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## ARGUMENTS FROM DESPAIR

A spirit of despondency afflicts many writers on traditional religious thought even if some of them succeed in disguising, to some degree, their despair and appear outwardly composed and confident. This is not entirely surprising. Beginning with the scientific revolution of the 17th century, following which the view that physical events have natural causes strictly governed by laws took deeper and deeper roots in people's mind, blow appears to have followed blow and cherished religious assumptions seem to have been demolished one by one. The relentless onslaught of the forces of skepticism has turned the gradual retreat of believers into a rout. Smarting from too many defeats, or rather what have been construed as defeats, many theists, unaware that there is plenty of room for religious belief based upon the solid ground of reality, have been driven to such despair as to see no other way but retreat into a world of fantasy. Rumors of the entire collapse of the rational foundations of theism have been greatly exaggerated and the need to withdraw into castles in the air has by no means arrived.

What I am trying to say is that in spite of the undeniable conquests triumphant atheism has made in the hearts of Modern Man, we must not lose our heads and arrive hastily at defeatist conclusions but try to retain our capacity for sober thought and to look at the evidence in the light of reason. An extreme illustration of the sort of panicky retreat from traditional positions I have in mind has been demonstrated by the disturbing theological conclusions some have drawn from the horrors of the Holocaust. The issue is fairly elusive, for many of the statements made in this context are sufficiently ambiguous to place them beyond logical scrutiny; but perhaps it may be safe to cite one brief passage verbatim and to treat it on the assumption that it

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means what it seems to mean. In *After Auschwitz*, Richard Rubenstein, a non-believer, writes:

After Auschwitz many Jews did not need Nietzsche to tell them that it is unquestionably no longer possible to believe in the old God of Jewish patriarchal monotheism.\*

No elaboration is given, Rubenstein seems to believe that atheism follows as surely from the catastrophic events of Auschwitz as day follows night and any sort of argument to demonstrate this would be utterly superfluous. He has supporters who have found his conclusion firmly established and in no need of justification. Furthermore, a number of adherents of traditional Judaism, instead of stopping to ask themselves what were the premises assumed here and the rules of inference that were used to arrive at this momentous conclusion, have been frightened into assuming that we are facing an assertion which must be reckoned with. It was taken by some believers to be proven that entirely unquestioning faith has now become problematic. To continue to maintain the simple-minded belief that the universe is governed by an omnipotent and omnibenevolent Being who is concerned with all the details of every individual's fate, without some elaborate qualification, is to disregard the magnitude and uniqueness of the tragedy we have sustained. No less than a new theology, to deal with the obstacles to belief that have recently arisen, has been proclaimed by some.

The question one obviously wants to ask those who subscribe to this new theology and at the same time feel a commitment to the basic tenets of Judaism is: why did they not first ask themselves before they decided that a hasty retreat from traditional positions was called for, whether, indeed, the situation we find ourselves since the end of World War II raised any relevant unprecedented problems?

Now is it indisputable that the Nazis have reached depths of evil unfathomed before. Yet it is a fact that a great deal of human suffering did also exist before them. How was it possible

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\*The passage is rendered here somewhat differently from the original so as to avoid reprinting a blasphemous phrase.

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to reconcile the assertion that the Almighty is omnibenevolent with what had to be endured for instance by galley slaves or by those committed to medieval torture chambers? From the statement that after Auschwitz and not before did it become evident that there is no Divine Providence, one may infer that Rubenstein has an answer to this. His statement implies that a Supreme Benevolent Being could permit all the sufferings of previous centuries while not those of ours.

Thus we seem entitled to assume that Rubenstein and his followers have a solution to the problem of evil as it existed before 1940. What is it? It is very difficult to find any indication in his writings what the answer to this question might be. For argument's sake let us for a moment assume that he was willing to subscribe to one of the best known theodicies, referred to as the "virtuous response to suffering" (VRS) solution. To put it very briefly, according to this solution, it is by no means the case that all pain is punishment. Some pain exists, for example, in order to provide opportunities for the victim or others to respond virtuously to suffering. We are to assume the following.

