

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 2

Number 1 *Volume 1, Number 2, Summer 1971*


Article 11

1971

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Ferre, Frederick (1971) "Toward a Reasonable Ethics of Belief," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 2 : No. 1 , Article 11.

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TOWARD A REASONABLE ETHICS OF BELIEF by Frederick Ferré

Like Dr. Blanshard, whose philosophic temper I have admired as long as I have read philosophy, I am a partisan of reason in religion — as in all of life. Without the controls of some criteria, life drifts or staggers aimlessly. Without concern for consistency and coherence among the aims of life, one's policies of action are likely to defeat one another and even at best will lack integration and the benefits of mutual support. Without insistence on adequacy to the many demands of life, integration itself may be purchased, by the resolute exclusion of relevant value-claims, at the high cost of fanatical narrowness.

Reason in life, in other words, guards wholeness and fullness against *ad hoc* randomness, self-sefeat, and one-eyed loss of perspective. Religion, as the domain of life's fundamental values, is *a fortiori* in urgent need of reason at every level: reason is needed, that is, not only in analyzing particular assertions and practices as to their success in performing their appropriate function within the total scheme, but also in assessing those propositional networks by which religious thinkers attempt to articulate and relate the beliefs that are implicit within their religion's basic values — and is needed even in weighing for wisdom the fundamental value-orienting imagery on which religions rest.

Holding such a position on the pervasive claims of reason in religion, I shall best perform my role as commentator, I think, by attempting simply to focus and refine the issues that Dr. Blanshard has laid out.

My intention is to remark on five different statements Dr. Blanshard makes on what the central issue is. Sometimes, as he puts the question, the answer comes easily. But not always.

For me the easiest formulation of the issue is stated in the context of Dr. Blanshard's polemic against historical Christianity's allegedly uniform hostility toward intellectual responsibility in matters of religious belief. I am going to ignore the question of whether this hostility is fully representative of the many-stranded history of Christian thought. I doubt it. But St. Paul, Tertullian, Martin Luther, and others, all said things amply sufficient to draw Dr. Blanshard's fire; thus if the issue is set in their terms my response is obvious. If the issue, as Blanshard phrases it, is whether or not we should tolerate "a hard requirement that no matter what the evidence one might suppose one had, assent must be given to certain tenets of the creed . . .," then my answer, like his, must be an unambiguous negative. Such a formulation calls for a barbarous self-mutilation of the mind. I share Dr. Blanshard's deep moral revulsion from it. The demand for belief *no matter what* the evidence has no more ethical than intellectual justification; on the contrary, its ethical defects are equally fatal, and any religion requiring such dehumanization of its devotees stands condemned on both counts.

The issue is less clear-cut, however, in another passage wherein Dr. Blanshard phrases his question: "Ought we to believe where we do not see?" On one in-

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terpretation of “not seeing,” of course, the image of “blind belief” is evoked and what I have just said against Tertullian’s brand of theological obscurantism remains pertinent. Call this the “do not see *at all*” interpretation, and classify it with the “no matter what” view as clearly unacceptable. But this is only one (rather extreme) reading of the question. Another interpretation (equally extreme) might be phrased: “Ought we (ever) to believe where we do not see with perfect clarity?” Call this the “do not see *perfectly*” interpretation, and it is clear, I think, that the subject has been suddenly changed. Between not seeing perfectly and not seeing at all are a wide range of possibilities. I may see less well without my eye-glasses than with them. but being without them will not prevent me from coping adequately with some kinds of activities. How well I need to see depends upon my purposes and the circumstances. On a foggy day I shall drive my car more slowly and doubtless, unless in an extreme emergency, I shall give up hopes of flying my airplane at all. The crucial questions are, however: *how great the restrictions* on the visibility and *how large the risk* that is warranted by my purposes. If I were trapped in the center of a rapidly closing forest fire with my airplane, and if my only chance of survival lay in taking off into conditions I would normally avoid, I suspect that even quite low visibilities would seem a blessing.

