Theism, Atheism, Dialogue:
The Possibility of a Post-epistemic Philosophy
of Religion

Matthew Stannard

P henomenology distinguishes itself from analytic, propositional philosophy in an obvious way. Eugene T. Gendlin writes:

> philosophy cannot be based on a study of how the things are in order to see what (conceptual) approach is most suitable. How we find the things to be already depends on our approach...
>
> Much in our conclusions about anything comes not from the study of things but from the philosophical decisions implicit in the way we start. (1967, 249)

Those decisions and the definitions that acknowledge them shed light on phenomenology's call to begin with the things around us. To begin so is to begin with the "us" that finds itself in a full range of humanistic concerns—political, ethical, economic, spiritual, and so on, recognizing that most of our definitions are either formed in community consensus or utilized in reference to mutual, contextual needs. And if philosophy can be the history and aesthetic of our shared conversations, then it must reveal something behind the true/false propositions that characterize the analytic playing field.

If we were to paraphrase Gendlin's statement to apply to the philosophy of religion and specifically the question of God's existence, it might read: "Philosophy of religion cannot be based on the truth or falsity of theism. Whether we find theism to be true depends on the philosophical approach we choose."

And, I believe, such an approach, and why we should or should not take it, is the focus of a post-epistemic philosophy of religion. In such a possibility, the redeeming value of the theistic debate is the demonstration of its dialectical failure.

This essay focuses on the debate between atheists and theists concerning "presumption," an inherent epistemic advantage supposedly granted to atheism by virtue of particular argumentive rules such

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as parsimony, everyday-ness, and verifiability. A recent essay by Scott A. Shalkowski, "Atheological Apologetics," questions these assumptions. Shalkowski shows that the rules of "the philosophy of religion game" do not favor either party prior to the actual debate. My thesis will go further: the rules themselves, in fact the whole principle of the game, ignore the role of theism and atheism in formulating complicated rule-theories which emerge from a misunderstood dialogue that invokes epistemology only within a larger scope of human situations.

THE GAME OF THEISM AND ATHEISM

Atheism generally presupposes that the particular criteria, which reflect the consensus of the scientific and philosophical community, render religious faith based on nonrational criteria epistemically illegitimate. Because epistemic rules resulting from community consensus are not in themselves enough for conclusive proof, atheists produce a "trump card": the rules of the philosophical community call for a prior burden on the theist to produce positive evidence for God's existence, where anything less than absolute victory on the theists' part will result in an absolute victory for atheism.

Michael Scriven's "The Presumption of Atheism" systematically lays out these criteria. Scriven claims that religious "faith" is an equivocation, since we usually claim to have "faith" only in things about which we are reasonably confident (1987, 364). It is wrong to have faith in that which lacks evidential support.

Scriven argues that "you ... cannot show that a belief in God is likely to be true just by having confidence in it and by saying (it is) knowledge 'based on' faith" (365). To get the facts, you need a tested methodology, grounded in everyday reasoning, logic and observation (365). In short, verifiability of everyday reasoning, logic and observation constitutes truth; science covers all truth, or can potentially do so, and all truth is scientific.

Religion fails to constitute truth for several reasons. Differences in religious belief indicate that nothing is universally agreed upon (366). Religious claims are not testable; methods of testing are often "fixed" in such a way so as to ensure certain results (366).

For Scriven, the arguments for something's existence entail: (1) "all the evidence which supports the existence claim to any significant degree," and (2) a comprehensive examination of the area where such

evidence, if any, would appear (367). Scriven summarizes:

> If the criteria of religious truth are not connected with the criteria of
> everyday truth, then they are not criteria of truth at all and the beliefs
> they 'establish' have no ... bearing in our lives ... no explanation of
> what we see around us ... no guidance for our course through time.
> (367)

Scriven's more provocative thesis is that, since one need not prove
the *non*existence of something, "we need not have a proof that God does
not exist in order to justify atheism. Atheism is obligatory in the absence
of any evidence for God's existence" (367). Scriven argues that
agnosticism is not the proper response in the absence of proof for God;
instead, one must admit that we cannot reasonably say such a being
exists.[3]

Shalkowski's article lists five possible reasons why a presumption
would exist against theism:

1–Something makes the position *instrinsically* suspicious or un-
likely.

2–Since the theists "begin" the debate, and introduce the concept of
God, theists have the burden to justify it.

3–Positive claims require proof or evidence, while negative claims
do not.

4–Since all theistic claims fail, atheism wins by default.

5–There is no "need" for theism, since we can explain everything
without it (Shalkowski, *passim*).