(a) A universe in which there are opportunities for noble acts and thoughts which are expressions of VRS, is morally superior to a universe in which there are no such opportunities.

(b) The goodness of the universe is not measured solely by the amount of pleasure it contains but also by the presence of opportunities for the generation of morally precious human sentiments and deeds; in other words, a morally superior universe is a better universe.

(c) The Almighty wishes to have the best of all possible worlds.

(d) It is logically impossible to have opportunities for VRS unless actual cases of suffering exist.

Now (a) (b) (c) and (d) together entail that there will be unhappiness in the world. One objection that might be raised is that by allowing evil human sentiments and deeds, the moral worth of the universe is debased just as much as it is raised by VRS. The answer to this problem may be that given man's innate propensity for evil, freely willed virtuous response constitute a high achievement, and their moral value outweighs the

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disvalue of evil which comes more naturally.

Another question which may be raised: is it fair to the victim to be singled out as the instrument to increase the opportunities for VRS? To this it might be replied that such a person will be amply compensated to his own complete satisfaction if not in this world—like Job—then in the world to come where opportunities for compensation are limitless.

If indeed it should be the case that Rubenstein agrees that the VRS solution was capable of dealing with the problem of evil as it existed in former times then it is hard to see why he should reject it now. The effectiveness of the VRS solution is clearly independent of the amount of suffering endured by humans. No matter what ordeals people are subjected to in this world, their magnitude is finite, endured only for a certain amount of time; hence they are infinitesimally small compared to the magnitude of the counterweighing bliss that may be bestowed in the eternal life of the hereafter.

Of course some people may come up with what may seem to them a good reason why the VRS solution is to be deemed flawed. In that case, however, it could not be used at any time in history as a solution to the problem of evil. For a moment I shall consider the possibility that Rubenstein might wish to claim that while the VRS was acceptable in previous generations it is now no longer acceptable. He might perhaps argue that the VRS solution is not effective unless a belief in survival after physical death is granted, and this for modern man is no longer possible. He might point out that even among committed, traditional Jews, the hereafter has ceased to constitute the aim at which all of a person's aspirations are focused. In fact many Orthodox Jews are reluctant to dwell on the nature of the world to come and whenever possible avoid altogether referring to it.

I shall not attempt here to elaborate on the subject of the hereafter. Suffice it to be said that anyone who finds it hard to believe in the survival of the soul cannot attribute his difficulties to the events of the Holocaust. Those tragic events cannot be construed as providing any confirmation of the proposition that a person does not survive his physical death. But the theologians we have referred to have explicitly stated that it was Auschwitz

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which changed their outlook on the question of the unconditional benevolence of the Almighty.

I shall not discuss any further reputable attempts that have been made to solve the ancient problem of evil. The foregoing example was an illustration of a general truth applicable to all theodicies worthy of attention: their effectiveness is independent of the amount of suffering, or their magnitude, that exists. It is necessarily the case, however, that these new theologians either accept one or another solution to the classical problem of evil or that they do not. In the first case the horrors of Nazism have not provided any new basis on which to question the benevolence of the Almighty. In the latter case those theologians had just as much reason to query the existence of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent Being before those events, as they have now. Thus I submit that while the grave lessons that derive from the traumatic experiences endured by our people during the years of the Holocaust will take generations to absorb, these experiences are irrelevant to the purely logical question whether the two propositions—"The Almighty having the attributes assigned to Him in classical theology, rules the world" and "The world is as it is" i.e. it contains all the sufferings we know of—are consistent. I do not intend to claim callously that what I have said is sufficient, or indeed, that I could say anything that would be sufficient, to provide comfort to the mourners of the Holocaust. All I wished to do was to produce an answer to the question what conclusions are strictly warranted to be drawn from what reasonable premises.