But this is all a metaphor. Its epistemological application would seem to be that belief without *any* appropriate warrant, on the one hand, and belief with *perfect* certainty (which presumably occurs only in connection with self-evident or logically necessary truths), on the other hand, are far from exhausting the relevant alternatives. Our normal situation, I suggest, is somewhere between these extremes. We have some grounds, but far from enough for complete certainty, for most of our beliefs: and the question of whether it is reasonable for us to believe or not under those conditions depends upon our circumstances: including the accuracy of our assessment of the risks in being wrong and the rewards of being right. “Ought we to believe where we do not see?” My answer is: “It all depends.” It depends on how imperfect our vision is, how urgent the need for decision, what sorts of things *need* to be “seen” under the circumstances. In all of this, of course, I am including not merely religious belief but any sort of beliefs. I am, in brief, calling for a richer notion of “reasonableness” than Dr. Blanshard has yet given us for weighing the merits of affirming or withholding assent.

A third formulation of the issue before us is proposed by Dr. Blanshard in a way that might lead to just such an enriched notion if pursued. He contrasts withholding belief till the evidence warrants with: “the embracing of belief, whether intelligence is satisfied or not.” The question is well raised: Just *what* “satisfies intelligence”? Must intelligence be *fully* satisfied prior to the adoption of any belief under any circumstances? *Whose* intelligence, by the way, are we discussing? My commentator’s function does not allow me to explore the answers here at any length, but just as I am confident that reasonableness does depend upon satisfaction of intelligence, so also I suspect that intellectual satisfaction is not irrelevant to persons, times, and places. We all know that this is the case actually, inasmuch as different intellects are in fact differently satisfied. And even ideally, it would at the very least be extremely difficult to specify an absolute standard of intellectual satisfaction — one that demonstrably has and continues to have the power to

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convince every intellect exposed to it of its satisfactory character. The most I look for, therefore, are general criteria of good thinking set within a larger context of values and purposes. But this should be enough for finite human thinkers. This means that various intelligences may be legitimately satisfied without agreement with each other. It further means that the genuine hunger many men feel for intellectual satisfaction is set within a multiplicity of basic human hungers, also genuine and deserving, that may sometimes be in competition with one another. Seen in this light, it is at least possible that, under some circumstances, other interests than intellectual ones should *reasonably* be served *along with* intellectual interests and even before the intellect is completely satiated in its demands (if satiation is possible even in principle, which might well be debated). If persons were exclusively intellects, disembodied and eternal, no other satisfactions would count. But since this is not the case, it may be *unreasonable*, in the fullest sense, to defer feeding all other hungers until the intelligence is gorged.

II

Thus far I have been pressing toward an enriched conception of "the reasonable" as it pertains to the giving or withholding of assent by living human agents. Another skein of questions is brought to the fore by Dr. Blanshard in a fourth statement of the issue: "Is it true that even in religion," he asks, "beliefs should be accepted only on logically relevant evidence?" Here the main concepts that may require some enlargement are "logical relevance," "evidence," and "religious belief" itself.

What is it to be "logically relevant" to some possible belief? Is there some absolute standard of logical relevance for all types of belief and all domains of thought? Is one and only one *kind* of evidence designated by the modifier "logically relevant," or is it a normative *relationship* that Dr. Blanshard has in mind? Assuming the latter in view of the endless variety of the subject matter of human beliefs, what sort of relationship constitutes logical relevance? Dr. Blanshard writes in places as though "logical relevance" must in principle always exclude consideration of feeling or of human fulfillment, but surely this cannot be so. If I am inclined to believe, for example, that Bach's music is greater than the Beatles', a part (though probably not all) of my evidence will have to do with the quality of my own — and others' — musical experience, essentially including affective as well as cognitive dimensions. Likewise data about human fulfillment or frustration cannot without great loss be ruled logically irrelevant to ethical beliefs. Indeed, what counts as logically relevant evidence for beliefs in mathematics, physics, or astronomy excludes, for the most part, direct reference to the value-claims of human life (though even here I would not want to forget the relevant — and unavoidable — part played by aesthetic, moral, and religious convictions in shaping scientific belief); but as subject matters differ so, I submit, does the character of what may be taken as logically relevant. My answer to Dr. Blanshard's question, then, so far is: "Yes, even in religion beliefs should be accepted only on logically relevant evidence; but we still must determine *what sorts of evidence* this allows in view of *what sorts of belief* are included in religious beliefs."

