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Book Review: The Uses Of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, And The Absurd

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to distant worlds, to commune with animals or nonhuman beings, and so forth. All of these can fairly be described as “natural” desires, shared by all or nearly all normal human beings. So, too, is the natural fantasy to live forever and achieve ultimate happiness in union with the *summum bonum*, God. But there is no reason to think that all or even most natural fantasies have objects that can satisfy them. Why, then, unless there is something compellingly different about it, should we think that our wishful desire to achieve infinite happiness with God has an object that can satisfy it?

Is Lewis’s argument from desire thus of no evidential value? By no means. For the convinced theist, one who reasonably believes *on other grounds* that God is loving and faithful, the experience of Joy, and more generally the desire for eternal happiness and union with God, can indeed provide support for belief in life after death. As Aquinas argues, it does seem that *if* there is a loving, all-perfect being God, he would not frustrate our deep human longing for what the Cambridge Platonist John Smith called “a blissful fruition of himself.” What this means is that Lewis’s argument must be seen—as it was almost certainly intended—as part of a cumulative case for the Christian faith.

Wielenberg’s *God and the Reach of Reason* offers an admiring yet critical appraisal of Lewis’s principal arguments for Christian belief. It is must reading for Lewis fans who value—as Lewis himself pre-eminently did—clear prose and rigorous logic.

The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd, by Matthew Bagger. Columbia University Press, 2007. Pp. 152. \$36.50 (cloth)

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In *The Uses of Paradox*, Matthew Bagger examines the status of paradox in various religious and philosophical texts, concentrating especially on Pseudo-Dionysius and Søren Kierkegaard, but giving attention to Chuang-Tzu, Nāgārjuna, and Pyrrhonian sceptics as well. Drawing on cognitive dissonance theory in psychology, Bagger notes that most people who have grounds to accept contradictory beliefs are motivated to avoid self-contradiction either by demonstrating that despite initial appearances the beliefs are in fact compatible or by rejecting one or more of the beliefs. What is of interest to him, however, is that despite this psychological tendency to eliminate contradiction, a number of religious and philosophical authors esteem paradox and, in doing so, actively embrace the dissonance of contradiction.

The principal argument of *Uses of Paradox* concerns cases in which individuals embrace paradox. The heart of the book, in the second and third chapters, advances two principal claims. First, Bagger wants to say that when a religious person embraces paradox, he or she typically puts

it to one of two possible uses, which Bagger labels cognitive asceticism and mysticism. Both uses aim to cultivate self-transformation. Cognitive ascetics seek the dissonance that paradox engenders for the same reasons that other ascetics subject themselves to physical discomfort and pain. The point of the ascetic practices, whether cognitive or physical, is to reorient the individual away from temporal ends and toward transcendent ones. Kierkegaard serves as Bagger's example of a cognitive ascetic. The Danish philosopher embraces the Christian paradoxes, especially the one concerning the relation of the infinite, eternal God to the temporal, human subject, and claims that affirming the contradictions, despite their absurdity, orients the subject away from reliance on the relativity of human existence and toward the absolute and eternal God. Mystics, for their part, actively commend the contradictions of the paradoxes of their faith, just as the cognitive ascetics do. However, for the mystics, and here Bagger supplies Pseudo-Dionysius as the prime example, the paradox serves as an occasion for the achievement of a mystical state in which a higher type of cognition than the cognition involved in reasoning is achieved. The contradiction the paradox presents is the means to this higher cognitive state, a state that is inexpressible in human language. Since the mystic uses paradox in this manner, she or he is not troubled by the cognitive dissonance of the paradox; what matters is the higher cognitive plane achieved in the mystical state.

The second principal claim Bagger wants to advance is that when a religious practitioner embraces paradox, the determination of whether he or she adopts the attitude of a cognitive ascetic or a mystic is a matter of his or her attitude toward his or her own social group and those outside that group. Here Bagger draws on anthropologist Mary Douglas' theory that a society's attitude toward anomalous creatures, animals that do not fit neatly into the society's classification scheme, is determined by the society's attitude toward those outside the social group. A society that is threatened by outsiders will treat anomalous animals as abominations, symbolically investing the animals with their concern to maintain the integrity of their own boundary. A society not so threatened, on the other hand, will have a tolerant attitude toward anomalous animals. Bagger suggests that paradoxes function in a similar manner. Paradoxes can represent the outsider because they stand outside the boundaries of reason and understanding. This has two implications. First, the more an individual is concerned with the external boundary of her or his social group, the more likely she or he will be to show concern about the external boundaries of her or his reason and understanding. The individual will manifest this concern by treating paradoxes as irresolvable, leaving them outside the bounds of rationality, and adopting the attitude of either cognitive asceticism or mysticism. The second implication is that whether such an individual views outsiders as a threat or prefers to see them incorporated into the social group influences whether the individual adopts the attitude of asceticism or mysticism. An individual who sees outsiders as a threat will maximize the dissonance in paradoxes, refusing to incorporate the paradox into the bounds of reason

just as he or she wishes to refuse to incorporate the outsider into the social group. This is to adopt cognitive asceticism. The individual who sees benefits from bringing the outsider into the social group, on the other hand, will take the mystical option, minimizing the dissonance, not by resolving the paradox, but by treating it as a revelatory means to a higher cognitive state in mystical union.

