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IS COMING TO BELIEVE IN GOD REASONABLE OR UNREASONABLE?

R. T. Herbert

In this paper I contend that coming to believe that God exists is neither reasonable nor unreasonable, since coming to believe it is to be seen rather as "coming down" with the conviction that God exists (as one comes down with an ailment) than as an instance of being persuaded of or accepting something. I set forth what I take to be scriptural support for the ailment view and attempt to show that a key scriptural passage seeming to support the persuasion view does not really do so.

Jesus asked the Pharisees, "What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?" (Mt. 22:42). I understand the Christian response to this to presuppose the belief that God exists, since the response is (as at Mt. 16:16) that the Christ is the Son of the living God (God could not now be living unless he exists) and since, further, the Christian scripture teaches that whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists (Heb. 11:6).

I will take belief that God exists (or, as I shall also put it, "belief in God") to be a *sine qua non* in the body of Christian doctrine and in what follows consider the question "Is it reasonable to *come* to believe that God exists?" The companion question "Is it reasonable to believe (i.e., to *continue* to believe) that God exists?" will be discussed briefly at the end of this essay; here I will observe only that recent discussion seems to consider the distinction between believing and coming to believe to be of little importance when one is dealing with the question of reasonableness. Recent discussion also appears to assume that the categories *reasonable* and *unreasonable* are exhaustive: if believing or coming to believe that God exists is not reasonable then, so the thought goes, it must be unreasonable.

The tendency to conflate coming to believe with believing, together with the assumption that *reasonable* and *unreasonable* divide the field without remainder, has the unfortunate result that an important view of the "logic" of coming to believe in God is kept from our sight—a deprivation that, reciprocally, strengthens the assumption that feeds it.

It is perhaps true that *believing* that God exists is either reasonable or unreasonable. That is, perhaps it is true that believing this (1) either has or lacks suitable rational support, or (2) either is or fails to be, in Alvin

Plantinga's phrase, "properly basic." But it is by no means clear that *coming* to believe it suffers this same conceptual constraint. It seems that coming to believe in God may be neither reasonable nor unreasonable. If it is as Graham Greene's adulteress-heroine Sarah Miles describes her own coming to believe in *The End of the Affair*, it is something one undergoes or suffers, it happens to one: "I've caught belief like a disease," she writes to her lover Bendrix. "I've fallen into belief like I fell in love" (bk. 5, sec. 1). If a strand of the logic of "coming to believe in God" is revealed in this remark, it would seem that coming to believe in God can no more be assessed as reasonable or unreasonable than can coming down with influenza. Though one could take or fail to take precautions against acquiring the belief, he might "come down" with it nevertheless; thus though his efforts to contract or to avoid it would be reasonable or unreasonable, it would be neither reasonable nor unreasonable in him to acquire, to catch, to contract, to fall victim to it, since acquiring it would not in some important way be his doing.

A remark by another Catholic man of letters, Greene's friend Evelyn Waugh, suggests an opposing account. In a letter to his friend Nancy Mitford, Waugh wrote, "I can never understand why everyone is not Catholic." Waugh's editor, Donat Gallagher, explains that Waugh "meant, literally, that the case for Catholicism was logically compelling."¹ The same opposing account is also suggested by *The Jerusalem Bible's* rendering of St. Paul's observation at Romans 1:28, "it [is] rational to acknowledge God." The view suggested by these remarks is that coming to believe God exists is not a unique sort of coming to believe distinguished by its pathic, not to say pathological character, but is instead, like any other case of coming to believe, a matter of being persuaded by reasons or evidence, or at any rate by experience. Coming to believe in God on this view is not to be compared to catching a cold or falling in love, but to accepting a proffered explanation of (for instance) someone's unexpected absence or to accepting one's wife's response "Cats and dogs" to one's question "Is it still raining?"

Roughly, the Greene passage suggests that coming to believe God exists is a movement of heart, the start of a condition to whose onset causal explanation is relevant; Waugh's and St. Paul's remarks indicate that coming to believe God exists is a fixing of intellect to which is relevant either rational justification or an explanation (perhaps Plantingan) why none is needed.

