

Gordon Schochet

Response to Roundtable:
It Depends What You Mean By...



I.

The histories of political and social thought and normative philosophy are littered with continuing and unresolved debates about how we should act. What we should do, what are the *right* things to do, and why should we do them are among the most important questions that exercise humanity. We have knowledge of these discussions extending as far back as recorded history, but the questions themselves have to have been with us since the beginnings of human consciousness, for they are at the foundations of our relations with one another as well as of our fidelity and obedience to the principles and rules that structure our lives. To the extent that behavior is *prescribed* by an authoritative source—and when, in the final analysis, is it not?—be that source a system of social norms or a determinant but possibly remote or elusive human or supernatural rule-giver, it is ultimately coerced. Behind every rule-system is a recognition that people need to be directed, that they will not spontaneously or consistently do what is appropriate or necessary. Order is *established*, and rules are *commanded*.

Behind these quasi-anthropological, commonplace notions are deep questions of justification and legitimacy: who decides which rules are necessary, and what empowers the rule-givers? When the process and structure become contentious—when, that is, there are conflicts about the substance of the rules, the legitimacy of the rule-givers, or the attraction of rival systems—even more profound issues are at play, questions about how we reason, about what and how we know, and about what constitutes a compelling claim.

Obviously, there are relationships among the issues—*knowing* what is right and why it should be done is also *knowing* how to act—but that simply raises further questions: what makes something right and therefore obligatory, and how does one acquire this necessary sense of right and wrong?

Nowhere, perhaps, are these debates more intense and contentious than in the (often manufactured) confrontation of philosophy by theology and religion, and all the more so in the realm of politics. As important as all this may be to philosophers and theologians, there is a kind of intensity in a teapot to these debates for the ordinary person, the workaday sort of individual who goes about her or his day doing what needs to be done, making ends meet, attempting—sometimes struggling—to live a “decent” life according to what is probably “conventional morality.” Such people, we are told, do not worry very much about deep principles or their foundations; if they are responsive to any structured belief system at all, they tend to look more to religion for guidance than to ethics, for they are not concerned with the formalities or the relative open-endedness of ethical philosophy.

Religion, from this perspective, provides certainty and stability; it gives answers to pressing questions. In their crudest forms, religion and theology stipulate *how* people should act (in accord with divine fiat) and *why* they should do so (because God commanded it). Philosophy, by contrast, is presumed to be more about judgment and personal responsibility than about the acceptance and obedience that are said to characterize religion. Philosophy rests on a conscious and almost perpetual questioning and willing and occasional revision.

Whatever else it deals with and however infamously, politics purports to be about the *authoritative* making and enforcing of rules for the whole of a society. The hallmark of politics is that it replaces naked power with organized, legitimate coercion, which is sometimes called legitimate authority.¹ And it has been the conceit of Western politics and philosophy since the Enlightenment that the modern political system, the secular state, is the proper successor to what is now often called the “confessional state,” in which religion and politics were intertwined. That religion, it must be kept in mind, was Christian: Roman Catholic Christianity before the Reformation, and afterward denominational Protestantism in central and northern Europe. Because of its religious uniformity and the

¹ There is a sense in which *legitimate* authority is redundant, for the distinction between power and authority means that authority is legitimate by its nature; the general understanding of these concepts is that authority entails the legitimate exercise of power. *Political* authority, in this respect, is uniquely entitled among social institutions to use power to enforce its rules.

ties between religion and politics, that pre-modern state was perfectionist and committed to the public or “civic” virtue and the salvation of its members. It was also persecutorial, joining religion in its rejection of dissent and its insistence on harmony and order as social prerequisites to virtue and salvation. This intolerance did not immediately disappear when states became Protestant.

The modern or secular state, born of the religious variety that was the political consequence of the Reformation, did not abandon or even replace the *substance* of the theological principles that had long been incorporated into politics. It did eventually replace the theological justifications of those principles with secular and philosophic ones; it eliminated religious qualifications for political membership; and, in the long run, it unwittingly developed principles that would both sustain multiple religious denominations within a single state and be acceptable to those different faiths. This marked a major shift in politics from substantive ends to sustaining procedures. The most important accomplishments of the modern state were the transformation of liberty into a cardinal political principle (that carried with it the separation of politics from matters of personal concern, including religious beliefs and activities) and the development of toleration, first as a pragmatic response to ineliminable diversity and then as a doctrine that became one of the most visible and important accomplishments of modernity.