The last two chapters of the book take on related, but distinct themes from the central argument on social boundaries and paradox. Chapter 4 examines the cosmogonic question of why there is something rather than nothing, a question that Bagger sees as involving a paradox between absolute transcendence and immanence, since an answer to the question requires reference to something that must absolutely transcend the causal order, but must also be part of the causal order, since it itself is a cause (of the causal order). Bagger argues that the question is in actuality a pseudo-question. He appeals to Bas van Fraassen's requirement that any request for an explanation has to identify, implicitly at least, some portion of the causal order as relevant to the explanation. But since the nothingness to which the cosmogonic question refers has no causal order, the question does not meet van Fraassen's requirements, and so is not a real explanation request. Bagger thinks the cosmogonic question is at the heart of many mystical and religious practices and so these practices rest on mistaking a pseudo-question for a real question. In the final chapter, Bagger turns to skepticism, and he appeals to C. S. Peirce's philosophy to show that the Pyrrhonian skeptics' attempt to deny that they subscribe to any beliefs is belied by their involvement in practical affairs, an involvement that evidences commitment to various beliefs. Then, returning to the theme of social boundaries and paradox, Bagger claims that the case of the Pyrrhonians shows that an opposition to social boundaries generates a tendency toward skepticism.

Bagger's attempt to explain the adoption of each type of attitude toward paradox in terms of an individual's orientation toward social boundaries faces several difficulties. First is the problem of the small sample size. Bagger presents his work as appropriating social scientific methodology, but no proper social scientific result could be established on a sample size of a half dozen or so individuals. The specifics of Bagger's arguments are problematic, too. Bagger says that what is at issue in regard to paradox is the "external boundary of whatever social group most preoccupies a thinker," but he seems to assume that one can easily ascertain the identity of the social group of most concern to a thinker. Any member of a society is involved in a whole host of social groups and subgroups, pertaining to ethnicity, nationality, geography on the local and regional scale, gender, occupation or trade, economy, family or kin, religion, and so on. It is implausible to think that in general any one of these is the subject of paramount, lasting concern for any individual. Rather, different social identities matter in different contexts, and people typically visit various contexts through the course of any given day, as they go about their affairs. Matters of social identity are complicated, not easily transparent either to oneself

or a theorist. The variety of social identities that individuals inhabit results in a temptation for a social theorist with Bagger's concerns to engage in gerrymandering, selecting for an individual the social identity that confirms the hypothesis over the individual's social identities that do not. I suspect Bagger is guilty of this. According to Bagger, in Pseudo-Dionysius' case, it is the boundary between the church and the rest of society that matters; in the case of John of the Cross, it is the boundary between the discalced and observant Carmelites; in the case of Nicholas of Cusa, it is at one point in Bagger's argument the boundary between the Western Church and the Eastern Church, at another that between Christians and Turks; for Ta-hui Tsung-kaio, it is the boundary between his Ch'an lineage and a rival one. The object of the Pyrrhonian skeptics' concern is not even their own society, but the social boundaries of philosophical sects to which they do not belong. The case of Kierkegaard, a central figure in the arguments of *Uses of Paradox*, is particularly unconvincing, since the boundary that Bagger says most concerns the Dane is the boundary between true Christians and Christendom, a boundary that is marked by a subjective, inward relationship to God, not at all a social boundary in any conventional sense. Bagger's hypothesis is interesting to be sure, but it is far too underdeveloped to exhibit independent merits, and it involves too many differences from Douglas' theories to benefit from her evidence and argumentation. Douglas' theories involve societies and their symbolic relation to bodies, human and animal. Bodies are amenable to represent societies symbolically, according to Douglas, because bodies are concrete and have distinct and perceivable boundaries, and bodies' various functions, waste products, and orifices confront the members of a society in tangible ways. Bagger, in contrast, wants to use things highly abstract, such as reason and understanding, to serve as a symbolic representation of society. It is doubtful that something so abstract as the boundaries of reason would be fit to represent the boundaries of society in the way Bagger suggests.

The conclusion to *Uses of Paradox* has some puzzling features, in that Bagger positions his book as an exhibition of the superiority of naturalistic approaches to paradox over supernaturalistic ones. He says he has given a convincing social-psychological explanation for the religious fascination with paradox and so rendered "metaphysical" explanations superfluous. He even goes so far as to say his approach is emancipatory, implying I suppose that one who subscribes to supernaturalistic or metaphysical accounts of paradox is in and/or perpetuating bondage of some sort. This is all somewhat distracting, both because he has not substantiated these claims and because his explanatory hypotheses are compatible, as far as I can tell, with approaches to paradox that endorse supernatural and metaphysical realities. Nevertheless, Bagger's recommendation that we look at paradoxes not just as a problem for logical investigation, but as matters with practical implications, is valuable, and his distinction between ascetic and mystical appropriations of paradox is an important contribution to the study of religion.