Neither view suggests that coming to believe in God is strictly speaking volitional, as one's wife's answering the query about the rain is volitional. The view suggested by the Greene passage is that coming to believe in God is related to the volitional rather loosely at best, as the restoration of one's health to the taking of mild exercise and sensible meals or the onset of ill health to a dissolute life: one does what one does and hopes for the best, or hopes nothing and is surprised. The Waugh-Pauline view posits a closer

relation than this; it suggests that coming to believe in God is related to something volitional in the way becoming convinced of the accuracy of a report is related to one's efforts to confirm it.

In the way that answering a simple question, going for a walk, or checking out a report that your neighbor has been in a serious accident is volitional, coming to believe that God exists is not volitional.² But if it is "a fixing of intellect"—i.e., a being persuaded, a finding compelling, an accepting—then it not only is (or may be) closely connected with the fully volitional (as was suggested at the end of the previous paragraph), but perhaps is itself volitional in a diminished way. For though one does not accept *as he wishes* his wife's weather report and is not *on request* compelled by evidence or an argument, still, in general, accepting or not accepting, being or not being compelled, may be praise- or blameworthy, just as what is fully volitional may be. As for going (or refusing to go) for a walk in the park, so for being convinced (or unconvinced) by a piece of evidence, we may be counted sensible or foolish, reasonable or unreasonable.

On the view suggested by Greene the onset of belief that God exists may or may not be prepared and hoped for, may surprise its subject and even initially escape his notice: it is ictic, etiogenic, nonvolitional, and nonrational. By the Waugh-Pauline account coming to believe in God is cognitional, a fixing of intellect that its subject cannot fail to be aware of and which is volitional (or "volitional") in that its subject is reasonable or unreasonable, sensible or foolish, for it. Thus, to the question forming the present paper's title—"Is coming to believe in God reasonable or unreasonable?"—the Waugh-St. Paul view proposes an affirmative, the Greene passage a negative answer.

To weigh these answers I will consider the Old Testament episode of the burning bush, in which Yahweh calls Moses to his mission of liberating the Hebrews, and will ask whether Moses' being convinced that it was indeed God who spoke to him was reasonable or unreasonable or was instead neither of these.

For this Biblical episode to constitute a test case, one in which Moses *comes* to believe that God exists, it will have to be supposed that prior to its occurrence Moses did not believe, that he was until then at best an agnostic. Such a supposition is not entirely unsupported by Biblical evidence, though that evidence is by no means decisive. Favoring the supposition is the fact that although his mother is "a woman of Levi" and is allowed by Pharaoh's daughter to suckle him in his first three months, Moses is reared as an Egyptian and is "taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:20-22). Evidence favoring the supposition that Moses did not come to believe at the burning bush but already believed occurs at Hebrews 11:24-25: "It was by faith that, *when he grew to manhood* [but before his experience at the burning

bush], Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter and chose to be ill-treated in company with God's people rather than to enjoy for a time the pleasures of sin." If it was, as this passage indicates, *by faith* that Moses refused the one state and chose the other, then perhaps to posit a Mosaic agnosticism prior to the burning bush episode is a mistake. Yet the Exodus source seems to contain no suggestion that it was from belief in Yahweh that Moses renounced his Egyptian ties and aligned himself with his fellow Hebrews. But whichever the correct exegesis, I shall for the philosophical purpose at hand treat the episode as one in which Moses comes to believe that God exists, not as one in which he believes he is confronted by a God whose existence he already acknowledges.

In terms of this episode so understood, our title question can now be recast as follows: "Is Moses' coming, during this episode, to believe that God exists reasonable or unreasonable?" An affirmative answer to this may now seem unavoidable, though not for a reason acceptable to Waugh or St. Paul. For it may appear evident that Moses was being, not reasonable, but extremely gullible. And besides gullibility, another species of unreason may appear to be involved: perhaps there is logical incoherence in the figure of Moses as portrayed.

First consider an argument supporting this latter complaint, an argument suggested by a remark of Anthony Kenny's: "It does not seem possible," Kenny writes, "that someone could believe that God had revealed something without believing that God existed."³ It seems that if one believes that God has revealed anything to him, one must already believe that God exists; but if this is so, then God's existence cannot be among the items God reveals to him—just as anything another already knows cannot be among the items I inform him of. Hence, it cannot coherently be thought that Moses comes to believe God exists by God's revealing it to him. Nor of course can Moses himself coherently think it. But on our reading of the episode Moses "understands" that as he approaches the burning bush he does not believe and that moments later, because God reveals to him that He exists, he comes to believe that He does. If this "understanding" is of something incoherent, something finally unintelligible, Moses is guilty of that species of unreason philosophers sometimes identify in themselves.

