

## Cutting God in Half

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There is an urgent need to cut God in half.

To make such a pronouncement, these days, is a risky business. One risks having a fatwa declared against one. Or one risks being arrested under some new David Blunkett law about causing offence to the religious. So, let me explain as quickly as I can what I mean by this outrageous pronouncement, in the hope that this will keep such disasters at bay.

Consider the thesis: The ultimate reality is God, a Being who created the world and everything in it, a Being who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, the source of all value, a Being who cares, profoundly, for the salvation of our souls.

This is, I take it, a central tenet of Christianity, Judaism and Islam. It is not upheld by all religions; it is not, for example, a part of Buddhism. But it is believed to be true by millions, possibly billions, of people alive today. Many more pay lip service to the doctrine. Its influence is felt in many contexts: educational, political, legal, ceremonial. It even has a certain impact on war and terrorism.

Given all this, the thesis deserves to be taken seriously intellectually. We need to ask: What would it be to treat this doctrine in an intellectually responsible fashion, with a measure of intellectual honesty? This question has especial relevance to education. For in so far as there are religious schools which take the thesis seriously, educational authorities responsible for educational standards need to be sure that these schools treat the God-doctrine in an educationally responsible way, in a way that promotes education rather than mere indoctrination. But we can only know what it means for a school to treat the God-doctrine in an educationally responsible way if we know what it means to treat it in an *intellectually* responsible way.

In what follows I spell out a few elementary steps that need to be taken if one is to uphold the God-thesis with a modicum of intellectual honesty. These are steps that *all* theistic religions need to take if they are to avoid charges of dogmatism, charlatanism, disreputably and immorally misleading the public.

The first step towards intellectual honesty that one needs to take is to note that this creed, like other substantial theses about the nature of things, needs to be treated as a *conjecture*, a *hypothesis*, which may, or may not, be true.

Two points deserve to be noted about this first, minimal step.

First, even here, many religious traditions paralyse rational thought by making it a sin to doubt the existence of God. The sin, of course, is to make doubt a sin.

Second, it is important that one does not exaggerate the power of reason, and claim that, in order to be rational, a belief must be proven or justified. As Karl Popper tirelessly argued, even our best scientific theories cannot be verified or justified; they remain, for ever, conjectures which, at best, can be empirically falsified. The result of giving exaggerated powers to reason is that it becomes reasonable to hold that reason has its limits, and all sorts of beliefs, including

religious ones, are beyond the scope of reason, defy reason, and are legitimately held as articles of irrational faith. Interpret the powers of reason more modestly, as helping us to choose, fallibly, between rival *conjectures*, and no thesis, not even a religious one concerning the existence of God, lies beyond the reach of reason.

The next step, then, is to ask: Are there good grounds for preferring the God conjecture to rival conjectures - such as, for example, that no such Being as God exists? What problems does the God-thesis solve, what phenomena does it explain? Can it be refuted?

There can be no doubt at all that the conjecture that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God exists does solve problems, and does make many things intelligible. The dreadful, apparently unsolvable problem of death is solved at a stroke: such a God would arrange for us to survive death. The dreadful problem of the unspeakable suffering of this world, the awful waste of human potential, the numbing injustice of human life: all this will be put right after death, if an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God exists. And if such a God exists, we have an immediate explanation for the fact that our environment, here on earth seems, in many ways (if not in all ways) especially designed to nourish us and support our existence. We can even understand why the universe is knowable to us, by means of science: God created both the universe, and human beings; being benevolent, He would naturally arrange things in such a way that there is a sufficient match between the nature of the universe and the nature of our minds for us to be able to improve our knowledge of the universe. God explains why science works.

#### *How Can God's Evil Deeds be Excused?*

But there is a dreadful snag. If God is all-knowing and all-powerful, then God must be knowingly in charge of natural phenomena, in particular those natural phenomena that cause human suffering and death as a result of earthquakes, drought, disease, accident. Even when people torture and kill other people, God is always a co-torturer and co-murderer, in that He decides the knife will not, at the last minute, turn into rubber, the bullet will not evaporate before it hits its target, the virus will not die or become abruptly harmless. Day after day, hour after hour, God knowingly tortures and murders innocent children (children dying of painful diseases) - to put the point at its most emotionally inflammatory, but correctly.

The obvious conclusion to draw is that the hypothesis that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God exists is refuted by the most elementary tragic facts of human existence. This conclusion is inescapable once one child has suffered and died as a result of injury or disease - suffered and died as a result of the knowing actions of God (if He exists). A loving God would take care of His children in at least as humane a fashion as, let us say, a petty thief. No run-of-the-mill petty thief would torture his child to death over a period of days or months, a commonplace action for God (if He exists). God tortures and murders billions of people; indeed none of us escapes.

Nothing can excuse God for killing one child, let alone all of humanity, one after the other. And yet, over the centuries theologians, instead of emphasizing that the God conjecture is decisively refuted, have instead struggled to invent excuses for God's criminal acts. The excuses are dreadful, utterly immoral and hopeless, and yet they continue to be taken seriously today.