## II.

The preceding example was an extreme one where believers have allowed themselves to be intimidated into thinking that a *prima facie* case has been established for skepticism. A somewhat less extreme example of retreat from a traditional position is provided by the widespread idea that even if there may be no positive proof for the denial of the existence of a Supreme Being, it has been clearly demonstrated that there can be no positive proof or empirical confirmation to support theism either. Has

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not Hume destroyed the Argument from Design and Kant the Ontological Argument? And have not philosophers ever since kept piercing holes in all the traditional arguments for theism? The whole enterprise of attempting to construct arguments in favor of religious belief has been declared by many to be misguided. Furthermore—some theists who are adherents of this defeatist dogma try to comfort themselves—it is in fact a good thing that this is so: our inability to use reason in establishing our belief enhances the value of unquestioning faith. It is nobler not to demand evidence and proof before one is prepared to place one's unwavering trust in the Almighty. Some will go even further and declare the exercise of constructing proofs for one's belief not merely futile and unworthy but even dangerous. He who bases his faith on arguments, is running the risk of having those arguments refuted and thus having his faith destroyed.

I was prompted to think about these matters by a recent article in TRADITION.\* I shall not answer most of the author's critical points since I trust that any reader who reads the book attentively enough and tries honestly to follow the arguments developed in it, will quite easily be able to answer those points. I hasten to add that I do not have the slightest intention to attribute any dishonesty to Mr. Schnall and I am by no means suggesting that he has willfully misconstrued my arguments and suppressed the obvious answers to his objections. He was simply led astray as a result of the various pressures acting upon him. In correspondence he admits "I am not at all sure that my criticisms are correct." But when writing his article he was apparently laboring under the impression that only destructive arguments on the part of a reviewer are of any value.

In his essay he is truly generous in praising highly a large number of the views expressed in the book. He mentions a variety of subjects I have dealt with but which he decided not to discuss "partly because I could not find anything wrong with them." Thus he did not believe that a reviewer may sometimes profitably discuss any part of a work which he thinks are good, perhaps articulate the various reasons why he thinks they are

\*Schnall, I. M., "Proving Theism: Reflections on George Schlesinger's *Religion and Scientific Method*," TRADITION, Volume 17, No. 3 1978.

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good and also explicate the presuppositions and implications of those arguments of which he approves, thus to provide useful illumination of the structure of the reasoning in which the author has been engaged.

But there were other pressures as well acting on Mr. Schnall. He seems to have been strongly motivated in his search for faults by his conviction that one of the central presuppositions of the book, namely, that we should try to produce rational arguments in support of religion, is wrong. He says toward the end of his article:

I further feel that it is good not to base one's religious beliefs on reason at all.

He is, of course, in good company here. As I have already stated, many religious thinkers have asserted that arguments in favor of theism have failed in the past and are bound to fail in the future. These thinkers recommend a retreat into the position of proclaiming all arguments, reason and evidence as altogether irrelevant, a position impregnable to the assaults of the cool logical analysis which has proven so effective in dissecting and demolishing theistic arguments what we are urged to do is to make a leap of faith into what is far removed from the realm in which logic and empirical confirmations operate.

Some of these thinkers have explained, that when we assert that "X exists" then the assertion may only have substance if some argument could conceivably be constructed or some evidence could be thought of to support it. However when we substitute "God" for "X" then the result is an entirely different sort of statement one for which it is in principle not possible to find logical or empirical support. This, of course, is but one step away from the Wittgensteinian position according to which religion has its own "language game" and "exists" when it serves as a predicate of "God" assumes a fundamentally different sense than in other contexts. That position itself is in my opinion no more than one step away from the one expressed in the immortal words of Rev. Mackarel who triumphantly proclaimed that the final proof of God's omnipotence is that He need not exist in order to save us!