But is the main premise of this argument true? Is it true that if one accepts that God reveals something to him it must be the case that he already believes that God exists? However general its application, the premise does not really seem to encompass the crucial case, *viz.*, that in which one accepts that God reveals his existence to one.

Consider a nontheological case. A *blaguing*, prank-playing colleague, George, boasts endlessly of his "fabulously wealthy Uncle Albert who resides in Zurich." Knowing my colleague's propensities, I give his story no cre-

dence, a reception that seems to wound him. But then I receive a telephone call. The speaker identifies himself as George's Uncle Albert calling to offer me an attractive position with one of his companies. I may take the call to be a practical joke and continue to doubt the existence of Uncle Albert. But clearly I *can* take the speaker to be who he says he is. That is, in the thought of my doing so there is no unreason of the sort described by the premise under consideration. I may believe the speaker's self-identifying pronouncement even though I have doubted Uncle Albert's existence up to the very moment the pronouncement is made; accepting it does not "entail" that I already believe he exists.

As in this purported anthropophany, so in the theophany to Moses: there seems no incoherence in the thought that Moses only comes to believe that God exists as he accepts as true the self-identifying pronouncement "I am the God of your father..." Neither case appears to involve the logical impropriety in question.

Yet, if the case of Moses escapes the logical incoherence claimed by the argument just examined, another sort of unreason may be present in it. In accepting as true the self-identifying pronouncement, Moses may be guilty of the intellectual vice of believing too much, the vice of credulity.⁴ If this is so, then the Waugh-St. Paul affirmative answer to our title question "Is coming to believe in God reasonable or unreasonable?" would seem to be correct. For if Moses is credulous in coming to believe, his coming to believe shows unreason.

Consider again the case of my boastful colleague's tale of his Uncle Albert. I know George to be untrustworthy in such matters; moreover, he has victimized me before with his practical jokes. So when I receive the telephone call and hear the speaker identify himself as George's Uncle Albert who invites me to take an attractive position with a firm of his in San Francisco, I have ample reason to withhold assent. Certainly if the caller contents himself with merely the self-identifying "This is your colleague George's Uncle Albert" and the generous-seeming invitation (together, let us add, with an explanatory "My nephew described you in glowing terms"), the utter and immediate vanishing of my unbelief in Albert's existence because I accept without question the caller's self-identification would mark me as laughably credulous.

Parallels with the case of Moses are obvious. First, like mine before the telephone call, Moses' epistemic state before coming upon the burning bush is one of unbelief. (Indeed, the Old Testament text appears to allow imputation to Moses certainty of Yahweh's nonexistence, as the New Testament portrays Saul of Tarsus as certain of Jesus' post-Crucifixion nonexistence.) Second, as in my case, there is in Moses' a self-identifying pronouncement and a call to work. Third, as a ringing telephone calls my attention, so the burning bush calls Moses' to an impending communication. Fourth, as on

hearing my caller's self-identification my unbelief in Albert's existence might vanish, so Moses' unbelief in God's existence does vanish on hearing "I am the God of your father...": for "[a]t this Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God" (Ex. 3:6).

The question now is this. Is there the following fifth and crucial parallel between the two cases: that as the immediate vanishing of my unbelief would mark me as laughably credulous, the immediate vanishing of Moses' unbelief so marks him?

If this parallel exists then the Waugh-St. Paul affirmative answer to the present paper's title question seems to be correct. It must be observed, however, that this affirmative answer might be correct even if the parallel does not exist, since the vanishing of Moses' unbelief might not brand him as credulous, but instead bespeak perfect reasonableness. It is only if the vanishing of his unbelief is neither reasonable nor unreasonable that the negative answer suggested by Graham Greene's heroine can be correct.

The affirmative response may seem more likely correct than the negative, since debate between those defending religion as rational and those attacking it as irrational is multifarious and ubiquitous. Regarding Moses and his sudden coming to believe, an Irrationalist would declare that like me Moses is amusingly gullible in his immediate, unquestioning acceptance of the self-identifying pronouncement; his Rationalist opponent would contend that Moses has good and sufficient reason to accept the pronouncement at face value, Moses' ground being the double miracle of the flaming but unaltered bush and the voice coming from it saying "Come no nearer. Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." This miraculous preface to the pronouncement, the Rationalist would say, fulfills the requirement of reason; any truly reasonable man in Moses' place, be he never so unbelieving and secular minded, would be persuaded; so far from being credulous or gullible Moses is a model of rationality; the clear and sufficient evidence of divine presence is there, and Moses is rightly persuaded by it.