"God must allow us to suffer and die, because he must allow us our freedom" runs one excuse. So, should we equally demand of human parents that if their child runs onto the road in front of an incoming lorry, they should not interfere, so that the child may have his freedom? "God is unknowable, and we human beings cannot know why God performs these monstrous acts" runs another. But nothing can excuse God murdering a child slowly and agonizingly by means of cancer, let us say. People living in the Soviet Union under Stalin are on record as endlessly excusing the frightful crimes of Stalin; these excuses are morally and intellectually dreadful (however excusable in the circumstances): how can any excuse, whatever it might be, be any better for God's far more dreadful crimes? "God lets us suffer so that we may grow spiritually" runs a third excuse. Are child molesters to be excused on similar grounds? Can we be so sure that suffering ennobles? Would not this argument imply that we do a person a favour if we hurt him? "It is not God who does these dreadful things, but the Devil". If God is all-powerful and all-knowing, God has the power to stop the Devil; if He decides not to, then He is in part responsible for what goes on. "People suffer and die because of the sins of their ancestors." What an appallingly immoral argument! "God does not murder people; he acts as a surgeon, causing pain in order to cure: those who die live on in Heaven (at least those who deserve it do)." But a surgeon who caused unspeakable pain in a patient over weeks or months, without adequate explanation, and without anaesthetics, would be struck off the medical register, and would doubtless be prosecuted for assault to an extreme degree: even if God does cause us to suffer so that we may be released into the after-life, this might mean that God does not murder, but it does not remotely excuse His actions. (On these grounds, no true believer could be accused of murder either, of course!)

Religious communities should hang their heads in shame at producing such appalling, immoral arguments. Taking such arguments seriously, even if only to set about refuting them, is in itself to take part in a corporate dance of insanity.

Why, why has humanity, or so much of humanity, allowed itself to be so bamboozled? Because the need for God is so potent, the fear of His non-existence so terrible. God's criminality is excused for the same reason, essentially, that Stalin's criminality was excused: the consequences of acknowledging that the crimes are real are too dreadful to contemplate. And this is backed up, in both cases, by a system of "education" which prompts one to believe that it is not God's (or Stalin's) criminality that is at issue, but one's own - any hint of a suspicion that God (or Stalin) is a monster instantly demonstrating one's own dreadful disposition for sin. How justified God (or Stalin) would be in punishing such suspicion, and how merciful God (or Stalin) so often proves to be in not bringing down instant punishment on those who so sin.

Granted that the conjecture that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving God exists has been refuted, what do we put in its place? This is the really important question!

In order to answer it, the first point we need to note is that, as we have discovered that God in the orthodox sense does not, and cannot exist, we need to be more open-minded about what sort of entity God may be. The question of whether God exists or not can always be converted into a question, not about God's existence, but rather about what *sort* of entity God is. If we mean something very specific and highly problematic by "God", then it is all too likely that God, in this sense, does not exist. But if we mean something highly unspecific and unproblematic by "God", it becomes much more likely that "God", in this sense, does exist. One way of posing

the question is: What is the nature of that Entity which (a) preserves as much as possible about what is best in the orthodox notion of God, and (b) exists? Reformulated in this way, the question becomes, not "Does God exist?", but rather "What is the nature of God?" where God, in this sense, exists by definition as it were.

The next step, in answering the above question, is to track down what it is in the orthodox conception of "God" that we have been discussing that makes it so impossible for "God" in this sense, to exist. We then need to broaden our conception of "God" appropriately, so that "God", in this sense, becomes at least a viable possibility, the "God"-thesis a viable conjecture.

It is not difficult to track down what it is about the orthodox conception of God that creates the difficulties we have been considering. These all come from the supposition that God is *both* all-powerful, and all-loving. This is what we need, of course, an all-powerful being who is also all-loving, so that everything that is most precious in existence will be effectively, lovingly taken care of. But in our world, this leads to the awful consequences that we have been considering.

One possibility, of course, is that God, far from being loving, is thoroughly evil. But this does not seem to do justice to all the wonderful things that there are in existence. What is so confusing is that life is such a mixture of joy and horror, the extraordinary, the prosaic and the unspeakable.

Perhaps God is confused, schizophrenic even, a dreadful mixture of love and hate? But this does not seem to do justice to the majesty of the universe, its intricate splendour. Could this have been created by a neurotic?

One might take the thing further, by postulating two equally powerful gods, God and the Devil, one good, the other evil, locked in terrible combat, humanity somehow the field of battle. But if this really were the case, there would be, one feels, more disruptive explosions in the natural world, as the two cosmic Beings fought out their mighty, eternal battle.

Another possibility, of course, is that God is all-loving, but lacks power. He sees the terrible things that go on, but is powerless to intervene. It is a version of this hypothesis that I wish to defend. As it stands, however, it is incomplete: nothing is said about the nature of that which *does* have power, which *is* the cause of natural phenomena, and thus the cause of so much of our suffering.

### *Dissecting the Deity*

Here is how, in my view, the problem is to be solved. God must be cut in two. (At last I come to the proposition with which I began.) The God of *power* must be severed from the God of *love*, the God that is the source of all *value*. Or, if it seems just a little too brutal, too grandiose, to speak of cutting God in half, let us say, rather, that we need to cut the *concept* of God in half - a much more modest surgical deed.

