitchell, with good reason, next draws from Ayer. How does one reject a philosophy? By showing that one of its results cannot stand against a counter-example except by putting a considerable strain on the philosophical system or proposal itself. When one maintains the philosophical position that all knowledge is merely eliciting what is latent in oneself, then it is possible to show that while the slave-girl might have done a creditable job solving a geometrical problem ably prodded by an astute mentor, any law professor will readily reject the possibility of eliciting the convoluted provisions of the Internal Revenue Code from the SMS-saturated minds of our freshmen law students!

If we concede that “interpretation” and “evaluation” can be used interchangeably then I venture on another approach towards the affirmation of the “objectivity” of the theistic claim. All that I mean by this is that there is an analogy available to us that allow us to understand in what sense the believer makes a truth-claim.

What does one think of the recently showed movie “Alexander”? Film connoisseurs may think me naïve or even find my taste offensive, but I think it was a “good” movie. I can concede without trouble that others may think otherwise. I fully realize therefore that when I pronounce the movie “good”, I am evaluating it. I offer a way of looking at the data – the scenes, the plot, the cinematography, the script, etc. “Good” is therefore evaluative, interpretive. But I am also asserting that “good” is not simply the way I feel. It is a quality I believe “resides” in the movie, such that I find myself in disagreement with anyone who says it is “not good.” “Good” is, for me, an objective quality, a real attribute of the movie. Whatever else the theist might want to assert when he affirms God, at least, for me, it is clear that he is asserting an “objective attribute” of the data that is available to him – as to all others.

Of course, as Mitchell points out, the problem with the atheist (and therefore also with the theist) is that he has convinced himself from the outset that there is no other reasonable way of explaining the data except from an atheist. No matter the shuddering of Mount Sinai, or the parting of the waters of the Sea, or the healing graciousness of a Carpenter’s Presence, the atheist had decided *a priori* that there is no justification in invoking Yahweh. The only thing the theist can hope to do is to find some counter-example – a life characterized by almost incredibly unshakable trust or absurdly prodigal love – to show him that Reality-without-God severely strains and heaves to inspire such faith and love. This is not a deductive argument, but, in Waismann’s words, “it has force”!

If we admit that we construct, what then of deconstruction?

A small book by the now frequently read John Caputo – *On Religion* – offers plenty of contribution to this discussion. Religion has, for its object, “the Impossible.” The Impossible is what cannot be planned nor anticipated. It lies beyond calculation and reasonable inference. One can plan on pursuing a course, or on getting a new job, or even on having children. This is the future-present, the future that can be foreseen from the present. But what one can never anticipate or plan is the meaning of one’s life, what one’s life ultimately turns out to be, including the astounding

horizons that open. This is the absolute future, and the absolute future is a religious category.

Recognizing that we do construct may even be salutary to religion, to our belief. Because religion is the realm of the Impossible – in the sense of that which forces us to realize that all constructs are just constructs, there are no guarantees. Derrida’s “Impossible” is not the antithesis of “real.” It is the *indeterminateness* that exceeds all expectation and calculation, all guarantee provided by models and paradigms. A guarantee is the security of the pre-religious. Faith is always risky, and so its virtues are faith, hope and love, whereas the virtues of the possible are the virtues of management: the so-called cardinal virtues. Experience however is experience only because of the impossible. It is the irruption of the unexpected, the uncalculated that makes experience what it is. The Bible is therefore the narrative of sublime experience. We oppose experience of course to the regularities of routine, and to the accomplishment of the planned and the realization of the anticipated.

Recognition of the construct that theism is perforce is also recognition of its tenuousness but rather than keeping us constantly teetering on the edge of unbelief or the demise of faith it should be the nudge we need towards that openness that also goes by the popular term “deconstruction.” Deconstruction is then not a bad word, and it need not announce atheism waiting in the wings! If the Virgin Mary’s *fiat* is for all time the exemplar of faith then it is the “yes” that allows us to affirm, even beyond our constructs – and therefore, to “deconstruct.”

If, as the world’s greatest religions have constantly taught us, religion is to be bound to what is “greater than ourselves” – that which is conveyed by the “impossible,” unwieldy and intractable concept *id quod majus cogitari nequit* of St. Anselm, or the Cartesian *Idea of the Infinite* that exceeds what is ideated, then recognizing construct for what it is – a construct – even of the construct that a theistic paradigm is means recognizing, I grant, the possibility of atheism or unbelief, but more importantly it is setting us free for the adventure that all faith is, and for the *more* that the name/non-name “I am whom am” names! □