

Reverence & Rationality: A Utilitarian Account of Belief

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Abstract:

One of the perennial issues in theistic discourse concerns the rationality, or lack thereof, of religious truth-claims and behaviors. Moreover, rationality constitutes an important problem in the philosophy of mind. This article is an exposition of the relationship of rationality to belief in general and to religious belief in particular. In it, religious belief is investigated both as a means of revising the model proposed by philosopher of mind Ruth Marcus, and – more importantly – as a means of devising a more sophisticated theory of the rationalist aspect of theistic belief. Drawing upon Wittgensteinian notions for support, this article proposes a shift away from traditional definitions, suggesting instead that rationality be reconceived in utilitarian terms. One ramification of this move is that theistic claims be deemed ‘irrational’ only insofar as they minimize the cognitive economy of the believer; any belief that maximizes assonance and efficiency must henceforth be regarded as rational.

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In a 1990 paper entitled “Some Revisionary Proposals About Belief and Believing”¹, philosopher Ruth Marcus puts forth an account of belief with the hope of resolving some of the difficulties plaguing various theories on the topic. Paramount among her goals are to present an account that will be non-linguistic, dispositional, and capable of providing a more adequate and natural description of rationality.

Marcus makes it clear that she is not dealing here with any and all types of belief. She is concerned only with beliefs that are “making an historical claim about the actual world”, not with beliefs “about fiction or myth or the like”². Hence, it seems that Marcus is deliberately excluding the genre of religious belief, among other things, from the purview of her paper. There are some obvious reasons for doing so. If one views the content of religious belief as “fiction or myth or the like”, then an account which wishes to speak to such beliefs would be equally obligated to deal with beliefs, say, about Cinderella’s godmother. Marcus has her eye on a different ball.

Despite the obvious reasons for Marcus’ division, one wonders whether something important might not be lost to an account of belief in general by neglecting to include a discussion of religious belief in particular. In fact, an investigation into the special nature of theistic convictions – a tremendous line of inquiry in its own right – may prove to be an excellent window onto the nature of other (secular) types of belief. It is precisely this genre which I should like to examine in this essay. Thus, in what follows I will be interested in the question whether it is possible, in dealing with religious belief, to meet the philosophical aims on Marcus’ agenda without appealing to her type of account. To this end I will turn to the writings of Wittgenstein (whose views Marcus makes use of in her paper, but to different effect) and attempt to coax from his philosophy of religion a good example of this prospect. Finally, I will attempt

to draw some broader conclusions from this discussion of religious belief as to what can be said about belief in general, and as to the consequences of such a discussion for certain types of arguments made against the claims of theism.

Marcus On Rationality

Though Marcus' paper is replete with varying concerns, the main crux of her argument seems to centre on the problem of rationality and belief. Thus, in order to motivate a discussion of rationality and religious belief, it is important to examine both why she takes issue with the 'mainstream' view, and what might be offered in its place.

Marcus' unease with the traditional view, whereby irrationality is typically defined by belief in contradiction, is that it creates what seem like unnatural distinctions. Her own case of Sally (who believes that St. Jean Perse is and is not a poet)³, or Kripke's case of Pierre (who believes that London is beautiful and ugly), illustrates the difficulty well: in both cases, the believer has come to believe $P \& \sim P$, and yet no one would think to label such a person irrational, since it is only through a lack of information that these beliefs have been adopted. According to the traditional view, however, both hold contradictory beliefs and have therefore committed the crime of irrationality.

Marcus' solution to this puzzle is to limit the power of contradiction in her account of rationality and belief. Instead of simply granting that Sally believes a contradiction, Marcus explains that what Sally assents to is (unbeknownst to her) an impossible state of affairs. The result of such an explanation is that Sally remains worthy of being regarded as a fully rational agent.

An account such as this, however, seems problematic. One has the impression that Marcus is somewhat artificially manipulating how we are to view what is essentially a very simple story. Why is it necessary to appeal to such an unintuitive rephrasing of the situation? Is it not possible to admit that Sally does indeed believe a contradiction, while still safeguarding her rational status?

Four Types Of Contradiction In Religious Belief

What I would like to point out is that in the realm of religion, every believer is akin to Marcus' Sally, in that each one unwittingly assents to contradictions. Yet, one would not be likely to call most religious believers 'irrational'. After all, such believers assent to science's basic claims about the way the physical world works. Some of them are excellent mathematicians, perfect logicians, and renowned scientists. The fact that they believe contradictions does not tarnish their reputations as rational agents in the

popular mind, and (as in the case of Sally) most people feel no impulse to doubt this assessment. How is this so?