The God of cosmic power is utterly impersonal. It is that impersonal *something*, whatever It may be, that exists everywhere, eternally and unchanging, throughout all phenomena, and determines (perhaps probabilistically) the way phenomena unfold. It is what theoretical physics

seeks to discover. It is Einstein's "God", eternal, omnipresent, all-powerful, but utterly impersonal, an It, not a conscious Being. It is that physical property of the fundamental physical entity, the fundamental physical field or whatever, that determines the way in which that which changes *does* change. It is what corresponds physically to the true unified theory of everything that physicists seek to discover.

It is this cosmic It that is responsible for all our suffering. And precisely because It is an It, incapable of knowing and feeling, It can be forgiven the terrible things that It does. If It knew that the laws of nature, working themselves out as usual, meant, in this particular case, horrible suffering and death from cancer for this child, agonizing burns for this person, burial in rubble for that person, the It would at once bend a law of nature here and there, so that these ghastly tragedies can be avoided. But this cosmic It has no mind, no understanding, no awareness: it goes blindly on Its way, incapable of knowing anything, and therefore can be forgiven.

But what of the other half of the traditional God, the God of value? This, I suggest, is what is best in us. It is that potentially or actually aware and loving self within us that sees, feels, knows and understands, at least partially, and either *does* intervene to prevent disaster, or is powerless to do so. The God of value is the soul of humanity, embedded in the physical universe, striving to protect, to care for, to love, but all too often, alas, powerless to prevent human suffering. (More generally, the God of value is that which is of most value, actually and potentially, in sentient life.)

What is usually characterized as belief in science and humanism is actually what emerges as a result of a rational evolution of belief in God. The scientific view of the universe, and the humanistic faith that it is individual human beings that are of supreme value in existence amount, when taken together, to a profoundly religious view, one which does not have the awful intellectual and moral defects of orthodox Theism (whether Christian, Judaic or Islamic). Science + Humanism only denies the existence of God, in a thoroughly disreputable sense of "God"; granted a somewhat more reputable sense of "God", Science + Humanism is a passionate affirmation of the existence of God.

But if this religious view solves problems that haunt orthodox Theism, it does so at the expense of creating an immense new problem. Having chopped God into two, into the God of Cosmic Power and the God of Cosmic Value, we are at once confronted by the problem: How are the two halves to be put together again? How is it possible for the God of Cosmic Value to exist embedded in the God of Cosmic Power - the physically comprehensible universe? How can we understand our human world, embedded as it is within the physical universe, in such a way that justice is done to both the richness, meaning and value of human life on the one hand, and what modern science tells us about the physical universe on the other hand?

This final formulation of the problem (created by cutting God in half) ought, in my view, to be regarded as the most general and fundamental problem confronting humanity. It is a *philosophical* problem - indeed, the fundamental problem of philosophy: How is it *possible* for our human world, imbued with sensory qualities, consciousness, free will, art, science, and much else of value, to exist embedded in the physical universe? (This embraces, as subordinate issues, the mind-body problem, the problem of free will, problems of knowledge, of perception, of the philosophy of science, of biology and evolution, even problems of moral and political

philosophy, problems of language, culture, history, abstract entities, time, space and causation.) The above is also a fundamental problem of knowledge and understanding much more generally: How precisely do features of our human world, such as perceptual qualities, consciousness, and life more generally, fit into the physical universe? The problem can also be regarded as a fundamental problem of *living*, of *action*: How can we help what is of value in existence, actually and potentially, to flourish? What do we need to do, as individuals, so that what is of value to us may flourish? And what do we need to do, collectively, socially and politically, so that what is of value to people everywhere, to humanity, may flourish? The problem of fitting the God-of-value into the God-of-cosmic-power (the underlying unified It of the physical universe) is not only a conceptual problem, a problem of knowledge and understanding; it is also a *practical* problem, the most general, fundamental practical problem that there is: to help the God-of-value, what is of most value in us, to exist in the physical universe in ways that are less painful and constrained, more exuberant and joyful, more just, peaceful and noble, than at present. Once we recognize that the God-of-value is what is of most value, actually and potentially, in us, it becomes our most profound religious obligation to help what is of value in us to flourish in the real world.

The outcome of treating the initial God-thesis with a modicum of intellectual honesty is that we are led straight to the most fundamental problems of knowledge, understanding and living that there are. Education in religious schools, in *all* schools, should explore these issues. Children deserve to hear, and to take part in debating, the arguments for and against steps of the kind I have indicated in this article. Anything less is dangerously close to indoctrination rather than real education.

But, it may be asked, where are the textbooks for such an education? Let me conclude by recommending five relevant titles.

*Is Science Neurotic?* (Imperial College Press, 2004).

*The Human World in the Physical Universe: Consciousness, Free Will and Evolution* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

*From Knowledge to Wisdom* (Blackwell, 1984).

*The Comprehensibility of the Universe* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

*What's Wrong With Science?* (Bran's Head Books, 1976).

I must however declare an interest. I am the author.