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Religious Skepticism

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1. What is Religious Skepticism?

Religious skepticism is often understood fairly loosely today. Both in academic and non-academic contexts, pretty much anyone who is at all negative about religion, or who questions it in any way, may be seen as having an attitude that fits under this label. In the present chapter I adopt a narrower and, I hope, more illuminating understanding of the term. On this understanding, the term ‘religious skepticism’ allows us to pick out certain specific attitudes in relation to religion, obviously associated with skepticism in the history of philosophy and deserving of discriminating attention, that are associated with being in doubt.

What it is to be in doubt is best understood in relation to belief: ordinary usage and philosophical discussion alike suggest that someone is in doubt about a proposition when, and only when, having considered it, she believes neither that proposition nor its denial.¹ Thus Suneetra, who does not believe that the soul is reincarnated but does not disbelieve this either, is to be regarded as being in doubt about whether the soul is reincarnated. But is this the only sort of skepticism to be associated with doubt? I think not. For consider Sam, who finds himself with belief that there is a God but thinks doubt would be more appropriate because of the force of certain arguments his desires strongly resist. Sam may take it upon himself to actively question theistic belief over a period of time, hoping thereby eventually to do justice to the arguments, psychologically speaking. And it would be odd to deny that Sam is being skeptical about the claim that God exists as he does so.

We can deal with this fact by distinguishing between active skepticism and passive skepticism, saying that Sam exemplifies the former but seeks to reach the latter by, so to speak, helping the relevant arguments induce a state of doubt in him. (He is forced to do so because the state of being in doubt, like belief, is fundamentally involuntary rather than voluntary).ⁱⁱ This distinction between passive and active skepticism also neatly permits us to accommodate the commonly used phrase “suspending judgment,” which is often linked to skepticism but sounds like it refers to something one does – something active. One may voluntarily suspend judgment about a proposition by refusing to assert that the proposition is true or that it is false, and resisting inner affirmations on either side too, and this precisely is what one does when one exemplifies active skepticism.ⁱⁱⁱ

So we have passive skepticism, which is involuntarily being in doubt, and active skepticism, which means voluntarily identifying with doubt in the way I have described. These ways of being skeptical might of course arise in relation to many different subjects of inquiry. So we have to ask: What makes either form of skepticism religious? There are various possibilities here, the most obvious of which are (as my examples suggest) tied to religious propositions. But this point only invites a further question: what makes a proposition religious?

Unfortunately, there is no standard answer to this question about the nature of religion; the matter is controversial. But, pretty clearly, restricting religiousness to behaviour tied up with views about God or gods would be overly narrow: though they may be in the minority, there evidently are in the world today nontheistic and nonpersonalistic forms of religion (they can be found, for example, in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism). Having said that, it is understandable if philosophers find most interesting those forms of religion that have clear and distinctive non-

naturalistic metaphysical commitments of the sort that belief in a personal god exemplifies. (Metaphysical naturalism is the view that concrete reality is a single unified system of natural law.) To deal with this issue here I will assume for the purpose of our discussion, which is primarily philosophical, that religion is bound up with the notion that metaphysical naturalism is false. Religious realities, if such there should be, would in other words be transcendent realities – transcendent of the natural world. It seems clear that religious people also greatly value the transcendent toward which they think of themselves as oriented. These metaphysical and axiological points I think we may safely assume, in a philosophical context. But to ensure wide relevance for what I say, I will not assume any more than what they contain.

With that as background, we may continue elucidating religious skepticism by reference to religious propositions. One might say that being skeptical about even one religious proposition is enough to instantiate religious skepticism. And so on this option, Suneetra, even if the proposition I mentioned before is the only religious proposition about which she is in doubt, exhibits religious skepticism. But to make our discussion of religious skepticism philosophically interesting, we need to construe the latter as a general stance on religion, not a particular one of the sort exhibited by Suneetra. Even if Suneetra is in doubt about the reincarnationist proposition, she may believe many other religious propositions, such as the propositions propounded by the Catholic Church, to which she is in the process of converting. And it seems implausible to say she exhibits religious skepticism of any philosophically interesting sort in that case, for she is then a theist and a Christian! Notice that we are helped here by the fact that someone who, in a philosophical context, exhibits religious skepticism we should be able to call a religious skeptic.

