

TO REASON WHY

FROM RELIGION TO PHILOSOPHY AND BEYOND

John Burnheim



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For those who do or die, there also have to be those who reason why.

André Brink

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INTRODUCTION

Brink described his own formula as 'glib' in the context of the struggle against apartheid, but still claimed 'there's a grain of truth in it'. As indeed there is, as I shall try to explain. But first let me introduce myself.

My defining image of myself belongs to late summer, 1944. I am standing in front of the magnificent sandstone building of St Patrick's College, Manly, the Alma Mater of the Australian priesthood, looking up along the great stretch of headlands and beaches between Sydney Heads and Broken Bay. It is late morning, the warm sun glints on the ocean swell as it rolls in to make surf along the beaches and fling spray on to the intervening cliffs. A tall, thin, erect figure, about to turn seventeen, with a long face, light brown hair, hooded blue eyes, a long nose and longer ears, I look preoccupied, serious but by no means lugubrious, in spite of my dress. I'm wearing a black serge cassock or soutane with a broad red sash, derived from the college's association with Propaganda, the central missionary college in Rome. It is said to symbolise the blood of martyrs. Australia still counts as a missionary country, subject to the papal congregation *De Propaganda Fide*, for the propagation of the faith, the origin of the modern word *propaganda*.

I have a powerful vision of my place in the scheme of things. The inexorable but beneficent power of the dazzling light in which sun, sea and land manifest the magnificent beauty of their creator evoke a sensation of trust in his will to transform the world. He is teaching

us through the horrifying lessons of the war that is limping towards its conclusion how we must press forward on the ragged march that must ultimately lead back to him. I feel that the English-speaking peoples have a providential role, following their wartime mission against the forces of evil, in orienting the world towards an order based on justice, freedom and a genuine understanding of who we are. For all its imperfections, Australia is a striking example of what can be achieved in a very short time by people who can shake off the oppressive shackles of the past while preserving and developing their positive heritage. It has a special message for the times, but that message needs to be set in the context of the divine plan and draw on the power of God's grace. I am called to devote myself to convincing my countrymen of this necessity and to exploring its implications.

I shall try to explain how I came to be that person and what finally became of him. My first twenty-two years culminated in my ordination to the priesthood. My second twenty were spent as a priest trying to find in Catholic beliefs the remedy for the ills of the world. The third twenty were spent as a professional philosopher amid the turbulence that erupted in the late sixties, culminating in my publishing my own prescription for changing our political institutions. Now at the end of my fourth twenty years, in retirement, I attempt to sum it all up.

My story may be of some historical interest. I hope it will also interest people who are thinking about the great problems that face humankind in the twenty-first century. Not that those of us who devote themselves to thinking rather than doing are more likely to be right than anybody else. We too easily become obsessed with some partial vision of our situation. The history of philosophy can be read as a process of ricochets from one extreme to another. An old saying describes philosophers as 'making a living by taking in each other's washing.' A distinguished late nineteenth-century British philosopher, AC Bradley, once described philosophy as a matter of finding bad reasons for what we believe on instinct. We are very

well aware that everybody is inclined to believe what it suits them to believe. So we tend to be sceptical about explaining people's changes of belief in terms of the validity of their reasons. What follows is the story of a life focused on a search for the right way of thinking about human life. I think that my choices have been guided by sound reasoning, but I offer my version of my choices not as an *apologia* but as an attempt to sharpen the issues involved. They are, I believe, not just religious and philosophical, but social and political, in particular a matter of how we can improve our collective decision procedures.

What individuals or groups choose may be a matter of their psychological needs. But what they *can* choose is a matter of what alternatives are on offer and what they can know about their advantages and disadvantages. The task of those who devote themselves to thinking is to clarify the choices that are available. When it comes to beliefs, whatever other desirable or undesirable features they may have, the strength of the evidence for or against them has to be relevant. Once our curiosity is aroused, we cannot be satisfied without evidence. We want to understand, to get it right. In complex matters the evidence is rarely completely conclusive, as the history of thinking in both science and philosophy shows. I believe that there is hardly ever conclusive evidence in favour of a philosophical position, but that some can be shown to be pretty certainly false. Still, it is not enough just to accept that a view is false. Especially in matters that have significant practical implications, we need to know not just that people got things wrong, but where exactly their beliefs were wrong and what, if anything, survives the needed corrections. Above all we need to see more clearly what constitutes a genuine step forward. That is the really hard part.

The story I have to tell may help in that task, precisely because it is about a past that is in many ways very different from the present. I see it as story of progress in a number of respects, for reasons I attempt to articulate. I may be wrong about that, but what I have to say may still be of use in providing readers with a view in which

they can recognise clearly what they want to reject. That may enable them to clarify for themselves where they stand. More importantly, the assumptions with which I began my journey are not very widely held these days. I believed that religion, and, more generally, our conception of ourselves must rest on a set of completely objective truths, as strongly binding as those of mathematics. That assumption is deeply entrenched in Western culture, and its traces are still influential. So one often encounters the view that human life and concerns are insignificant because we are just tiny specks in the universe, as if our value was a matter of the objective physical facts about our size or our power rather than about what is distinctive of us, our knowledge, our loves and our moral worth.