Shalkowski proceeds to question each of these reasons by applying
various theories of argumentation (1989, 1). In the first case, one might
presume against an internally inconsistent claim; something which, by
virtue of being a logical impossibility, has a probability of zero. "We
must be wary," Shalkowski warns, "of claims that presumptions and
burdens are functions of objective features of propositions alone" (1).
Instead, such claims are determined *by the information we have*. How
this could apply to something with no information is unclear. In sum,
if one can prove that something is necessarily false, then one has good
reason to think that belief in it is unwarranted. But if one has such proof,
one needs no presumption (2).

In the second case, Shalkowski asks why theists necessarily must
"start the debate," and whether a "debate" format is a proper or desirable
way to think about justification.

> Given what I take is common philosophical lore, that defeating the skeptic is well nigh impossible, it follows that we are unjustified in our common-sense beliefs. So, for atheists who are not ready to accept general skepticism, this way of posing the problem about theism is contrary to the way they generally think about justification. (4)

He continues: "if anyone knows anything, it is in virtue of having good grounds for believing it. This applies to theism and atheism equally" (4). Many of our beliefs are grounded in unproven assertions, and it is unreasonable for theism to bear burdens which other areas of life are allowed to conveniently ignore. So it seems unreasonable to automatically assume that one side begins the debate with a particular burden of proof.

In the third case, atheists' assertion that positive existence claims require evidence, while negative existence claims do not is silly, since to prove I don't exist, or this computer doesn't exist would certainly require radical evidential reinterpretation. Where God is concerned, the atheist has the advantage of God's apparent absence from the epistemic playing field. Shalkowski replies that even a casual examination of so-called positive and negative existence claims shows that the difference between their content is minimal and irrelevant. Making one type of claim subsumes making the other (5).

Shalkowski points out that Scriven ignores "evidence for the existence of God—'religious' experience, testimony, alleged miracles and the like. Scriven may well think that this is insufficient to warrant belief in God," but even so,

> if there were no evidence at all for belief in God this would legitimize merely agnosticism unless there is evidence against the existence of God ... not by some presumption in (atheism's) favor, but by some plausible case to be made in its favor. (7)

In the fourth case, the argument by default confuses the lump sum of all past theistic proofs with "theism in general." Even if all past proofs have failed, this is scarcely more than the acknowledgement that theistic arguments are advanced by "a dull and not a terribly clever lot" of philosophers (7). But again, this hardly establishes "presumption." The skeptic might be more clever than us all. In any case, arguments are not commonly won by default; until one side or the other advances a

conclusive position, the issue remains unresolved. "It is somewhat mysterious" Shalkowski muses, "why conditions on proof which are recognized as defective in most contexts would seem relevant for theistic apologetics" (7).

The last possible warrant for presumption concerns whether or not theism is "necessary" given the current state of science. God is seen by atheism as an explanatory postulate, unnecessary, since all physical things can be explained with simpler hypotheses without such an unlikely thesis as God. Such an argument assumes what it wants to prove: "some case such that on its basis, it looks as though God does not exist." Otherwise, God may well be a possible explanation (9).

<center>QUESTIONING THE GAME</center>

If atheists are to maintain argumentative integrity, the most they can claim is that, given a specific context, a set of precise (though somewhat arbitrarily applied) epistemic rules, and an interpretation of those rules based on contextual needs, atheism or agnosticism is preferable to theism. It is, of course, possible for atheists to make arguments justifying their specific context, rules, and needs. Understandably, such arguments are difficult to find in the range of atheological apologetics; for even if these arguments are convincing, they must begin from the same assumption that Shalkowski begins with, that the debate between theists and atheists is a "game"—not something phenomenologically "real" and not doing justice to the full range of human experience.

Perhaps we can presently advance a thesis which would do justice to my task here. We invent games to fulfill needs. The fact that those games often succeed is no warrant for them being assigned a greater degree of "reality" than other games. The rules of "Monopoly" do not, and could not, include that we ought to play "Monopoly" or that it is a superior game to "Risk," "Twister" or "Dungeons and Dragons." "Monopoly" advocates may respond that some higher set of rules governing game-playing itself might well favor one game, but of course such an argument launches us into a regress.

So one thesis we can advance here is that, since context determines epistemic burdens and is not itself an epistemic situation, presumption originates in a post-contextual ethical maxim—an "ought"—rather than from any "is." Because atheists might be willing to acknowledge this and simply argue for the instrumental superiority of their game rules, we

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can here enter a dialogue with atheism by examining the way those rules are made.