It would certainly be odd to apply this label to Suneetra if she is well on her way toward being a full-fledged Catholic.

So when would it not be odd? To see, we need to make a shift from the particular to the general. Suneetra is skeptical about whether one specific religious proposition is true. The religious skeptic, properly so-called, is skeptical about whether any religious proposition is true. This is what is required to have an alternative both to the religious believer, who thinks she has found at least one religious proposition that merits a more positive response than skepticism (there are of course innumerable examples of this stance, including many in contemporary philosophy of religion), and to a certain general sort of religious disbeliever, who thinks that religion merits, across the board, a more negative response than skepticism affords, believing all religious propositions to be false (metaphysical naturalists, whose view is presently in the ascendancy in philosophy more generally, afford examples here). The religious believer holds that there is truth in religion, the religious disbeliever holds that there isn't, and the religious skeptic is unsure.

One must be careful about the details here. Being skeptical about whether any religious proposition is true is not the same as being skeptical about each religious proposition; rather many of them – take, for example, the propositions of ancient Greek religion – are clearly false, and contemporary religious skeptics usually see this. Nor is it the same as being skeptical about the conjunction of all religious propositions, which brings them together, linking each to another using the logical connective 'and.' It's not hard to see that that proposition, properly understood, will not inspire doubt but rather disbelief, since, given religious disagreement, it entails innumerable contradictions and must be false. Instead, what we have is something that, if made

precise and clarified in the skeptic's mind, would amount to skepticism about the disjunction of religious propositions (also an enormous proposition including all religious propositions, but this time one that links each to another with the logical connective 'or'). The religious skeptic typically sees a huge number of religious possibilities, some false, others unknown and so unassessable, and still others assessable but allowing for no verdict one way or the other. She is unsure as to whether any of these possibilities is realized: perhaps (at least) one is, perhaps not.

Various states of mind seem to represent a sufficient condition for being religiously skeptical in this sense. Consider the proposition 'Some religious proposition is true.' It might not seem itself to be a religious proposition (we would not inappropriately call it meta-religious). But being skeptical about that proposition should surely count as a sufficient condition of being a religious skeptic in the desired general sense, since that proposition is logically equivalent to the disjunctive proposition mentioned above. For the same reason, so should being skeptical about 'There is a religious reality' (where a religious reality is one whose being realized would be sufficient to make some religious proposition true). Another sufficient condition for being skeptical about religion in the desired general sense can be detected in skepticism about a particular religious proposition which the skeptic regards as being such as must be true if any religious proposition is true. For many in the west today, who suffer from shrunken imaginations about what's possible, that would be theism, i.e. 'God exists' (where by 'God' is meant a broadly person-like ultimate divinity). And here we also bump into the term 'agnosticism.' Purely at the level of attitude-type, there is evidently a close relationship between 'skepticism,' as we are using the word, and 'agnosticism.' But the latter term also has for us, these days, a strong religious connotation, associated with theism. The agnostic most often addressed in western discussions of

religion is skeptical about whether there is a God. And so we may think it is Sam, rather than Suneetra, who exemplifies religious skepticism, properly construed. And Sam might be a religious skeptic if he thinks theism (or propositions entailing theism) to represent the only ‘live’ option, religiously speaking. Many religious skeptics of recent years appear to be agnostics about theism who make the latter assumption.

Let’s call the general sort of religious skepticism just delineated categorical religious skepticism. Quite a number of individuals in the history of philosophy give the appearance of being categorical religious skeptics. In ancient Greece we find Sextus Empiricus arguing that “it is inapprehensible whether there are gods” (in Annas et.al. 2000: 146). Moving forward in time we find similar sentiments in thinkers such as Montaigne and Bayle. Ironically, some of these individuals seem more in tune with relevant cultural facts and conceptual possibilities than many of us in the twenty-first century, noticing that a divine reality might have lineaments very different from those of any god or indeed any reality with which we are acquainted – this theme may be found, for example, in Montaigne’s “Apologie de Raimond Sebond,” the longest chapter of his famous Les Essais ([1580] 1981). Even Bertrand Russell, in the twentieth century, was able to distinguish between the traditional theistic idea of an all-good and all-powerful personal deity and another sort of ‘God’ not so defined or restricted, declaring himself a disbeliever about the former but only an agnostic or skeptic about the latter: “That sort of God is, I think, not one that can actually be disproved, as I think the omnipotent and benevolent creator can” ([1939]1996: 258). Today in the west the making of such distinctions is much less common. Such religious skeptics as one does find today or in recent years often appear to have ruled out, as a religious option, everything other than theism (the philosophers Ronald Hepburn and Anthony Kenny are examples here). One of my aims in this chapter is to push us back toward a more

sensitive and sensible perspective, which enables the acknowledging of a much wider range of religious possibilities.