A detailed analysis of the crucial concept of "evidence" is far beyond the scope of this comment. Let me simply say that while the general function of evidence is to

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count for or against the reasonableness of giving some degree of assent to a possible belief, its specific nature is field-dependent and thus relative to the logical character of the sort of beliefs at issue. Evidence is either logically relevant, that is, or it is not evidence (within that field of thought) at all. And what makes some datum or other evidence is not some absolute characteristic inherent in it but, rather, the considered judgment of those who work and think in the field that it needs to be taken into account in the weighing of their beliefs. Thus evidence becomes evidence I submit, by a kind of ruling made — often not without debate — by those most intimately concerned. Evidence is granted its evidential status by being acknowledged as properly pertinent to the resolution of the issue at hand; it is ruled in order by those seized of a question; it is admitted into court, as it were, by those most interested in reaching a fair verdict.

Such a view as I have expressed reminds us to be cautious about challenging the logical relevance of what is taken within some field to be significant evidence for or against belief that concern that field. My view raises no absolute prohibition: it is always in order (both for “insiders” and “outsiders”) to ask that the rules of evidence in some domain be explicit and carefully examined. But if those most concerned continue to insist on considering as evidence for or against their beliefs what seems to others logically irrelevant, it is well to remember that it is always possible for critics to misconstrue what kind of belief is really at issue. If religious beliefs are logically more similar to astronomical beliefs than to moral beliefs, for example, then surely it is true, as Dr. Blanshard argues, that consideration of human fulfillment are logically odd when adduced. Here William James, too, is in full agreement: “The future movements of the stars or the facts of past history are determined now once for all,” he asserts, “whether I like them or not. They are given irrespective of my wishes, and in all that concerns truths like these subjective preference should have no part; it can only obscure the judgment.”¹ Granted. Here everyone seems in sweet harmony. But since many thoughtful religious believers do persist in point to considerations of human fulfillment — considerations that would obviously be irrelevant in astronomy — I propose we take seriously the possibility that at least some important types of religious beliefs are quite unlike the astronomical ones with which Dr. Blanshard appears implicitly to compare them.

III

Finally, I turn to a fifth statement of the issue presented by Dr. Blanshard. He says that “while the scientific mind has on the whole, though with many lapses, held it wrong to exceed the evidence before it, the religious mind has held that there is one great exception, and that in this exceptional case it is not only a right but a duty to give one’s belief a freer rein. The question before us is whether this is true.”

My main concern, having already touched on the need for an enlarged concept of reasonableness in risking assent, a more flexible concept of evidence, and a revised analysis of religious belief, is now with the ethical notion of “rights and duties,” particularly within the domain of religious belief. Religious beliefs, in my view, as I have hinted, form a complex fabric whose threads are of many quite

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different kinds. There are doubtless some beliefs which function very much like the beliefs of historians (or astronomers), but I take these to be quite subsidiary to the fundamental function of primary religious beliefs which serve not mainly to describe finite states of affairs but to organize, elicit, and express ultimate values.

My role is not to expound on this view. Rather, entertaining it as a mere hypothesis, I am curious to see its implications for the question whether there are ethical grounds for giving "freer rein" to the religious beliefs we adopt than could be appropriate in the sciences or in other primarily descriptive discourse. The outcome, I think, tends to confirm the intuition of what Dr. Blanshard calls the "religious mind" that there are significant points of difference in both rights and duties.