This raises the question of where we might place ourselves to begin the examination. Since Shalkowski and I believe that the game and its rules depend on what situation one is in, we could create a different situation in order to test whether atheological rules are indeed justifiable in the face of human experience. Quick to point out that he is only musing, Shalkowski hypothesizes:

> suppose we begin teaching philosophy of religion to a class and the reigning intellectual and social predisposition is to think that theism is the liberal view which frees one from the shackles of narrow, atheistic explanations of the cosmos, human history, and the meaningfulness of life. ... There have historically been people of high degrees of intelligence ... who have disbelieved the existence of God and for a long period our social and intellectual tradition was atheistic, but after a religious enlightenment this has changed, though there are still conservative strongholds of unbelief and spiritual revivals. ... Since the shift in context I have envisioned requires no shift in the weight of evidence, we will see that atheism is no better off than theism, contrary to the reigning intellectual climate. (9)

Obviously, we are stacking the deck, and ought to feel no shame for this, since we have found every deck to be stacked, and have chosen to concentrate on the ways in which stacking occurs and the relationship between various stacks.

In the manuscript for his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel presents the very context Shalkowski hypothetically proposes to invalidate the presumption of atheism. Hegel sermonizes:

> There was a time when [one] cared, was driven indeed, to know God, to fathom his nature—a time when spirit had no peace, and could find none, except in this pursuit. ...
> Our age has renounced this need and our efforts to satisfy it; we are done with it... It is no longer a grief to our age that it knows nothing of God; rather it counts as the highest insight that this cognition is not even possible. (1984, 87)

How is Hegel stacking his deck? Hegel calls this transformation "arrogant" and "the last step in the degradation of humanity" (88).

Again, one must know Hegel's context to know that it is indeed degrading to deny the human relationship to the divine—which the Enlightenment erases in favor of the exaltation of positivist cognition, the abandonment of genuine community in favor of mutual exploitation, and the abandonment of the search for Truth in favor of the quest for personal advantage.

We are more concerned, however, with Hegel's account of the dialogue between theism and atheism, particularly regarding the confusion of epistemology and primal context. Much dialectical failure results from this confusion. Without committing ourselves to the Hegelian universe, we can isolate this confrontation as an illustration of the epistemic attack on Faith.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* contains an account of the confrontation between Faith, the side of Hegel's developing consciousness which acknowledges Truth as a transcendent reality, and Enlightenment, the side whose defining characteristic is to use its "Insight" to question and dismantle the presuppositions of Faith.

Because Faith acknowledges Truth as *transcendent* reality, reality not open to questions of authenticity (though perhaps to questions of interpretation), Faith cannot participate, on those terms, in an epistemic debate. Faith acknowledges the transcendent Truth through what Hegel calls "picture-thinking." Most of Insight's dialectical shortcomings are further complicated by both sides' ambiguities concerning what is real in a transcendent, and hence unprovable sense, and what is real in a pictured, or propositional and epistemic sense. Essentially, Insight forces Faith to reduce its non-propositional beliefs to a set of propositions. By demonstrating what Hegel would see as the frailty of undeveloped consciousness in this confrontation, we can see the emergence of non-genuine dialogue: the failure to answer the demand of the other side, the dishonesty of advocacy, and absolutizing as an escape from accountability.

Insight presently recognizes its identity only in the function of questioning (though later it will presume to offer a system of its own), and can only be actualized by "borrowing" content from its object of ridicule: the images of Faith (Hegel 1977, 324, 329).

At this point, Insight must begin its attack not by building a case, but by tearing down the case of Faith. Faith is a truth-candidate placed in question by Insight. Insight still lacks content. Faith, on the other hand,

has an active component: trust. Trust is a positive commitment; an affirmation and commitment of self-consciousness into the divine (334).

Insight cannot see the individual-transcendent nature of rational consciousness. The acknowledgement of such a transcendence requires a positive action; a trust, or self-projection into itself. Insofar as it only continues to negate, Insight is not capable of this.

Here, Insight commits its first communicative failure as a critic. The critic cannot, or will not, see the truth in the truth-candidate. The critic is willing to ignore the sentiment and conviction of the candidate, is willing to accuse it of both ignorance and dishonesty without realizing the contradiction of those accusations (335), and in all respects is willing to turn away from the candidate ethically while confronting it "intellectually." Inasmuch as it does so, the critic fails to answer the essential demand of the candidate: charity in interpretation. "Enlightenment," Lauer interprets, "is incapable of comprehending the ground of belief, absolute spirit giving testimony to itself" (1982, 205).