To answer this question, one must first examine in what sense contradiction may be viewed as a fundamental aspect of theistic belief. I wish to illustrate this from four different angles.

The Nature of Religious Language

The first sense in which one might argue that contradiction is inherent to religious belief has to do with religious language. According to Wittgenstein, all ethical and religious discourse is rooted in metaphor:

“Thus in ethical and religious language we seem constantly to be using similes. But a simile must be a simile for something. And if I can describe a fact by means of a simile I must also be able to drop the simile and to describe the facts without it. Now in our case as soon as we try to drop the simile and state the facts which stand behind it, we find that there are no such facts. And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense.”⁴

All metaphors work precisely because we do not believe what they speak about, but what they speak to. This is especially salient in religious discourse, wherein the fundamental axiom is that this is a domain in which it is impossible to speak about, since by definition God defies definition. Thus any attempt to speak about when using religious language results in Wittgensteinian ‘nonsense’.

But how does a metaphor speak to a reality? Arguably, the function of the metaphor is nothing other than the upholding of terms which, through their contradiction, serve as a prism that speaks to (i.e. makes apprehensible) a deeper reality. Thus, a believer who is able to properly grasp religious metaphor should be able to believe both of the following claims:

- 1) The Lord redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm.
- 2) The Lord is incorporeal.

This type of anthropomorphic metaphor could not be more common in religious discourse, yet it in some important sense, it is rooted in contradiction. Of course, no one would dream of labeling the users of such metaphor ‘irrational’. Why not? The

answer is that it is understood that the metaphor is being used to speak to something greater than the words or imagery it employs. The metaphor is designed not to impart knowledge, but to produce an effect. As is arguably the case with all poetic devices and all art, the desired effect is a pointing away from the two-dimensional world of truth/falsity and validity/invalidity, and a pointing toward a transcendence, a third dimension of deeper and softer truth⁵.

The Relevance of Historical Truth

The second sense in which one might argue that contradiction is a fundamental feature of religious belief has to do with the relevance of historical truth to religious belief. Wittgenstein has the following to say on the subject:

“Queer as it sounds: The historical accounts in the Gospels might, historically speaking, be demonstrably false and yet belief would lose nothing by this: not, however, because it concerns ‘universal truths of reason’! Rather, because historical proof (the historical proof-game) is irrelevant to belief. This message (the Gospels) is seized on by men believably (i.e. lovingly). That is the certainty characterizing this particular acceptance-as-true, not something else.”⁶

As Wittgenstein points out, then, historical truth is irrelevant to religious belief, precisely because this belief is seized ‘lovingly’. That is, this type of belief is adopted not as we adopt regular beliefs, but in a different way, on a different plain; the success of belief on this plain is thus measured by different criteria, and is not susceptible to categorizations such as ‘invalid’, ‘contradictory’ and so forth.

It is worth noting why, according to Wittgenstein, religious beliefs are evaluated on this other plain (‘lovingly’).

“It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s belief, it’s really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of this interpretation.”⁷

What is interesting to observe here is that Wittgenstein has provided a view of belief not unlike what Marcus aims for: a dispositional account, whereby “x believes

that S just in case [...] x is disposed to act as if S, that actual or non-actual state of affairs, obtains”⁸.

Religious belief is essentially a way of living. Its true purpose is simply to inform one’s behavior, to style and shape the way one interacts with one’s world. A believer is meant to act as if S (here, the tenets of one’s theology) obtains – but what counts is the action, the behavior. Accordingly, the success of a religious belief is a measure of its impact on one’s lived faith.

For our purposes, however, what is important to note is that historical truth is irrelevant to religious belief, and that this fact opens the doors to contradiction. For example, a religious believer may have no trouble believing both of the following:

- 1) The Lord redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm.
- 2) Historical evidence proves that the Israelites never were slaves in Egypt.

Of course, most religious believers, not wishing to view themselves as irrational, take pains to believe nothing of the sort. This discomfort, however, is simply a result of confusion over the ‘grammar’ of the religious language game, Wittgenstein would say.

In truth, both of the above claims, albeit contradictory, are perfectly compatible precisely because of the plain on which they are properly adopted – namely, the loving one.