Something that will help us get there is the recognition that a further way of being a religious skeptic, related to but distinct from categorical religious skepticism, remains to be identified. It is perhaps a less obvious sort of religious skepticism, one that does not get its religious character from being straightforwardly tied to religious propositions. I call it religious capacity skepticism. This sort of skepticism involves a skeptical attitude in response to the proposition that we have (sometimes that we have now, sometimes that we ever will have) the capacities required to discern religious truth, if such there should be.

Though certainly to be found among a few contemporary religious skeptics, particularly in the work of Schellenberg (2007), such skepticism is also present in classical writers – for example, in the work of David Hume, where it can be seen as one aspect or application of his famous “mitigated skepticism,” which urges us to limit our thinking to the matters that “are best adapted to the narrow limits of human understanding” ([1748] 1975: 162). Hume, like Russell after him, realizes that arguments against specific religious claims (perhaps including traditional theism) may be successful in justifying disbelief of certain such claims even if we cannot rule out that some religious claim – perhaps one of whose content we cannot even form a clear conception – is true and so must, in general terms, remain religious skeptics. As can be seen here, capacity skepticism is closely related to categorical skepticism. The former sort of skepticism can provide one with justification for the latter. After all, if there may be religious propositions that we are incapable of formulating or incapable of assessing (perhaps because the relevant evidence is at least for now beyond our grasp), how are we in a position to rule out that one of them is true? Or that some such proposition is true and incompatible with religious propositions known

to us, which we are inclined to believe? Religious capacity skepticism will therefore lead, for those in its grip who understands the state at all, to categorical religious skepticism.

So we have categorical religious skepticism, which is active and/or passive skepticism about the proposition that there is truth in religion (or some logically equivalent proposition), and religious capacity skepticism, which means being actively and/or passively skeptical about the proposition that human beings possess the capacities required to discern truth in religion, if such there should be. And although the former can exist without the latter, they may also go together, with the former grounded in the latter. A final point we should make note of here is that where religious skepticism occurs or is discussed in philosophy, we may expect it to be associated not only with such attitudes but with an epistemological claim: the claim that religious skepticism is intellectually preferable to both religious belief and a general religious disbelief of the sort I described earlier in this chapter. This claim need not be interpreted in such a way as to imply or suggest that religious believers and disbelievers have something wrong with them personally, some defect of intellectual character, perhaps, or the failure to fulfil intellectual duties of a sort that philosophers often have in mind when they speak of someone being unreasonable or unjustified in her belief. Rather, what we should think of here is a proposal as to what is objectively the case – what reason actually best supports in the way of a response to religious propositions. The religious skeptic, naturally enough, proposes that the best response is going to be religiously skeptical. I shall now outline what I regard as the strongest case for this proposal – a case I regard as being successful.^{iv}

2. A Scientific Case for Religious Skepticism

The case begins with points that have long been emphasized by religious skeptics, having to do with human limitations. But its true force emerges most clearly when we add to these certain further points, allowed and indeed encouraged by modern science, concerning human immaturity.

We have seen already that Hume emphasizes the first sort of point. So we can take him as an example of someone who would push that part of my case. Human beings, on this view, have cognitive powers that are severely circumscribed, and are prone to cognitive errors. Though this is not where they are most fruitfully brought into play, here too scientific developments can help to buttress the case. Cognitive psychology has in recent years, in part through the rich ingenuity of its experiments, revealed many surprising biases in the workings of human minds (Kahneman 2011). More generally, what we have learned about the vicissitudes through which humans have emerged in evolutionary history, the particular environments to which they have contingently become adapted, has led some philosophers – notably Chomsky (1988), whose view is developed by McGinn (1993) – to surmise that the human brain is quite good at some cognitive tasks, such as those of science itself, and not so good or perhaps even really bad at others, such as the general and fundamental problems addressed by philosophy. Now the intellectual questions referenced by McGinn are of the same sort – general and fundamental – that religious belief and disbelief purport to answer. And it would not be surprising if religion were an area of human life that particularly invited cognitive bias. So humans could, by virtue of the contingent and limited cognitive structures they have to work with, be prevented from learning whether there are any realities beyond the natural world studied by science or what such realities – should there be any

– would be like. It might of course be hard to be sure, in any rationally approvable manner, whether we have been thus prevented. But our limitations may nonetheless be noticeable enough to support being in doubt about whether this is not the case. What we have here is an argument for capacity skepticism which undergirds categorical religious skepticism.