"Not so," the Irrationalist would respond. "The evidence is woefully inadequate. A thoroughly reasonable man, even one of Moses' own time and circumstances, would be unpersuaded by what you call the miraculous preface. Moses, the New Testament informs us, was 'taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians.' He might be expected, then, to have known of the powers of Pharaoh's sorcerers, who as the Book of Exodus tells us could by magic match some of Moses' own thaumaturgy. One versed in Egypt's wisdom would surely have thought of the *possibility* that the burning bush and the voice addressing him were the work of Pharaoh's pesky magicians, who like Yahweh could change staves to serpents, and water to blood, and produce a plague of frogs. The possibility does not cross Moses' mind. This is not the response of reason. Reason would first seek and entertain several explana-

tions and then take measures to eliminate all but the most likely. Insofar as Moses fails to undertake this procedure he is credulous. Indeed, Pharaoh's magicians themselves are more reasonable than he when after matching Yahweh's wonders three times but failing the fourth attempt (to duplicate Yahweh's plague of mosquitoes), conclude from their failure that 'This [plague] is the finger of God.' But even in the unlikely event that the magicians' powers were at that time still unknown to Moses, the fact that no explanation occurs to him except that suggested by the self-identifying pronouncement itself is reason enough to brand him credulous. Even to those of us devoid of belief in sorcery *some* alternative would occur ('Perhaps it is the work of beings from a highly advanced extraterrestrial civilization'). Moses is, to be sure, curious: he says, 'I must go and look at this strange sight and see why the bush is not burnt.' But he does not, as reason requires, fetch up possible explanations and seek to eliminate all but the most likely. Moreover, if one takes those reasonings simply to have been prevented by the voice's subsequent communication, the interruption would have been only momentary to one bent on the exercise of reason. Not, in that case, merely: 'I must...see why the bush is not burnt' but instead: 'I must see [also] what is producing this voice.' Curiosity, perhaps a mark of reason, is momentarily present. But it is much too soon satisfied to save Moses from credulity. Moses just doesn't keep his head."

The Rationalist might continue this debate by responding that Moses did know of Pharaoh's sorcerers, yet also knew of their limitations: how they were unable to produce a plague of mosquitoes and likewise were unable to make a bush burn without being consumed or a voice proceed from a bush. Or the Rationalist might contend that when Moses approached the bush he knew the sorcerers were not involved because he knew they were nowhere in the neighborhood. The Irrationalist might retort that these speculations, if true, would tend to clear Moses of the charge but, if based on any scripture text at all, express an objectionably imaginative, *ad hoc* exegesis.

But however this debate might continue, we must now consider the Greeneian negative response to our title question. One making this response (call him the Nonrationalist) contends that his opponents' debate is futile and that it overlooks the really significant element, the element that renders their arguments and positions irrelevant to the correct account of Moses' coming to believe in God. "Moses' coming to believe," the Nonrationalist argues, "is not a case of his being persuaded by what he witnesses or experiences. Moses is not persuaded by anything whatever. *Pace* Rationalist and Irrationalist, the category 'being persuaded' is not applicable in the case. G. E. M. Anscombe has helpfully observed that 'The thought that God is speaking (if one hears a voice) is not the thought "What else can have produced this voice?"' (I once heard of a man who heard a radio when they were very new and exclaimed:

"Now I don't believe in God any more!")⁵ The man who gave up belief in God because he heard a radio is someone, let us say, who came to believe in God in the thought that a voice he heard was God's voice. (In this he would be like Moses, who also comes to believe in God in the thought that the voice he heard was God's. Whether there is the further similarity that the voice heard by the man announced that the speaker was God is not important and in any case cannot be determined from the information Anscombe supplies.) If the man supposes the thought that God has spoken to him is the thought 'What else can have produced this voice?' he will be understanding himself to have been persuaded (and, as he later comes to think, too easily persuaded) by what he has heard. 'What else can have produced that voice? I didn't even consider an alternative to "God," with the consequence that on hearing the radio I realized I had been credulous in failing to keep an open mind.' The man views himself (as both Rationalist and Irrationalist would) as someone who was persuaded by what he heard.