The second failure closely follows. The critic holds the candidate to a standard the critic itself cannot uphold, and then pretends to uphold the standard in a superior way. Insight is questioned by the same demands it makes on Faith: What do you have to offer? "Discrediting belief accomplishes nothing positive; it in no way establishes the opposite of what is believed ... rationalism cannot justify itself" (204). Insight must answer these demands by postulating a transcendence, a projection of its own. Otherwise, it is nothing more than the glorification of emptiness. "The attribution of predicates to such a vacuum would be in itself reprehensible." In fact, it would reduce Insight to the undesirable level on which it has placed Faith (Hegel 1977, 340).

Searching for at least apparent certainty, Insight turns to the obvious: sensory experience. Sense-certainty is seen as absolute certainty. Insight now forgets that the very absolutism it questioned in Faith has become an attribute it has assigned to sense certainty. The experienced is seen as the True (341).

Insight may reply that sense-certainty does not call for the speculative objectification that Faith commits concerning Faith's images. In its defense it may invoke certain "principles" which justify calling sense-certainty Truth. For example, Insight might propose the principle of parsimony, or a "shift" in the burden of proof to the side of the argument making the unverifiable sensory claim, or even the verifiability prin-

ciple itself.

These defenses are ad hoc and impotent, since the "principles" only occur so far as their assumptions are based on the certainty of sense experience. Insight's defenses make sense only within their own paradigm, and do not justify the choice of that paradigm over some other. Thus, as Insight asks Faith to "verify" Faith's religious claim, Faith could just as easily ask Insight to pray about its most recent scientific discovery. Neither side sees the point to the other's request.

"In utterly rejecting belief it has rejected all the forms of consciousness which necessarily culminate in belief, and, in so doing, has raised sense-certainty to 'absolute truth'" (Lauer 1982, 206). Thus, its epistemic certainty is the direct result of its rejection of the beliefs of its opponent. Epistemic principle arises from ethical utterance.

This attitude's results are political. Once sense-experience has been given the stamp of absolute certainty, "(t)he platitude of utilitarianism is the logical outcome of enlightened insight" (206), and reason is viewed as a means to attain advantage.

Not only is speculative thinking sacrificed, but the primacy of the community is lost—the search for the divine (which is a communal search, both in Hegel's view and in traditional Christianity) has become a search for individual power. This is "a world of no depth, ... in which things are only what they are immediately... in which individuals are shut up in their natural egoism and are linked to each other only by considerations of interest (Hyppolite 1974, 446). And this allows the more sinister character of Insight to subordinate Faith, to make it one more component of serviceability (Hegel 1977, 343). Placed in that realm, Faith's demands can be forever silenced, shelved along with other useless, unanswerable sentiments (349).

To summarize: in Hegel's confrontation, atheism does not communicate with theism, but destroys, ignores or ridicules theism by using arguments. There is a clear distinction between the ethical-contextual origin of Enlightenment and the epistemic methodology it employs. Failing to admit this distinction results in three failures:

(1) *The critic refuses to interpret others charitably.* It refuses to recognize the believer's account of belief, and postulates alternative origins—"Enlightenment tells the believer what it is he really believes" (Lauer 1982, 205). This is a paradox: either Faith is reduced to nothing, and the essence of the believer destroyed, in which case a judgment is irrelevant; or Insight can make no judgment at all, since Faith's context

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and paradigm is radically different than Enlightenment.

(2) *The critic is hypocritical.* Atheism cannot justify its own epistemic ground in a way that is objectively superior to theism. It must offer a transcendence of its own, or else it is empty. But the transcendence offered—merely sensory positivism—is not epistemically verifiable. It cannot prove itself.

(3) *The critic disguises its ethical assumptions as principles of epistemic "truth."* Insight offers utilitarianism in the guise of certainty. Its new "laws" of exchange cannot understand Faith on Faith's own terms. Ironically, this constitutes a phenomenological failure as well as an ethical one, since it is "too abstract and too impoverished to express the finite richness which seems to constitute human experience" (Hyppolite 1974, 446). Moreover, in conquering Faith dialectically, Insight merely retains "many of the ideas that were formerly the province of Faith" (Kainz 1983, 62), even though Insight earlier condemned those ideas as absurd.

CONCLUSION

Scott Shalkowski questions the rules governing the game we call "philosophy of religion." In doing so, he paved the way for us to question the game itself, to envision a deconstruction that would allow us to move beyond epistemology on to more relevant questions.

What remains is to create those questions from a new field. If such a field seems difficult to envision, perhaps this is due to our preoccupation with still more stale analytical questions. Perhaps we are still trapped in a paradigm which imagines that the rules we create have an objective origin somewhere outside of us. Perhaps we are still confusing the game with the purpose of games: to fulfill whatever needs were there before we started playing.

ENDNOTE

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