

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Article 9

4-1-1987

Terence Penelhum, GOD AND SKEPTICISM

Kenneth Konyndyk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Konyndyk, Kenneth (1987) "Terence Penelhum, GOD AND SKEPTICISM," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19874224

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol4/iss2/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

BOOK REVIEWS

God and Skepticism, by **Terence Penelhum**. D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1983. Pp. xii + 186. \$34.95.

KENNETH KONYNDYK, Calvin College.

Ordinarily, Christians and skeptics are thought to be strange bedfellows. After all, what attitudes could be more diametrically opposed than the unbridled credulousness of the Christian believer and the studied and deliberately adopted incredulity of the skeptic? Yet throughout the history of the church, various Christian thinkers have thought they found in the skeptic's outlook a way of defending their faith. Richard Popkin has recently mined a rich lode of such thought in his *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, showing how numerous self-styled defenders of the faith during the seventeenth century made use of the skeptic's arsenal of arguments. But before and after the seventeenth century there have been many other Christian thinkers eager to point out the pretensions and the fallibility of human reason, often using skeptical conundrums to accomplish this, in order to persuade people that their faith is solidier if it has no support from "worldly wisdom."

Although Penelhum is opposed to the fideist attitude as well as the use of skepticism to advance the cause of faith, this book is directed mainly against the fideist's use of skeptical arguments. He examines the views of several skeptical fideists, pausing when appropriate to criticize their lines of argument or their views of faith. Penelhum claims that skepticism does not serve the cause of Christian faith and actually constitutes a hindrance to it. He does not believe, as some skeptical fideists do, that tearing down reason is necessary to bring people to faith. This book presents his case in a way that connects some central historical figures with some contemporary debates about the rational justifiability of religious beliefs.

Although by Penelhum's lights, the skeptic and the believer still turn out to be strange bedfellows, by the time we reach the end of the book, Penelhum has provided a great deal of insight into this unlikely alliance, both in terms of the great historical figures he treats and some of the main arguments pursued by this tradition. This book is an important contribution to the contemporary discussion of the rationality of religious belief. It advances our analysis by means of a historical as well as an analytical treatment of the parity argument. Many of the connections among the seventeenth century debates, Hume and Kierkegaard, and the present discussions are illuminating and fascinating.

II

Fideism is described as the position that reason cannot support faith and that faith has no need of rational support. A skeptical fideist then is one who holds in addition that reason is impotent to give us knowledge outside as well as inside the sphere of faith. He attempts to support fideism by appealing to skepticism. This skeptical fideism comes in two varieties, “conformist” and “evangelical.”

The conformist skeptical fideist, exemplified by Montaigne and Bayle, endorses the skeptical arguments against our rational abilities and believes (in the case of Bayle) that Christianity is inconsistent with the deliverances of reason. Accepting the pyrrhonian suspension of judgment as the recipe for quietude and peace of mind, this type of skeptical fideist recommends conformity to the faith of the rest of the culture, the Christian faith.

Evangelical fideists, such as Pascal and Kierkegaard, while accepting the skeptical exposé of the pretensions of human reason, emphatically reject the skeptic’s recommendation of suspension of judgment, “moderate feeling,” and conformity. They accept the diagnosis as correct, but they find the suggested cure to be a recipe for despair. We are unable to suspend our common sense beliefs. Even after the arguments against our beliefs have been convincingly presented, we cannot help but believe as passionately as ever. Likewise in the realm of faith, the believer has the answer to the despair induced by the skeptic—passionate, committed, rationally unsupportable faith. Since reason cannot show that the beliefs of common sense are justified but we should believe them anyway, so also with religious beliefs—we should accept them rather than the skeptic’s despair.

Penelhum picks out a type of argument employed by these skeptical fideists, calling it the “parity” argument because of the alleged parity between the rational justification of religious beliefs and that of common sense beliefs. He discusses various forms of this argument as the book proceeds.

The version of the parity argument used by the Conformist Skeptical Fideist involves applying pyrrhonism to religious belief. The various skeptical considerations that are part of the pyrrhonist tradition undermine the rational justification of all our beliefs, secular and religious alike. The appropriate response to religious beliefs is therefore the same as that to secular beliefs—suspension of judgment, moderate feeling with respect to things unavoidable, and conformity to the customs and traditions of one’s fathers (or one’s community). This argument, Penelhum rightly points out, makes room only for a form of faith so tepid that it hardly merits the label, especially within the Christian tradition.

The Evangelical form of the Parity argument is harder to nail down even though Penelhum discusses it at greater length. This type of skeptical fideism is concerned to expose reason as incompetent, especially in religion, and to show that the inabilities of reason—to discover that there is a God, for example—actually serve the Christian faith. Use of reason in religion only confirms the hiddenness of God and inability of reason to find answers to the despair it induces.