"But," continues the Nonrationalist, "consider again Graham Greene's arresting trope: 'I've caught belief like a disease.' How is Moses' thought (or conviction) that God is speaking to be understood? Greene's figure suggests this reply: Moses is not *persuaded* that it is God speaking; being persuaded is reasonable or unreasonable, justified or unjustified, sensible or silly; one is, for being persuaded, insightful or dull, meticulously observant or abstracted and careless, collected or bewildered, sensible or credulous. Such characterizations and assessments, though applicable in general in cases of coming to believe (e.g., of coming to believe that a huge manlike creature called Sasquatch roams the mountains of the Pacific Northwest or that one's new neighbors across the street deal in illegal drugs or that one's colleague does have a rich Uncle Albert after all), are inapplicable here. For Moses catches his conviction. He is infected, not persuaded. He does not accept the pronouncement as true; he comes down with the conviction that it is true."

So much can the Nonrationalist urge against the Rationalist and Irrationalist. But his adversaries may not find his words persuasive. There seems to be nothing in the detail of the burning bush episode requiring the adoption of his account. That in hearing the words "I am the God of your father..." Moses is convinced they are spoken by God does not by itself indicate whether his conviction is a case of being persuaded or is instead an infection. In his "thought" that God is speaking he is either susceptible or immune to Rationalist-Irrationalist wrangles, but the "thought" does not indicate which. Why, then, make an exception of Moses' case? Why declare his to be a case of "catching" when every other case of coming to believe something appears to be one of being persuaded or accepting?

Part of the answer is that taking Moses' case as one of infection makes it exceptional in the class of all cases of coming to believe but not exceptional

in the subclass of cases of coming to believe in God. Indeed, cases in this subclass are often taken this way. That is, they are taken as cases in which the person coming to believe is a kind of victim. For example, consider C. S. Lewis's revised version of his own earlier account of his coming to believe in God: "What I wrote in *Surprised by Joy* was that 'before God closed in on me, I was in fact offered what now appears a moment of wholly free choice.' But I feel my decision was not so important. I was the object rather than the subject in this affair. I was decided upon."⁶ It seems Lewis would happily apply Greene's trope to himself. So, it seems, would Simone Weil, who writes of her experience while reciting a poem of the English metaphysical poet George Herbert, whose work she had until that moment loved only for its aesthetic quality: "I used to think that I was merely saying beautiful verse; but though I did not know it, the recitation had the effect of prayer. And it happened that [in the autumn of 1938] as I was saying this poem...Christ himself came down, and He took me."⁷

Both Lewis and Weil might readily affirm that they caught belief like a disease. Yet if Moses' "thought" that God is speaking does not indicate whether his conviction is a being persuaded or an infection, surely the particulars of Lewis's and Weil's experiences would fail to do so in their cases. To be sure, their own accounts suggest infection. Lewis says that God closed in on him and that he was the object and was decided upon; Weil says Christ took her. These words suggest an assault, an invasion, a conquest, a capture, an affliction, an infection, a victim. But considering that their experiences probably contained, perhaps could contain no indication, isn't the Non-rationalist flavor of their accounts gratuitous? Couldn't Rationalist-Irrationalist terms equally well have been used, terms suggesting not victimization but willing acceptance with at least the bare possibility of refusal? It seems that even if the Nonrationalist construction of cases of coming to believe in God is commonplace, that construction is not the less arbitrary for it. An inspection of the details of those cases will likely convince us that those details are neutral in the matter, just as the details in the burning bush episode are neutral.

Yet even if all these cases are neutral in their details, all failing to validate the Nonrationalist's against his opponents' interpretation, it does not follow that the Nonrationalist's account is arbitrary. Grounds for it may perhaps be found elsewhere than in the cases themselves. And, indeed, grounds do seem to exist elsewhere. When Lewis says that he was the object and was decided upon he echoes Christ's instruction to his disciples, "You did not choose me, no, I chose you" (Jn. 15:16) and Yahweh's declaration through Moses to the people of Israel that "it is you that Yahweh our God has chosen to be his very own people out of all the peoples on the earth" (Dt. 7:6). Like Lewis, Christ's disciples and Yahweh's people are "the object rather than the subject in this