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The oddness of the position, in which many quite sincere believers felt they had to take refuge, is evident in many ways. I shall make only quick reference to some of the factors which tend to turn this into a very shaky position. As is known, for example, there are a considerable number of transgressions for which Jewish law prescribes severe punishment. While the Almighty's mercy is boundless a plea of skepticism by a sinner (except in the case of *tinok shenishbah*) is not an acknowledged form of excuse. That is, a person who has violated any of the Torah's prohibitions, cannot claim in his defense that had he believed that the relevant laws were indeed of Divine origin he would have been very careful to observe them, and it was only because of an entirely honest doubt in the existence of the supposed author of these laws that he permitted himself to break them. But if reasons for belief do not exist, how can it be ordained by Divine justice that I should be punished if I sincerely searched my heart and could not find in it any conviction of Divine authority and there is nothing in the nature of reality which could help generate such a conviction. It is even harder to explain that the severest punishment is reserved for those, who while they may have done nothing, simply fail to believe in some of the basic tenets of Judaism.

Then again how are we to explain all the miracles recorded in the scriptures? No lengthy arguments are required to show that the main purpose of miracles is to provide *evidence* of the splendor of Divine power. But if it is conviction rooted in faith alone that is essential, why are those spectacular events brought forth which demonstrate the controlling hand of the Almighty?

Lastly, what are those theologians to make of the vast amount of effort invested into constructing proofs for theism by the most highly revered medieval Jewish philosophers? Are we to dismiss their works as entirely useless or even condemn them as illegitimate and alien to the spirit of true religion?

Nevertheless, Mr. Schnall might be thought to be entitled to ask how, after the failure of some of the greatest minds in the history of mankind to evolve an acceptable demonstration of the truth of theism, do I have the temerity to claim that I am at last the one person who, against all odds, succeeds in this task?

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Anyone who would be arguing this way would show a lack of understanding of how philosophy progresses. It is not true to say that all the arguments of medieval philosophers have been later completely demolished and shown to be groundless nonsense. What has happened is that objections were raised to the assertions of these philosophers in consequence of which those who wished to defend these assertions had to reinterpret, amend or refine them. With the surfacing of further objections further transformations were required. There has been a continual process of revising and refining of philosophical ideas, and this process will never end. What any individual may hope for is to make a contribution to this process. I have no doubt that someone eventually is going to produce very reasonable objections to my arguments. But I am also fairly confident that ways to meet these objections will also be found.

### III.

Let me briefly consider some of Mr. Schnall's specific objections. In Part II of the book I attempt to prove that some human choices are free in the sense that some of them are, in principle, unpredictable. It goes without saying that if this be so then all human choices cannot be completely law governed; for if they were, then anyone knowing these laws and the initial conditions could in principle predict them. I cannot enter into the details of the proof here and shall only indicate its general structure. I begin with the assumption that all human choices *are* in principle predictable and show that this leads to two propositions which contradict one another. As a consequence we have a *reductio ad absurdum* proof that our initial assumption cannot possibly be true.

The method I use in order to arrive at the conclusion that if we assume that human acts in certain cases are fully determined leads to a contradiction, is admittedly controversial. It has already attracted more than a dozen critical notices in print. Fortunately, however, not only is there no commonly agreed fault with the proof but each critic finds some other weakness in it. It would be quite extraordinary if an argument capable of

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exciting so much interest had such a rich variety of defects. Mr. Schnall may, however, have succeeded in reaching a more thorough misunderstanding of my arguments than anyone else. He begins his objection by attributing to me an assertion which I explicitly deny. He says:

First of all, he [Schlesinger] does not agree in support of his statement that a human being's choices (as opposed to the behavior of machines) are not caused or determined by any antecedent conditions; he just *assumes* that they are not.