II.

While states were separating themselves from theology, philosophy too was attempting to declare its independence and to develop moral arguments that did not require divine justifications but rested upon “nature,” reason, and/or experience. Invocations of God increasingly functioned as place-holder arguments, assertions of formal causes and conclusions to conceptual regressions. Skepticism is never satisfying, but even secular natural law and minimalist natural religion, then as now, carry too much metaphysical baggage for the devotees of reason and enlightenment. Some seventeenth-century philosophers such as Spinoza appeared to view religion as the enemy of philosophy; others such as Locke and Descartes recognized a conflict between the reason of philosophy and the faith of theology but attempted to bridge the chasm that separated them.

The secular state that emerged from these ongoing conflicts never fully shed its origins in religion, and it continues to share conceptual and practical space with ethics and theology. The political order often derives its legitimacy and justifies its actions with principles and standards rooted

in those areas, but by its nature, politics is not reducible to morality or religion. Because its reach is so wide, its material power so great, and the consequences of its decisions so immediate, the modern state is more definitive than either of them. The political process is materially coercive, and the costs of violating its requirements are bodily deprivations and physical punishments that are as nearly contiguous to the violations as possible. Ultimately, the end of politics is order and stability accomplished in the best of states through the imperfectionist pursuit of secular justice; it is not the job of the modern state, by its own lights, either to make its members virtuous or to enable them to achieve salvation. Those goals belong, respectively, to private morality and organized religion. The role of the state, if any, is to protect the pursuit of those ends to the extent that doing so does not interfere with civil peace or “public interest.”

However, it is precisely the continuing, substantive relationship of politics to morality and religion that legitimates the periodic intrusion of the seemingly never-ending Jerusalem-Athens debate into public affairs.

Philosophy is purportedly about experience, reason, and knowledge, whereas religion and theology are presumed to occupy the domains of faith and belief. While both claim to be about the pursuit of truth and the quest for stable, reliable knowledge, the two endeavors are often defined in ways that make them unavoidably antagonistic to one another.

Trumpeting the virtues of their own relative, open-ended, and tentative inquiries, self-styled philosopher-combatants caricature religious thinkers and theologians as close-minded, hostile to free inquiry, sometimes even rigidly authoritarian, and the intellectual forces behind—if not the actual perpetrators of—untold evil, all of which is amply observable in the spate of anti-religion books published over the past few years.² Champions of religion, on the other hand, respond that philosophy lacks a firm foundation, denies purpose in the universe, and robs humans of their spiritual needs. Philosophers, in turn—some philosophers, at least—respond with versions of “realism” and “naturalism” through which they seek to defend an objective normative or moral order but without recourse to divinity, a perspective that avoids the most problematic aspects of theology only by ignoring the question of cause. Philosophers cloak themselves with the mantle of science and paint theology with the tar of intolerant mysticism. Theology, by contrast, self-adorned with divine grace, sees philosophy as dangerously destructive. And so it goes.

² The best-known and most contentious of them is Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hatchette, 2007), but see also two works by Sam Harris: *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2007).

III.

What's at stake in all this? Why is this series of debates ever-recurrent, and why are its participants so strident? The stakes as represented by both sides are nothing less than the world itself, for this is the age-old battle between virtue and corruption, good and evil, right and wrong, heaven and hell—a war, the theologians will tell us, that began in the Garden of Eden and has been going on ever since. What is at issue is whether we are going to live with purpose and direction or be enslaved by our baser instincts and passions. For their part, the philosophers claim to be defending freedom and enlightenment. Theologians, on the other hand, are saving us all from the evils of secularism and setting us back on the spiritual path from which we departed in the Enlightenment.