affair." The Nonrationalist construction of Lewis's case appears, then, not to be arbitrary, for it is grounded in doctrine; Lewis construes his own coming to believe in God nonrationalistically because he understands that the faith he now confesses enjoins him to do so. It is an injunction he might have seen, for instance, in the epistle to the Philippians, where Paul writes, "Unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ...to believe on Him" (Ph. 1:29) and in St. Augustine's observations, first, that here Paul "shows that [to believe on Christ is] the gift[] of God, because he said that [to believe on Him is] given" and, second, that Paul "was made a willing believer" (*A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints*, chapt. 4). Doctrine rooted in scripture enjoins Lewis to understand that, like Paul, he was *made* a believer, that his coming to believe in God was a gift, though not one merely offered, that he could have accepted or refused, but a gift received, a gift he had "caught...like a disease." His Nonrationalist construction is far from being arbitrary even if the details of his experience are neutral.

What, then, of Moses? Moses beholds the burning bush and hears the voice say "I am the God of your father..." in the conviction that God is speaking. The Nonrationalist rejects his adversaries' view that Moses is persuaded by what he sees and hears, a view that paints Moses as possibly remiss in failing to consider Pharaoh's sorcerers or whatnot. Echoing doctrine, he instead construes Moses' "thought" or conviction as a condition caught like a disease and so past both accepting and refusing.

On this view of coming to believe in God the "quality" of what one sees and hears does not matter. Whether it is the stars wheeling to form a message in the heavens or only words written or spoken by a human being and unattended by miraculous display, what matters is that the words declare that God exists and that one is attending and taking in this declaration. Just so long as this content is conveyed, the spectacularity or commonplaceness of the means is unimportant, because one is persuaded by neither message nor medium, but instead his conviction is as a gift received. A theophany thus has an essential inward aspect. It was to indicate this aspect that the translators of *The Jerusalem Bible* selected the preposition "in" instead of "to" when rendering St. Paul's words concerning his conversion: "Then God...chose to reveal his Son in [not "to"] me" (Gal. 1:15-16). The note explaining this choice reads: "Paul is not denying that his vision was real,...he is stressing the inwardness of this real vision...." Why does Paul stress this? To emphasize that the revelation penetrates his every defense. Paul is a castle, and an Invader occupies the keep.

But perhaps it is rash to speak of "the doctrine" that yields the Nonrationalist construction of coming to believe in God. Earlier we noticed that St. Paul intimates that "it [is] rational to acknowledge God." This and the passage in which it appears seem to indicate a doctrine supporting the Rationalist-Irra-

tionalist construction of coming to believe in God, the construction that holds it to be a matter of accepting or being persuaded. Paul writes that "what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them ["who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18)] since God himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity—however invisible—have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made" (Rom. 1:19-20). Thus, "it [is] rational to acknowledge God" (v. 28). The Rationalist-Irrationalist takes Paul to be saying that the existence and character of the universe ought to persuade all of us to acknowledge that God exists and has "everlasting power and deity." So understood, Paul's remarks teach a doctrine supporting the Rationalist-Irrationalist understanding of coming to believe in God. On this understanding one takes Moses to be persuaded that God exists by what he sees and hears, finding support for this in Paul's claim that all of us should be persuaded of God's existence by what *we* see and hear, i.e., the vast and varied universe. On this same understanding Rationalists and Irrationalists would clash over whether we would be justified in accepting, rational in being persuaded of God's existence. The Irrationalist would argue that to "acknowledge God" is not rational at all, but credulous, since doing so would indicate a failure to consider other possibilities, that as Moses was credulous in not considering Pharaoh's sorcerers, so would we be credulous in not considering naturalist accounts of the world's existence. Defending Paul, the Rationalist would retort that it is unnecessary—and, indeed, irrational—to consider "other possibilities" when God's existence is "perfectly plain... since God himself has made it plain."

It is not clear, however, that the Rationalist-Irrationalist reading of Paul's remarks is correct. Indeed, that reading seems to ignore something important. The target of Paul's denunciation at Romans 1:18-32 is not the atheist, the unbeliever in any and all gods, but is instead the pagan. It is instructive to read the Romans passage against the background provided by an episode described in Acts 14:8-18. In this episode Paul and Barnabas inform the pagan inhabitants of a certain Lycaonian town that "we have come with good news to make you turn from these empty idols [Zeus and Hermes] to the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that these hold" (v. 15). As in the Romans passage the condition of pagans, those who already believe in deities, is here being addressed. The suggestion of the two passages taken together is that it is irrational in pagans not to reject their gods and to acknowledge the living God, for no empty idol has attributes or powers that could account for the existence of heaven and earth and sea and all that these hold.