Now to such reasoning the religious believer may be inclined to reply in terms of revelation, perhaps a revelation from God. Precisely because of our human inability to find God on our own, so it may be said, God reveals Himself to us through scriptures or human authorities or special experiences or miracles. Or perhaps God is revealed in the very tendencies of our minds, as exposed by science: the cognitive science of religion (CSR) has recently documented how ‘natural’ it is for humans to think of the divine in personal, agential terms, and to believe in God or gods (Guthrie 1993, Barrett 2004). The religious disbeliever, for her part, may scoff at doubt, arguing that no singular ability is needed to tell that there obviously is no God and gods, or insisting that science is so much more impressive, intellectually, than religion as to justify consigning the latter to the dustbin of history.

But even in their common use of male personal pronouns – such as ‘Himself’ – for a transcendent spiritual reality, the influence on believers of human limitations may be observed! And the religious skeptic will wonder whether what CSR has revealed may not be precisely the sort of limitation she is talking about: being constitutionally such as to be specially attracted to what may be a very small sub-set of religious possibilities. It is in any case question-begging to speak of revelation in response to an argument purveying doubt as to the accessibility to us of a divine reality: how can we have any confidence that we would understand the information that needs to be delivered to us?

The disbeliever's argument is no better. The various god ideas may only scratch the surface when it comes to transcendent possibilities. Just the likeness to us of God and gods should already make any serious religious adventurer ready to move on in the quest for what, if anything, lies beyond ourselves. (Here too the CSR results might be illuminating, and in an unexpected way, helping to explain why critics of religion such as Daniel Dennett [2006: 9] seem just as onesidedly focused on personalist religious ideas as believers are.) By the same token, the disbeliever subtly begs the question too. For if our limitations are as serious as the religious skeptic suggests, mightn't there very well be a religious reality even if human religion hasn't found it? The very unimpressiveness of human religion (supposing the disbeliever to be right about that) should lead the disbeliever to wonder whether its ideas are, as she assumes, representative of all there is in the domain of religious possibilities.

What both religious believers and religious disbelievers typically overlook is, as I have suggested, what Montaigne and Hume and Russell saw: that there might be innumerable possibilities when it comes to alternative ways of construing reality beyond nature. Human limitations may lead us to miss one or another or various sets of such possibilities, or large swaths of evidence pertaining thereto. The relevant information might be such as we are capable of recognizing, but nonetheless overlooked, neglected, or inaccessible (by which I mean that the particular directions of our thinking conspire to obscure it from us). It might also be such as we are incapable of recognizing: undiscovered or undiscoverable. The importance of these five ways of missing relevant evidence is itself something we tend to overlook (Schellenberg 2007).

So much for the Limitation Mode of religious skepticism. Now it's time to see how adding the Immaturity Mode allows us to take the case for religious skepticism to a whole new

level. The Limitation Mode is about how we are constituted as finite beings and the constraints this imposes on investigation into the ultimate and infinite or at any rate the transcendent. It is not about our stage of development as a species, and indeed it might inspire doubt at any stage of development (even if some of its concerns could to some degree be mitigated at higher levels of finite development). The Immaturity Mode, on the other hand, is all about development – or rather a (relative) lack thereof. The Limitation Mode argues that human beings, given their finite constitution, may lack the capacities required for religious or irreligious insight. The Immaturity Mode argues similarly but with a twist: even if finite beings could have the relevant capacities, we may not yet have them.

‘Immature’ can be understood in two senses, both quite familiar to us. The first is illustrated by Theresa, who is called an immature chess player because she has a tendency to become angry and overturn the chess board. Todd too might be called immature at chess, but that’s because he just started playing chess six months ago. The first sort of immaturity might be called normative, the second descriptive.