This form of the Parity argument proceeds along the following lines: Skeptical and rational considerations show that we are unable to demonstrate God's existence and that we are likewise (and for similar reasons) unable to justify many crucial common sense beliefs. Since they are each equally unsupported by reason, there is no reason to accept one but not the other, and no reason to reject one and not the other. Since we accept (and can hardly reject) the beliefs of common sense, we should equally accept belief in God.

Penelhum criticizes this position by pointing out, first, that these Evangelical Fideists haven't ruled out the tepid response of the Conformist, even though they suppose themselves to have argued for the place of passion in religious faith. Secondly, there is a potentially relevant difference between our adherence to common sense beliefs and our adherence to religious beliefs. While common sense beliefs take effort to resist, religious beliefs apparently do not. Thirdly, the demonstrated parity doesn't cut in favor of one religious belief system over another, and finally, there are various ways of arguing against parity. This leads Penelhum to a consideration of David Hume.

Penelhum observes that Hume's employment of skeptical arguments against common sense beliefs, coupled with his view that such beliefs should and would nevertheless continue to be held, leaves him vulnerable to the parity argument. Furthermore, it is his conviction that Hume himself recognized this and tried to argue against the rational parity of religious beliefs with common sense beliefs. Penelhum presents and evaluates three different lines of defense against the parity argument that he finds in Hume.

Hume's first line of defence is to explain religious belief as pathological. It is not natural and instinctive, it can be dislodged, it originates in fear, and it hinders science. The second line is that the parity argument yields only a vague and unreligious deism, not Christianity. And Hume's third line of defence, according to Penelhum, is to accept this vague deism and be a conformist fideist, something he thinks many people have done. Penelhum is himself sympathetic to what he presents as the second line of defense.

Although he argues against accepting the evangelical fideists' version of the parity argument, there is another, weaker version which Penelhum accepts. This is the "permissive" parity argument, which he takes from some recent writings of Alvin Plantinga and Norman Malcolm. According to this argument, religious belief is shown to be rationally permissible because of the parity between the justification of religious beliefs and other common beliefs. Religious believers can at least be defended against the charge of irrationality—they have not adopted rationally impermissible beliefs.

In a concluding chapter on the nature of faith, Penelhum rejects the view of the skeptical fideist that undermining reason is an aid to faith. The "conformist" can only offer too tepid a version of faith and the "evangelical" wrongly makes destruction of the pretensions of reason a necessary condition of faith. Penelhum concludes the book with his own account of the nature of faith. According to him, trust rather than belief is the essence of faith, although trust must rest upon

certain beliefs about the person trusted. Thus he criticizes Aquinas for making belief the essence of faith, and he rejects the Wittgensteinian “form of life” view on the ground that it identifies faith with the fruits of faith.

III

Penelhum’s book would be stronger if he had further clarified two of its central ideas—fideism and parity. He characterizes fideism in two different ways. First, in the Preface, it is said to be the view that “faith is not undermined but strengthened, if we judge that reason can give it no support” (p. ix). Then in Chapter One, fideism becomes the position that faith needs no justification from reason. These two positions are different; John Calvin, for example, appears to have held the second but not the first. Furthermore, a fideist of the first type is much likelier to be attracted by skeptical arguments than a fideist of the second type. One who holds that faith *needs* no justification from reason might nevertheless hold that rational justifications are available, and thus denigrating reason need be no part of his position. I believe this to be the position of St. Thomas Aquinas, and I think making Aquinas a fideist is reason to be suspicious of Penelhum’s characterization.

Closely associated with fideism is a refusal to affirm a principle which we might call evidentialism: the view that belief in God is rationally improper unless it is based on evidence. Or, as the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) puts it, “...since faith is essentially mediate cognition, it must be based on an immediately evident cognition in order to be acceptable to a rational being....” According to Penelhum’s second characterization, denial of evidentialism is sufficient to make one a fideist, at least if we understand justification to be on the basis of other beliefs. But someone who, like Alvin Plantinga, denies the evidentialist principle but holds that belief in God can be properly basic and who would welcome a convincing proof of God’s existence if one could be found, then turns out to be a fideist. Nor is denying evidentialism a necessary condition of being a fideist. Some fideists, and perhaps Pierre Bayle is an example, affirm evidentialism and go on to claim that belief in God is not rational but we should (or at least may) believe anyway. So, although denying evidentialism frequently is linked with fideism, denying it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of being a fideist.

What is the core idea of fideism? Certainly part of the core is affirming the primacy of faith. But what else? I do not think it is just a lack of reliance on reason in holding religious beliefs, nor is it simply a denial of the need for reasons. I think it is the exclusion of giving or having reasons for religious faith. Then an extreme fideist is a fideist who goes on to hold that reasons are to be excluded in the area of faith because it is not possible to give any. A skeptical fideist is an extreme fideist who bases that position on a skeptical view of the capacities of reason in general.