This controversy—this renewal of Tertullian's attack—has particular resonance in contemporary United States politics, where it has acquired a special urgency. The issues are not religious liberty vs. political intolerance and hyper-secularism, as they appeared to be in the French banning of religious garb in schools; nor are they the standard version of the familiar First Amendment debates about the meanings of “free exercise” and “establishment.”³ The American version has grown out of profound religious objections to abortion, to homosexuality, to the legal prohibition of religious observances and teachings in public schools, to the teaching of evolutionary biology, and to the fear of relativism by so-called religious fundamentalists. They would probably all agree with Hamlet's declamation:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.⁴

Religious activists have been encouraged by numbers of prominent political figures and most especially by the creation of what President George W. Bush called his “faith-based initiative,” which used federal funds to pay for the public activities of and services provided by religious groups. With President Bush's support and encouragement, evangelical and conservative religious groups have increasingly inserted themselves into political debates. Interestingly, these groups appear to be precisely the anti-reason proponents of absolute, unquestioning obedience to divine commands feared by Spinoza and Strauss.

³ The relevant passage of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution declares: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

⁴ Hamlet, act 1, scene 5.

To enter into a substantive discussion of what is sometimes called the “ethics of divine commands” would be to take up theology. But it is worth noting that the call for absolute obedience to the word of God is reminiscent of the classic Calvinist interpretation of the God of the Old Testament as a God of law, in contrast to the God of love of the New Testament. And it is further worth noting the possibility that Hobbes’ interest in the Hebrew Bible (his “Old Testament”) was rooted in that accepted account of the “God of the Hebrews” as an unyielding God of law, in an understanding of the jurisprudential implications of the Old Testament as “positivistic” in the same sense that Hobbes’ “command theory” of law and jurisprudence led to a strict version of legal positivism.

IV.

At the outer reaches, as the brief remarks about American religious fundamentalists were designed to illustrate, religion does concern itself with matters not directly touched by philosophic reason—the spiritual aspects of our lives. But even if we assume a human “need” for spiritual balm, does that necessarily make religion “esoteric” and/or mysterious and beyond ordinary discourse? And does it follow that religion is to be approached and interpreted only through feelings and perhaps only by those who are properly trained and designated? It is certainly not the case that anything dealing with or answering to that alleged “need” is religious rather than philosophic. But surely this is overinterpretation, at least in terms of this debate.

As part of his re-configuring of political philosophy, Leo Strauss not only resurrected Tertullian’s Jerusalem-Athens distinction—Tertullian is conspicuously absent from Strauss’ discussion—he also advanced his theory of “persecution” and the esoteric understanding of philosophic texts. Did he, contrary to his acceptance of the separation between religion and philosophy, see what amounts to a religious component to philosophy? We may ask further whether it is (necessarily) the case that spirituality requires mystery. Finally—and our answers will depend on where we want to put religion and theology—are “concealment” and elusive meanings, esoterica, necessary for the survival of humanity? That is, is society itself something of a mystery, some of whose *fundamental* secrets cannot be revealed?⁵ But this distinction may end in question-begging and come to no more than that theology is *not necessarily* the same as philosophy. Theology and religion, as Locke asserted in his *Letter Concerning*

5 For a recent discussion of many of these issues in the context of Jewish thought, see Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Implications*, trans. Jackie Feldman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

Toleration, have to do with our relationships to God and are of no concern to others. What does that leave for philosophy?

There are philosophers of religion and/or theology whose function is *outside* religion and theology and whose domain is *about* religion. Such philosophers claim to assess the logic and “truth-value” of religious claims and to explain how such claims work. These philosophers are analogous to philosophers of history and science, who purport to tell us what history and science are, how explanations in those fields work (or not), and what the practitioners of those subjects do.

On the other hand, philosophers of art, law, and politics—like the philosophical theologians below—actually philosophize about the *internal* aspects of those subjects. Similarly, philosophical theologians make claims *within* religion that are part of theology proper. Their theological assertions and claims are of the sort that (other) philosophers examine and evaluate; the philosophic theologians offer them as warranted.

Missing from all this are philosophers of philosophy, who examine philosophy in the same ways that philosophers of religion, science, and history analyze and evaluate the ways those subjects actually work.

We are left, then, with only a vague sense of what of substance philosophers actually do. There are some who hold that the task of philosophy is to uncover truth, which is precisely what some theologians claim to do. It is, of course, true that responses to the Jerusalem and Athens opposition will turn on how we characterize those ancient cities, what we make them represent. If the antonymy is religion or theology vs. philosophy, how do we move beyond the ways the practitioners describe themselves? Are we required to function as philosophers in order to determine how well religion and philosophy satisfy their own criteria?