The Relevance of Scientific Truth

There is another sense in which contradiction is linked with religious belief, which, though it is closely connected with the relevance of historical truth, is perhaps worth discussing in its own right. It concerns the relevance of scientific truth and its bearing on the nature of magico-religious beliefs and rituals.

The debate around the nature of ritual centres upon the intellectualist anthropology of the Victorian period and its violent rejection by the expressivist interpretation of religious belief and practice. While the intellectualist camp asserts that religious and magical rituals were conceived as attempts to influence the course of

natural events, the expressivist camp asserts that ritual is a way of expressing feelings and attitudes. Wittgenstein's view lies closer to that of the latter camp. He writes:

“Burning in effigy. Kissing the portrait of a loved one. This is obviously not based on a belief that it will have a definite effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at some satisfaction and it achieves it. Or rather, it does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied.”⁹

In another important passage, Wittgenstein considers rain-making ceremonies:

“I read, amongst many similar examples, of a rain-king in Africa to whom the people appeal for rain when the rainy season comes. But surely this means that they do not actually think he can make rain, otherwise they would do it in the dry periods in which the land is a ‘parched and arid desert’.”¹⁰

In both of these passages, Wittgenstein emphasizes his view that ritualistic actions are not based on a belief in their power to achieve empirical ends. Shocked by the intellectualist insistence on depicting magico-religious beliefs as mistaken hypotheses, and portraying magic and religion as mistaken science, Wittgenstein attempts to show that religious belief, insofar as it is expressive rather than descriptive, is not susceptible to this type of ‘mistake’. The upshot of this view is that scientific truth is irrelevant to religious belief. So-called contradictions between the claims of modern science (e.g. that rain-ceremonies cannot produce rain) and the ‘claims’ or beliefs behind religious practice are dissolved, just because religious practice does not rest on beliefs of this sort.

Before leaving this topic, it is worth taking a moment to notice the distinctly non-linguistic thrust of Wittgenstein's view. Religious practice “does not aim at anything; we act in this way and then feel satisfied”. A ritual is an ‘instinct-action’, a spontaneous deed which is not the product of deliberation or ratiocination; this suggests that it is “pre-linguistic: that a language game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought”¹¹. As Clack points out¹², Wittgenstein does not limit the scope of this view to religious belief; rather, it is part of his overall

interest in emphasizing the human believer's primitive, instinct-based, non-linguistic nature.

Intellectual and Emotional Theologies

The fourth sense in which contradiction is intimately bound up with religious belief has to do with what for many intellectually self-aware believers can be a psychologically agonizing problem: the yawning discrepancy between the 'theology of the heart' and the 'theology of the mind'. Those who move in religious circles are painfully aware of the number of people who grapple with this divide, struggling to reconcile the emotional and intellectual parts within them. I am thinking here of those religious believers who have trouble believing, for example, in metaphysical truth-claims, but who emotionally find themselves in need of the God (and God-talk) on which they were reared. Often what happens in such cases is that the believer comes to believe in a self-contradictory manner. It may be, for example, that when she is thinking philosophically, she denies the possibility of revelation, or of resurrection, or even of God, in spite of the fact that when she prays, she prays to God whole-heartedly.

What is one to say in such a case? Is the believer irrational, possibly even delusional? If we are tempted to answer 'Yes!' here, we might do well to examine an exchange between Wittgenstein and Turing which Marcus herself quotes in her paper:

Turing: What puzzles one is that one usually uses a contradiction as a criterion for having done something wrong...

Wittgenstein: Yes – and more: nothing has been done wrong...where will the harm come?

Turing: The real harm will not come unless there is an application in which a bridge may fall down or something of that sort.

Wittgenstein: ...But nothing need go wrong, and if something does go wrong – if the bridge breaks down – then your mistake was of a kind of using a wrong natural law.¹³

The basic assumption about believing contradictions is that they will cause one to run into problems, or prevent one from achieving one's goals. However, as Wittgenstein remarks in this passage, one does not always pay a price for a believed

contradiction. This might be applied to the case of the split-thinking religious believer described above. What is wrong with what she is doing? After all, 'where will the harm come'?