It is often the case that in rejecting a way of looking at things we are too narrowly focused on the obvious differences between us and our opponents, neglecting certain assumptions that underpin, constrict and distort both positions. The atheist can be a prisoner of theism, confined to a purely negative position, as if all values collapsed when the theist account of them failed. Monism may consist simply in the refutation of dualism, without any account of the differences that support the dualist position. Similarly the materialist may be as limited as the idealist, the sceptic just as wrong as the dogmatist and so on. Hegel thought that out of conflicts in which one idea is just the antithesis of its opposite thinking one could arrive at a position that rises to a higher level, getting beyond the assumptions that underpinned the conflict. Whether that is generally possible in the way he suggested, I very much doubt. But it is always worth trying. I hope to tell this story in a way that may bring into question some elusive assumptions that still need to be challenged if we are to get beyond many of the apparently sterile conflicts that continue to shackle our thinking. More positively I have some practical suggestions about organising our ways of making decisions in the light of new perspectives.

Some of what follows, the heart of it in fact, discusses the work of professional philosophers. I hope I have succeeded in making that work intelligible to readers with no previous acquaintance with it. I don't think that is too difficult. Obviously, what follows is simplified, and may well be misleading. One cannot guard against the myriad possibilities of misunderstanding, but if the reader does not read too much into what my words say, it should not be too difficult to understand. What is much harder to convey is why anybody should be concerned about such theoretical problems. Like most professional philosophers I think that problems of the sort we discuss often underlie people's beliefs and attitudes, and that making them explicit can sometimes help people make better judgments about their lives. Philosophy is supposed to be the love of wisdom. Whatever about its success in getting things right, its getting them wrong can be very dangerous. Even a proposition that is clearly true can be misleading if it is taken as the whole truth about a certain matter. Once we go beyond particular facts, which are mostly trivial, truth claims are always contestable. But they can still have drastic practical consequences, notoriously so in matters of religion, morality or politics. Because truth demands assent it brings the temptation to enforce acceptance of it in practice where the consequences of failing to heed it seem important. Similarly, error may seem to require forcible correction. The analogy with measures to control disease and protect public health is always at hand.

The most dangerous word philosophers can use is 'only'. Everybody knows that it is possible to write an account of an historical event that contains only true sentences but is quite wrong if it is taken as an adequate account of what happened. On the other hand, no account can ever be completely adequate in every respect. In the physical sciences it may perhaps be different. Certainly physicists aspire to a complete theory of the fundamental constituents of the universe. I think that philosophy is more like history than physics. The great strength of physics is that it can

identify and quantify the factors with which it deals and interrelate them by precise mathematical formulae. Verbal descriptions in ordinary language or even in technical terms can only sit pretty loosely on the core procedures with which physics works. That is why popular expositions of physics are so often dubious, even where the authors are competent physicists. But physics, in being precise, abstracts from many aspects of things that we can grasp only in terms of much vaguer concepts, which can compensate to some extent by having a much richer content.

It is impoverishing and dangerous to ignore ambitious truth claims simply because they are vague. Vagueness is indeed dangerous. It makes it easy to conceal falsity, to confuse issues and to claim undue significance. That many people attach great importance to a belief may be simply that they are confused, mistaken, manipulated by scaremongers or victims of wishful thinking. But we have to start with what is vague and avoid the temptation of dogmatic prescriptions for a false precision that simply excises much that is important. Many people's philosophical problems appear intractable because of imposing impossible requirements on what they will accept as a solution. As Wittgenstein put it, 'to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' in such cases is a matter of bringing it to see just how the bottle gives the illusion of being completely enveloping. The great danger for philosophers is concentrating on one type of example to the exclusion of others that are equally relevant.

There is also a fundamental difference between the role ascribed to claims of complete theoretical adequacy in physics and in philosophy. In physics it has frequently been possible to discover previously unknown entities by showing definitively that existing theory cannot account for certain phenomena. Physics is always open to recognising entirely new entities and finding new kinds of theories to account for them, precisely because there is no way of accounting for them in existing theories. In philosophy, however,

the usual role of claims to theoretical adequacy is the opposite of this. Philosophers typically strive to marginalise, explain away or ignore what their theories cannot account for, dismissing it as illusory or irrelevant, just because they want to maintain that their account is the whole truth of the matter. What follows may illustrate how dangerous and unwarranted claims of complete adequacy or exclusive truth are in philosophy, as in all the humanities and social sciences. But first a sketch of the background.