V.

Our perceptual world has been *constructed* by history and language. Our beliefs, attitudes, and practices are given to us by the world(s) we inhabit, and we understand them through the words by which they have been constituted. The world is not simply *there* to be perceived, understood, and accepted; we have to learn, to be told, not only what there is but what *there* itself is. At some level, this is always a matter of power and control, of imposition, however subtle and apparently non-invasive, by those in charge, the “rulers,” who are the arbiters of fashion as well as of belief and practice and therefore the purveyors of what is accepted as reality.

The more competition there is for control, the more important it will seem and the more contentious the struggles surrounding it will

be. Contests among rival epistemological and metaphysical systems are therefore irreducibly political. And when there are serious rivalries and/or perceived dangers, the contestations become all the more vital and contentious. It is always a matter of what is at stake and how serious the consequences of a defeat would be: people fight harder for what is most important to them and what is most seriously threatened. And what is at stake in these repeated contests between what amounts to Jerusalem and Athens is nothing less than “truth” itself and the way it is achieved and maintained.

Although it has been under frequent theoretical (and occasional physical) attack for several decades, the “liberal” polity or society remains the standard model around which most discussion circulates. Among its positive features are its openness, diversity, and commitments to liberty, rights, and toleration. In addition, it is characterized by social and, ideally, economic mobility that, also ideally, tends toward equality (those are at least its ideological goals). But all these make for ineliminable contestation and, in contrast to more homogeneous or authoritarian states, relative instability both because of the encouragement of rival points of view that is among the liberal state’s defining features and because of the opportunities for dissent that genuine diversity provides. Paradoxically, societies or cultures that acquire self-consciousness about the inherent fragility and contentiousness of their belief structures tend to become more permissive (and therefore subject to greater conflict) and epistemologically less homogeneous and less stable, while their internal belief-communities themselves become more stable, homogeneous, and doctrinaire as their positions are granted increasing legitimacy.

When the multiplicity becomes a virtue, and a society adopts a pragmatic coherence rather than a consistency-based understanding of its own larger existence, it is likely to move away from the perfectionism and certainty demanded by its smaller, individual communities (sub-cultures). Instead, such a society will adopt an imperfectionist tentativeness in which the institutions and behaviors that afford, preserve, and regulate the competition will become its chief characteristics: fairness and procedures will become the guiding principles, and the ends will be not the achievement of “the good” but the doing of “the right” and the preservation of competition. The very existence of these epistemic battles will mark the essence of the society.

Even the most diverse societies have characteristic modes of thought that more or less reflect widespread social and scientific-technological commitments and perhaps even the beliefs of many of their members. These outlooks, comparable to the “culture systems” described by

Clifford Geertz⁶ and often the products of what Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann called societies' dominant or "leading institutions,"⁷ are fluid and generally not consistent. In these terms, we might say that the "leading institution" of Western Europe and North America in the twentieth century was "science" and that "the Church" was the leading institution of medieval and early-modern Europe. From this it seems to follow that strong sub-cultures as the carriers of coherent belief systems will seek to dominate society, and those that are in the ascendant will be intolerant both of critics and of defectors and will fear rivalries and the potential loss of power.

The replacement of one ideological system by another—the ascendance of a new leading institution—does not mean that the old views and their adherents and supporting practices have disappeared or been thoroughly discredited. Social change of this sort does not constitute a Kuhnian "paradigm shift." "Flat earth" and the Ptolemaic universe may no longer be valid scientific positions, but in the same conceptual way that Tertullian's rejection of the possibility of a conversation between Athens and Jerusalem is periodically restaged, religious fundamentalists continue to insist on the direct and immediate roles of their beliefs in the formation of public policies in secular societies. Indeed, one version of the story of the emergence of the diverse, secular state suggests that it was not the noble principles of openness, equality, and equity that led to liberal society. It was, on the contrary, the grudging and pragmatic recognition of the practical ineliminability of dissent and diversity that led to the practice of limited tolerance that would eventually give rise to principled liberty.