Such a believer's theology exists on two separate plains: the intellectual and the emotional. They speak two separate languages (colloquially, 'the language of the heart' and 'the language of the mind'). Therefore, though they may contradict one another, they cannot dispute one with another. What is interesting in this case is that for this type of religious believer, self-contradictory belief may be not only harmless, but actually helpful. Indeed, insofar as it allows the believer to achieve her goals, it may be the most rational choice. By permitting herself this type of Orwellian doublethink or 'religious schizophrenia', such a believer is economically ensuring the fulfillment of her various intellectual, emotional and religious needs. Far from paying a price, such an adept player of the religious language game stands to gain much from believing contradictions.

Evaluating Significance And Generalizability

What can be learned from the four cases presented above? One might respond by drawing the conclusion that believing contradictions is not a sign of irrationality. However, the natural question is whether one can properly generalize from these findings about religious belief to belief in general. Indeed, there is good reason to suppose that the category of religious belief may be *sui generis*. The goal of religious thinking may be to project one's consciousness into a transcendent realm-above-reason, but this is certainly not the aim of thinking in regular situations. In these situations, it is likely that believing contradictions will cause harm by impeding rational deliberation, thereby preventing one from achieving one's goals.

At this point I invite the reader to accompany me on a flight of fancy. Let us imagine that Marcus' Sally and Kripke's Pierre arrange to meet for lunch one day. Each one, having become aware by now of having held contradictory beliefs, relates his or her experience to the other. What tone is most likely to accompany such a conversation? Undoubtedly, they are much more likely to laugh over the incidents than to become disturbed or angry because of them.

The fact that Sally and Pierre can laugh about their respective moments of 'irrationality' should be enough to demonstrate that the term 'irrationality' is not an appropriate one to use here. As noted above, at the core of what we believe about 'real' irrationality is that irrational people will incur losses as a result; Sally and Pierre

have incurred no losses, and are therefore not really irrational. However, it is not that they are saved from irrationality because they merely assent to an impossible state of affairs, as Marcus would have it. Rather, the simplest explanation is the correct one: they do indeed believe contradictions, but since these contradictions cause no harm, practically speaking they are irrelevant, and those who espouse them are therefore not irrational.

Some skeptical readers, I imagine, may still be squirming in their seats, pestered by the niggling intuition that this type of account is, indeed, only applicable to religious belief, but not, say, to some quotidian domain thereof. Again, I invite such readers to recall that the common definition of irrationality requires the incurring of loss. The above-mentioned scenario of Sally and Pierre is only one of many situations in which this criterion does not obtain. It is hardly difficult to conceive of examples of believing in the quotidian domain where people act ‘irrationally’ (say, by exhibiting contradictory beliefs) without paying any sort of pragmatic price. Indeed, everyday life is rife with examples of how contradictory beliefs may be held not only innocuously, but to good result. A simple example of this may be found in psychological studies of belief in ‘good luck’ and lucky charms. One such study¹⁴ considers baseball players who try to replicate the ‘good luck’ they had in previous games by wriggling their legs, or their bats, or whatever the case may be, a certain way before stepping up to the plate. Now, the majority of these baseball players do not believe that these movements will actually ensure a better performance; yet they act as if they did. Do such players pay a price for their ‘irrational’ behavior? No; on the contrary, they are aided psychologically by the encouragement afforded them by this ‘lucky’ act. Examples of this sort serve to demonstrate the weakness of the traditional conception of rationality, which is inept when it comes to explaining the pragmatically neutral or positive effects of irrational behavior.

Thus, it is not only in the realm of religion that contradictory beliefs may be held without adverse effects. Accordingly, I think it sensible to propose an account on which beliefs of all types be evaluated not on the level of surface formal properties, but rather on the functional or utilitarian level. Indeed, to a large extent this is how we assess beliefs. The cases of formally contradictory but pragmatically impeccable religious beliefs are proof of this; the fact that we generally do not take issue with such beliefs reveals our tendency to evaluate belief on a utilitarian scale. A good (i.e. rational) belief, then, is nothing more than a useful mental tool – or, in the Buddhist idiom, a raft whose purpose is to allow for navigation across the river and which may be abandoned once this purpose has been met¹⁵. On this view, the more a belief

maximizes cognitive assonance and economy, the better it is; the more it minimizes these effects, the poorer it is.

Therefore, in both the religious and secular realms, a belief should be deemed irrational only insofar as it produces unwanted results. This is not the case with Sally and Pierre, and it is certainly not the case with religious believers, many of whom are not only unharmed but are actually helped by their contradictory beliefs.