Penelhum does not bring out all these distinctions, and this leads him, I think,

to give an inadequate account of skeptical fideism. According to him, skeptical fideism is "...any attempt to show that faith is immune to the demands of reason by using arguments from [the literature of philosophical skepticism]" (p. 2). While I agree with Penelhum that Montaigne and Bayle are skeptical fideists by this test, I think it dubious at best that Pascal and Kierkegaard are. It is not clear to me that Pascal and Kierkegaard reach very deeply into the trove of skeptical arguments to show that faith is totally different from reason. Kierkegaard brings forward quasi-Kantian considerations against the project of proving God's existence. But the burden of his claim is that while reason may be competent to determine objective truth, that is not the kind of truth that counts in religion. Truth in religion is subjective. He does not make this case by using arguments from the skeptical tradition. Kierkegaard sees no need to support faith by inducing wholesale skepticism and he does not use skeptical arguments that way. He is an extreme fideist but not a skeptical fideist.

The essential point in skeptical fideism is not the use of skeptical arguments from the philosophical skeptics; it is the general rejection of the possibility of evidence and justification, combined with acceptance of the need for faith.

IV

Another feature of Penelhum's book which merits further scholarly attention and analysis is his treatment of what he calls the parity argument. Penelhum uses his development of this argument to offer considerable insight into Hume's philosophy of religion, seeing Hume's writings on religion as a systematic response to such an argument.

I think, though, that the three kinds of argument which he brings together under this rubric are so different that it is misleading to call them all "the parity argument." I also think that Kierkegaard and Plantinga, to whom Penelhum attributes different versions of the parity argument are not arguing from consideration of parity in the passages he cites.

The conformist parity argument is a genuine parity argument. Religious beliefs, like political, moral, and physical beliefs, lack rational justification, according to the conformist. The conformist supports this contention with skeptical arguments and then adds the pyrrhonist prescription—suspension of belief, moderate feeling in things unavoidable, and conformity to the beliefs of the community. The conclusion is that one should follow the religious beliefs of one's community. Not only is this a parity argument, it also clearly fits Penelhum's characterization of skeptical fideism. This is not so clearly the case for the other two versions of the argument.

The argument Penelhum presents as the evangelical skeptical fideist's parity argument involves the claim that common sense beliefs and belief in God are analogous in being "faith" beliefs. Since the lack of an intellectual justification does not prevent us from holding common sense beliefs, there must be some irrational factor—sin is the usual suggestion—which prevents people from

holding religious beliefs. But it is inconsistent to reject the religious beliefs while one accepts the common sense beliefs. Hence anyone who accepts common sense beliefs should also accept religious ones.

This argument is a parity argument, but it is less clearly a skeptical argument, and I can see little reason for attributing it to Kierkegaard as Penelhum does. The “parity” premise, that religious beliefs and common sense beliefs are analogous in being “faith” beliefs, does not require skeptical arguments for it to be established, although a philosopher might try to establish it that way. One might argue instead that these crucial beliefs are analogous in being basic. So this parity argument seems to me to have only an accidental connection with philosophical skepticism.

I am unconvinced by Penelhum’s attempt to find this parity argument in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*. It seems to me that there Kierkegaard’s interest is in removing religious truth from the arena of objective truth where evidentialist rules of justification of belief apply. He has no interest in claiming that there is no objective truth, but rather that the methods for establishing or justifying this kind of knowledge are inadequate to establish religious faith, and that its methods are frustrated by religious beliefs.

Penelhum attributes his third type of parity argument, the permissive version, to Alvin Plantinga and Norman Malcolm. But I believe that while the argument Penelhum presents is interesting and significant, it is not Plantinga’s and Malcolm’s argument. Plantinga and Malcolm are both arguing for the rational permissibility of religious belief, but they are not doing so based on considerations of parity. In each of their arguments, they attack the demand for grounds (Malcolm) or evidence (Plantinga), arguing that such a demand is unwarranted or confused when applied to belief in God. They attack the notion that, in the words quoted earlier from the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, belief in God is “essentially mediate knowledge.” Furthermore, for Plantinga, belief in God resembles other beliefs which seem to him to be properly basic, and so he concludes that belief in God can be properly basic.

As Penelhum states the permissive parity argument (pp 150-1), the idea of parity plays no role. Nor does he claim that the conclusion somehow follows from considerations of parity. Thus I think that the argument is not aptly described as a parity argument and compared with other parity arguments. Of course, I should not be construed as claiming that the argument Penelhum gives us is of no intrinsic interest; just the opposite is true.

Penelhum overlooks some recent writings which present clear versions of the permissive parity argument. One is found in the last sentence of Plantinga’s *God and Other Minds* (Cornell, 1967): “if my belief in other minds is rational, so is my belief in God. But obviously the former is rational; so, therefore, is the latter.” (p 271) Another is the “*tu quoque*” argument criticised by W.W. Bartley III in his *The Retreat to Commitment* (London, 1964), p 90:

“(1) [F]or certain logical reasons, rationality is so limited that *everyone* has to make a dogmatic irrational commitment; (2) therefore, the Chris-