Tertullian, no friend to liberty or to toleration, saw and feared the clash of his *religious* belief system, Jerusalem, with the *philosophic* belief system of Athens (become Rome). He championed Christianity's reliance upon the certainty of the universal availability of salvation and the promise of eternal rewards based upon revelation and faith against the Athenian philosophy of reason, questioning, and persuasion. It was bad enough for the pagan or the Jew to reject Christianity, but even worse was the Christian who turned heretic by embracing philosophy, and it was against that latter temptation that Tertullian's condemnation of philosophy was directed. It was the subversive openness of philosophic reason,

⁶ See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), especially ch. 8, "Ideology as Cultural System"; and Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁷ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967).

its erosion of faith and Christian love, and its inability to find truth that he feared.

What Tertullian could not have known—and could not have acknowledged, even had it been possible for him to have known of it—is that, as postmodernists claimed, all commitments are matters of faith, of reliance on the stipulations of science and philosophy, no less than the belief in God. The claim itself is interesting, for it suggests that all “knowledge” is a matter of preference and what “makes sense” to or “works” for someone. But are the commitments to philosophy and religion alike in the same sense that apples and bananas are both fruits, differing only in their details? On what grounds does one conclude that something makes sufficient sense to be accepted? And if we conclude that the world is not so arbitrary as the extreme form of the postmodernist analysis implies, what do we put in its place?

Science and philosophy, on the one hand, rely on “evidence” and “reason,” and religion, on the other, is dependent on “faith,” but are they truly the separate domains that Tertullian and secular modernists alike maintain? Do they mutually and necessarily threaten one another’s integrity? Surely there is more to religion than the unquestioning acceptance of divine fiat that is ascribed to it by its detractors. The difficult road in quest of the good life that philosophy compels us to walk, understanding and accepting the notions that we are *obliged* to do things because they are right and good, is ultimately no different from the continuing theological insistences that we overcome our baser inclinations in order to achieve some full measure of our humanity. There is much wisdom in holy writ,⁸ be it the Christian Old and New Testaments or the Hebrew Bible, but all too often the keepers of those sacred texts are quick to assert the mystery and irreducible divinity of what they superintend.

Religion often makes its way by story-telling. We learn the nature and value of justice and goodness from narratives and parables, and the collections of stories and moral and divine injunctions provide traditions and commonalities that bind their audiences together. Some of the stories—Cain and Abel is an excellent instance—are designed to teach by negative example. Narrativity is not the exclusive preserve of theology, nor does its use destroy the claim to be philosophic. Surely, Plato and Socrates are not to be dismissed from the ranks of philosophers because they resorted to narrative and drama to make their points. And theological “lessons” are not to be rejected because their contextual validity is dependent on some form or another of divinity. Brotherly love is no less

⁸ For a learned, elegant, and often amusing—and heretical to some—recent recreation of some of the wisdom of the Hebrew Bible, see Mordecai Roshwald, *Biblical Revisions and Para-Biblical Visions* (New York: World Audience Books, 2008).

important as a social norm because God punished Cain for violating it. It is clear that there remains much to talk about.

VI.

It was widely argued by the analytic philosophy of the mid-twentieth century both that the primary task of philosophy was conceptual clarification and that there could be no intelligible discussions until people agreed on the meanings of their terms. That may have been a pair of overstatements, but each contained more than a mere kernel of truth. Among the things philosophers are uniquely qualified to do is to help us clarify, to assist us in determining what it is that we are actually attempting to talk about. Short of achieving those ends, we are, for the most part, doomed to be talking—and arguing—past one another.

The 1960s West End revue *Beyond the Fringe* included a skit that was a caricature of analytic philosophy: A mock account by Bertrand Russell (portrayed by Jonathan Miller) of his first meeting with G.E. Moore. Upon entering Moore's room, the alleged Russell noticed a basket in Moore's lap.

“Moore,” I said, “do you have any apples in that basket?”

“No,” he replied....

I decided to try a different logical tack. “Moore,” I said, “do you then have some apples in that basket?”

“No,” he replied....

“Moore,” I said, “do you then have apples in that basket?”

“Yes,” he replied.

And from that day forth we remained the very closest of friends.

In these terms, it is fruitful to ask whether Tertullian and Spinoza and Strauss actually had religion and philosophy in their sights, or was it merely *some* versions of them both? If we have succeeded in clearing away some of the conceptual debris that has been accumulating for almost 2,000 years, we might be just about ready to enter into the conversation.