A Caveat Concerning Truth And Falsity

Having laid out my proposal for a utilitarian account that distinguishes between rational and irrational beliefs on the basis of their pragmatic effects, I would like to make clear what it is that I am not arguing. I am not arguing that we should eliminate the distinction between true and false beliefs. I see no reason to deny that beliefs may be either true or false; indeed, one of my main aims in this essay is to avoid such unintuitive formulations. Rather, what I wish to combat is the notion that the truth or falsity of a belief (or set of beliefs) is the ultimate standard by which the rational integrity of the believer ought to be judged. Beliefs may be true or false, but a false belief is not necessarily a harbinger of irrationality. The term 'irrational' I reserve for beliefs that are harmful to the believer, again based on the assumption that irrationality means incurring losses. That the falsity of a belief does not in itself signify irrationality, then, is evinced by the fact that oftentimes false beliefs may be held innocuously. For example, superstitious beliefs (e.g. opening an umbrella indoors will bear negative consequences) generally do not harm the believer. Furthermore, false beliefs may be held to excellent result. For a powerful example of this, one need look no further than the placebo effect, where a false belief in a pill's curative capabilities actually produces health. It is interesting to note, too, that the advantages of falsely held beliefs are apparent even on the most basic physiological level: as cognitive psychology reveals, the human perceptual system is designed to 'lie' to us on a regular basis, leading us to believe that we see or hear certain things which in actuality we do not, for the sake of cognitive economy or self-preservation¹⁶. The upshot of these instances is

that one may indeed hold false beliefs, but as these are just as apt to prove helpful as detrimental, a one-to-one mapping of falsity onto irrationality is unjustified.

Concluding Remarks

What I have attempted to do in this essay is to show that one can develop a sophisticated theory of the affiliation between rationality and belief, and can thus achieve some of the chief aims on Marcus' agenda, without resorting to her type of belief-account. Using Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion as an illustration of this feat with regard to religious belief, I have endeavored to explain that one can give a non-linguistic, dispositional account of belief that provides a solid understanding of rationality without introducing unnecessarily convoluted formulations. The advantages of such an account are thus threefold:

- 1) The account is more comprehensive in that it takes into consideration not only secular belief, but religious belief as well, thereby affirming a reality about how we naturally tend to assess beliefs (i.e. on the scale of utility).
- 2) The account affirms our instinct that, in cases such as Sally's and Pierre's, a contradiction is in fact believed.
- 3) The account avoids complex formulations and the difficulties that arise from them.

Furthermore, this essay has endeavored to shed new light on one of the most vital and oft-debated aspects of theistic belief – namely, its rational status. According to the utilitarian parameters for the definition of rationality outlined above, arguments which inveigh against the central claims of theism by critiquing religion's so-called irrationality should henceforth be assessed rather more harshly than many have been wont to do in the past. It is clear that the meanings and broader significances of the theistic discourse lie well outside the purview of such criticisms, which, in the final analysis, appear to be more a reflection of the mistaken 'grammar' of their representatives' definitions than of any inherent fault in the theistic discourse itself.

Endnotes

- 1) Ruth Barcan Marcus, "Some Revisionary Proposals About Belief and Believing," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50 (1990): 133-153.
- 2) *Ibid.*, 139.
- 3) For a full account of this case the reader is referred to Marcus. *Ibid.*, 147.
- 4) Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," in *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3-12.
- 5) One is reminded of Picasso's apt aphorism: "Art is a lie through which we perceive the truth."
- 6) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. P. Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990; revised edition, 1998), 32.
- 7) *Ibid.*, 64.
- 8) Marcus, 140.
- 9) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Frazer's Golden Bough*, ed. R. Rhees (Doncaster: Brynmill Press, 1979), 4.
- 10) *Ibid.*, 12.
- 11) Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), 541.
- 12) Brian R. Clack, "Wittgenstein and Magic," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. R.L. Arrington and M. Addis (London: Routledge, 2001), 26.
- 13) See Marcus, 142.
- 14) Jeremy M. Burger and Amy L. Lynn, "Superstitious Behavior Among American and Japanese Professional Baseball Players", *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 27 (2005): 71-76.
- 15) See Nanamoli, Bhikkhu and Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995. 228-229
- 16) For instances of this phenomenon, the reader is referred to Philip G. Zimbardo and Richard J. Gerrig, "Perception," in *Foundations of Cognitive Psychology*, ed. Daniel J. Levitin (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), p. 133-188.