If this is the burden of these passages, then the Romans passage seems to give no support to the Rationalist-Irrationalist interpretation of Moses' coming to believe in God, for it addresses the case of those who, being

believers in gods, are so to speak already half way to belief in God. Where one's options are confined to gods, embracing God may well be rational, as Paul claims.

Of those who believe in no god at all (the condition we are supposing in Moses before the burning bush episode) Paul appears to take the Nonrationalist view that their coming to believe in God is a gift caught like a disease, that Moses' "thought" that God is speaking or the erstwhile atheist's "thought" that all the world is God's creation is an infection—with the infector being the third Person of the Trinity. Paul says, "An unspiritual person [a "man left to his own natural resources," explains the editor's note] "is one who does not accept anything of the Spirit of God: *he sees it all as nonsense*; it is beyond his understanding *because it can only be understood by means of the Spirit*" (1 Cor. 2:24, my italics).

The Romans passage does not appear to support the Rationalist-Irrationalist view of coming to believe in God from a condition of utter unbelief, since it concerns the case of coming to believe in God from a condition of belief in gods. The First Corinthians passage, on the other hand, appears to support the Nonrationalist account that coming to believe in God (by one who "sees it all as nonsense") is an infection, for according to the passage understanding comes to an unspiritual person only by an operation of "the Spirit."

Yet even though doctrine derived from scripture seems to support, indeed to require, the Nonrationalist account, embracing it may be premature. Coming to believe in God may not be comparable to coming down with an illness, but instead may find its analogens in cases of "perceptual beliefs." The phrase "perceptual belief" is taken sometimes to mean one's belief that he perceives a certain thing, sometimes to mean one's belief, in perceiving a certain thing, that the thing exists or is the case. In the first interpretation, that one perceives so-and-so is the belief's content; in the second, that so-and-so exists or is the case is the content. In what follows I will use the latter interpretation.

A case of such perceptual belief might be the following. After the main course at dinner one evening my wife says to me, "Know what's for dessert?" "No," I say, "what?" "Your favorite," she replies and places a steaming wedge of apple pie before me. Being a normal human being in familiar surroundings that are optimal for perceiving, I come in seeing and smelling it irresistibly to believe that before me there is a slice of apple pie.

Proponents of an analogy between coming to believe in God and such cases of perceptual belief would urge the following: that though my coming to my dinner-time belief is (like coming down with an illness) nonvoluntary, I am (unlike in falling ill) nevertheless rational or irrational, justified or unjustified, in coming to have it. I am rational, or justified, if I know or believe my circumstances and condition to be normal, as in the case described, and irrational, or unjustified, if I do not—if, for example, often enough I have

suffered prandial sensory delusions due perhaps to ill health or to my wife's cleverly disguised pranks.

According to the analogy, then, one's coming to believe that God exists is nonvoluntary and rational or irrational: as in perceiving the dessert I come nonvoluntarily to believe it is there in front of me, so in experiencing God's presence the unbeliever comes nonvoluntarily to believe that God exists; as I am rational or irrational depending on what I know or believe concerning my condition and circumstances, so is the unbeliever, depending on what he knows or believes about his.

Let us now apply this analogy to the case of Moses at the burning bush. Presumably to say that in experiencing God's presence Moses comes nonvoluntarily to believe in him means that in hearing God's self-identifying pronouncement Moses comes irresistibly to believe that God exists. Further, the analogy requires that in coming to believe this Moses is held to be rational or irrational, depending on what he knows or believes concerning his condition and circumstances.

It is this requirement, however, that appears to make Moses vulnerable to the charge of irrationality, a charge of which there seems no convincing Rationalist rebuttal. For, as was indicated in earlier pages, the Irrationalist is ready to point out that concerning his circumstances Moses surely "knows" Pharaoh's magicians are probably capable of producing the phenomena he witnesses and that in failing to consider this, Moses is as gullible or irrational as a husband who fails to consider his prankster-wife's earlier dinner-time deceptions.