The "right" to give freer rein to religious than to scientific beliefs is derived from the different functions played by the two. The scientist, through his enterprise, has taken on an obligation to describe finite fact as it is with the utmost dependability. In reality he does much more, and it is not my intention to reduce the nature of scientific thinking to sheer descriptive accuracy; that, however, is another story for another day. What is important, however, is that rights and obligations in thinking be seen as relative to purposes and values in life. One of the main purposes of empirical science is dependable reporting; thus one of the key values of this enterprise is precision in statement coupled with humble subservience to the actual. The religious thinker, by contrast, is part of a different enterprise, is consequently under a different set of obligations, and is thereby in a context of different rights. In affirming a religious belief he is not (on my hypothesis) necessarily attempting to report accurately on the actual; he may well be celebrating his intuition of the ideal. His central purpose is to maintain and increase consciousness of the most intensely worthy and most extensively relevant object of worship of which he is aware; thus one of the key obligations of this enterprise is the avoidance of hypocrisy in speech, coupled with humble self-scrutiny against idolatry in ideals. In saying this I am not intending to suggest that the religious believer has absolutely free rein (values are not irrelevant to what is the case and *vice versa*), nor am I attempting to reduce religious thinking to sheer prescriptive expression. Such additional complexities would have to be supplied in a fuller account.² My quick sketch here is merely to suggest a basis for an affirmative reply to Dr. Blanshard's question whether the "religious mind" has a right, somehow, to a freer rein (not a totally absent rein) in affirming a religion's most crucial beliefs. If those beliefs centrally deal with what is most worthy of worship rather than (in the first instance) with what is most probably actual, then they should be allowed that right.

What, though, of the "duty" to give freer rein to religious beliefs than scientific ones? I agree with William James that the purely defensive posture in life — the attempt to avoid all risks by refusing all uncertainties — is both impossible and, when attempted, self-defeating. We are obliged by the facts of finite life to risk, whether we like it or not (or acknowledge it or not); the refusal to make a positive choice is to make a negative one. Thus if (as on my hypothesis) religious beliefs primarily have to do with value-commitments rather than matters of cool, objective fact, there will be no avoiding religious beliefs — implicit in our ways of living, at least, even if never uttered or examined.

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Thus the question of a “duty” to religious belief has two facets. In one sense, since there is no avoiding living so as to exemplify some values or other, we are obliged — but not in any moral sense — to give freer rein to religious belief. We literally cannot suspend judgment, while going on living, on all matters of relevance to religion. But in this sense we have no “duty” to implicit religious belief of some kind since we cannot help ourselves and “ought” implies the possibility of doing otherwise.

There is another side to the question, however, on which it makes good ethical sense to speak of a “duty” to give freer rein to religious belief: this is the duty to articulate, openly affirm and thereby make available for examination the fundamental value structures of one’s life. Whence comes this duty? Is it externally imposed by philosophers of religion to enhance their prestige or their market value? No, if there is a duty to be self-conscious and reflective about one’s functioning religious beliefs, it arises from a common human duty to our own reason. We are agents, that is true; we are lovers, haters, builders, destroyers, artists, poets — people who feel and fear and need and all the rest. But we do think, if we are men: we are rational agents, intelligent organisms, and we diminish ourselves if we fail to use our frail powers of reflection to their best advantage in all aspects of our lives. Most profoundly of all, then, we have a duty to make explicit and to examine that valuational core from which our policies, our sense of self, our vision of the meaning of our world extend. We may shirk our obligation to reason in religious belief; but if we do, the sanctions fall upon ourselves as well as others. As I said at the start, practical unreason — the neglect of consistency, coherence, and adequacy as criteria in weighing the wisdom of one’s policies of life — invites randomness, self-defeat, and one-eyed loss of perspective. The duty to explicit and examined religious belief is the duty we all share to enhance intelligence in human existence. This duty to be reasonable, in turn, is ultimately grounded in the ideal of a full and integrated life.

FOOTNOTES

1. William James, “The Sentiment of Rationality,” *ESSAYS IN PRAGMATISM*, edited by Albury Castell, New York: Harner, 1957, p. 27.
2. See, for such an account, my *BASIC MODERN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1967, especially Parts I and III.