But, of course, I assume just the opposite. However, it is a basic principle of logic that when an assumption leads to a contradiction one may infer that the assumption is false. Would it that he had said that my argument in support of the contention that some human choices are undetermined was defective. Then I would have been at least forced to defend their soundness. No, Mr. Schnall explicitly denies that I offer any arguments for my thesis. I cannot imagine what he was thinking I was arguing for in Chapters 12 to 17 if not for that!

After having attempted to prove that all human choices cannot be determined I raise the question: does it follow that the performances of machines are also in principle unpredictable. On the surface it seems that just as in the case of humans so also in the case of the operations of machines, if we assume they are all predictable in principle that would lead to a contradiction. I devote several pages to detailed arguments showing that the contradiction actually arises in the case of human beings only if the following assumptions are also granted:

1. a human being can sometimes act in a way that is not contrary to how he wants to act;
2. a human being may know that an act  $A_1$  is more to his advantage than an act  $A_2$  and even wish to do what is more to his advantage, yet in a moment of irrationality decide to do  $A_2$ .

It seems that these assumptions could be granted but that parallel assumptions in the case of machines could certainly not be granted: it makes no sense that a machine wishes this or that since I take it that one of the features which distinguishes

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machines from humans is that machines have no such mental properties as having a wish.

If it is proven that some human acts are in principle unpredictable that should constitute a certain amount of confirmation for theism relative to naturalism since theism requires that humans who were created in His image should have free will. If the opposite were proven that should disconfirm theism to some degree. So contrary to Mr. Schnall, I am not:

. . . guilty of trying to have it both ways—making theism immune to refutation but capable of confirmation . . .

Of course it has to be born in mind that confirmation does not amount to conclusive verification nor disconfirmation to conclusive refutation. The more confirmation we have for a given hypothesis the more inclined we shall be to uphold the truth of that hypothesis and vice versa. The answer to the question "Are humans free?" is capable of providing either a certain amount of confirmation or disconfirmation to the belief in a Creator. My point was to show that we seem fortunately enough that human beings turn out to have a crucial property which lends positive support to the theistic position.

### IV.

A final word on Mr. Schnall's closing remark, why it may in principle be undesirable to have evidence for our beliefs:

Suppose it could be shown that there is incontrovertible evidence proving that God exists and that everything in *Torah shebiktav* and *Torah shebaal-peh* is true. Would not life become rather less interesting?

The fear that life may become less interesting if we were to accumulate evidence supporting the teachings of Judaism is quite groundless. Human beings are fully capable of doing—that which is unreasonable. By the time of the seventh plague, Pharaoh had overwhelming evidence of the power of the Almighty. In fact he had been taught such a strong lesson that he goes as far as to declare "The Lord

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is righteous and I and my people are wicked!" Yet no sooner has the hail stopped than Pharoah apparently succeeds in convincing himself that after all there was sufficient evidence for the righteousness of the might of the Lord and refuses to let Israel go. The attraction of wrong deeds and wrong beliefs is powerful. There can never be strong enough rational support for religious belief to force it upon the unwilling. No matter what the accumulation of evidence and argument is in favor of true belief a person still requires strength to resist the temptations of disbelief. Thus there is plenty of challenge and scope for interesting struggle to overcome the psychological obstacles that stand in one's path to the truth.

But of course Mr. Schnall's effort to convince us that faith without any reason at all makes life more exciting is just a variation on the argument from despair I have referred to earlier. It is assumed that attempts to provide reasons for belief have been irreversibly defeated, so we might as well talk ourselves into thinking that this is after all a good thing and what every individual is required to do is to partake in the thrill provided by an unconditional leap of faith.

I should like to maintain that the search for reasons fortifying belief—for those who are in the need of such fortification—is a legitimate search. It may of course be easier to avoid the rigors of this search and to abandon reasoning as the monopoly of non-believers. It may be easier to fantasize about the advantages of levitating far above the solid grounds of evidence and empirical confirmation. I believe that our task is to return to earth and to do battle in the arena of rational arguments no matter how arduous the task may seem.