The case seems no more favorable, under the perceptual-belief analogy, to any other such comer-to-believe in God. Whether a purported theophany be public, as in Moses' case, or private as in that of one who "feels" God's presence or "hears" his direction in a scriptural text or in a child's chanting "Take up and read; take up and read," reason enjoins one to consider the possibility that these experiences are not experiences of God. For one's circumstances—if (say) these are extended through books or the daily press—encompass the experiences of others who have "heard voices" and "felt presences," and at least some of these experiences the reasonable man will identify as self-deception or the echoes of madness. Reason, made relevant by the perceptual-belief analogy, then urges him to ask, "What makes my own experience different from these?" If, on the other hand, his circumstances provide him no cases for comparison, reason takes his conviction that God is present (speaking) as the thought "What else can have produced this voice?" But then reason must also supply the answer: "Well, *something* else can have produced it."

The difficulty with the Rationalist's perceptual-belief analogy is that it needlessly reopens the door to Irrationalist complaints concerning the "thought" or conviction that God is present or is speaking, whereas the

Nonrationalist's illness analogy closes that door. If the "thought" that God is speaking is a condition or gift caught like a disease and is not to be compared to a perceptual belief, whose rationality or irrationality is circumstance-dependent, the "gullibility" of "failing" to consider the possibility of Pharaoh's magicians, extraterrestrial visitors, self-deception, mental aberration, or what not, is not gullibility and not failure.

An additional point must be stressed here. As was noted above, Biblical teaching concerning coming to believe in God seems thoroughly nonrationalist: "...unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ...to believe on him..." (Phil. 1:29); "...I am sure that [God]...began a good work in you..." (Phil. 1:6); "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights..." (Jas. 1:17); "A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven" (Jn. 3:27); "What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast [Is it not a boast to claim that one is reasonable in coming to believe in God?] as if it were not a gift?" (1 Cor. 4:7). With such texts before him, the believer would, it seems, do well to endorse The Council of Orange's condemnation of the proposition "That the beginning...of faith...is not through the gift of grace...but is in us by nature...."

Early in this essay a distinction between *coming* to believe in God and believing (i.e., *continuing* to believe) in God was introduced. To this point the question being discussed has been "Is coming to believe in God reasonable or unreasonable?" I have defended the negative answer to this question.

I will conclude with a brief comment concerning the companion question "Is continuing to believe in God reasonable or unreasonable?" For this purpose it will be useful to introduce one more Nonrationalist trope: God is like an adroit process server; He places belief in one's possession like a subpoena: it is in one's hand, and there has been no opportunity for either refusal or acceptance. What light might this emblem shed on whether it is reasonable or unreasonable to continue to believe in God? Let us first ask whether it is reasonable or unreasonable to keep possession of a subpoena placed in one's hand. The answer is obvious: yes, it is reasonable or unreasonable. The etymological meaning of the word "subpoena"—"under penalty"—echoes and reminds us of this. Now, as one on whom a subpoena is served understands himself to be "under penalty" should he discard or fail to act in accordance with it, so one served with belief in God understands himself to be under penalty should he become apostate (Heb. 6:4-8; 10:26-31): he thus has at least one reason to continue to believe. In this way, continuing to believe in God is either reasonable or unreasonable; whereas (it is my chief contention) coming to believe in Him is neither the one nor the other.⁸

NOTES

1. Donat Gallagher, *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh* (London: Methuen London, Ltd., 1983), 296.

2. For an able critique of the view that coming to believe anything whatever can be directly volitional see Louis P. Pojman's "Belief and Will," *Religious Studies*, 14 (March, 1978), pp. 1-14.

3. Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 73. The remark quoted is part of Kenny's effort to show that "one could not believe God exists because God has revealed it" (v. pp. 73-75).

4. For a helpful discussion of this "vice," see the judicious amendment of Aristotle's doctrine of the virtuous mean in Kenny, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 f.

5. G. E. M. Anscombe, "Faith," a paper read at a colloquium held in the spring of 1968 at the University of Oregon. I believe that this paper remains unpublished. The essay appearing in Anscombe's *Collected Papers* under the title "Faith" is a version of the Oregon paper, but it does not contain the material I have quoted.

6. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 261.

7. Jacques Cabaud, *Simone Weil: A Fellowship in Love* (New York: Channel Press, 1964), 169-170. Bracketed material is Cabaud's.

8. I am grateful to Professor Joseph A. Hynes of the University of Oregon and to *Faith and Philosophy's* editor and anonymous referee for helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this paper.