Now what’s interesting is that the human species, in respect of thinking about religious matters, is presently immature in both senses. In matters of religious investigation we have surely done less well than might have been hoped with the time already allotted to us, but it is also true that – at least when scientific timescales are brought to bear – we must be regarded as having just got started. To see the former point, we need only consider the fact that credulous belief, dogmatic preaching and teaching, and fighting and killing in the name of God or gods are rife in religion as we’ve known it so far. This normative immaturity is a familiar fact, so I will not tarry in its precincts. The more interesting and also far less familiar fact is the descriptive fact about

our place in time – one that we will count as representing a very early stage of development both for human beings and for intelligent life on our planet when we have reached a proper understanding of scientific time and internalized it.

Clearly we have not yet internalized it. Indeed, this is part of our immaturity. In our culture we are constantly bombarded with scientific results, but our awareness and internalization of deep scientific time is still incomplete. It is true that we have begun to adapt to the fact of a deep past. Daily we are reminded that we come at the end of a long evolutionary process. But there is little to stimulate the thought that we come at the very beginning of one too, and that we humans may have inscribed in the book of intelligent life only its first few lines.

To be thus stimulated, we need to meditate on such uncontroversial scientific results as the following. Our planet has supported life for about 3.8 billion years. But only about 5 million years ago did the human lineage diverge from the ape lineage. You'd have to travel almost all the way through that period, stopping just 100,000 or 50,000 years short of the present, to finally meet beings a lot like us, who are clearly capable of practicing some form of religion.^v What's more, you'd have to make it almost all the way through that 50,000 year span of time to arrive at the forms of religion, including Christianity, that preoccupy us today.

Now contrast all this, the human religious story of about the last 50,000 years, still touched by the violence that is in our genes and conspicuously heavy at our end, with the fact that, according to science, although the sun will eventually scorch our planet, earth may remain habitable for as long as another billion years more (Schroder and Smith 2008). What this means is that the human story, so far, appears in about the first twenty-thousandth of the portion of deep time that may feature intelligence on Earth! Long story short: religious experience and inquiry

might only be getting started. When we refer to the twenty-first century, we should think of this as indicating how very brief and flickering has been the existence of religion so far, rather than (as is more usual) taking it as grounding claims of ancient venerability.

So what can the religious skeptic do with such facts and with the new sensibility sponsored by an ability to convert from human to scientific time? Well, there are consequences for both religious belief and religious disbelief. To religious believers the skeptic says this: perhaps religious experiences of the future will, because of much greater future intellectual and spiritual capacities, reveal a transcendent reality with defining characteristics quite different from those of any such reality we have yet conceived. To the disbeliever she may of course say the same, but here she may also put her point directly in opposition to what religious disbelievers commonly hold concerning their argumentative prowess: for all we know, what we have ruled out so far in the way of religious ideas, however impressively we may have done so, is only what beings at a very early stage of thought about such things have been able to come up with. So let the human species develop some of the more advanced capacities that may in the future come with a larger brain, or with the overcoming of violent tendencies, and think then about what the evidence shows. Believing now is premature!

Of course the state of being in doubt that I have called passive religious skepticism may not immediately be induced by reflection on such considerations. I think the religious skeptic will quite sensibly prescribe extended contemplation of our immaturity, both normative and descriptive, for all of us. For those who see that doubt is appropriate but are prevented by the involuntariness of belief, this will of course amount to a prescription of active skepticism.

But the religious skeptic has another move up her sleeve – the most powerful one, which I

have left for last. The key here is to see how, although either the Limitation Mode or the Immaturity Mode might, on its own, be seen as justifying religious skepticism, these two can also be combined in a certain way to produce an even more impressive result.

This is how to produce it. Strategically back away from the claim that the Limitation Mode on its own justifies religious skepticism. Instead, use the points made there to support just the following unexceptionable claim: that the very least we can conclude from our limitations is that an extended process of high-quality religious inquiry instantiated in our midst would be required to justify religious belief or disbelief for human beings. (The principle here is the same as the one preventing us from expecting correct answers on a test from a child who has little aptitude for a subject and moreover hasn't studied.) The clinching move will perhaps be obvious. For surely the very least we can conclude from our immaturity is that we have not yet engaged in such inquiry! The human species is both profoundly limited and profoundly immature. Thus, even more obviously than before, religious belief and religious disbelief are shown to be intellectually unjustified for beings such as we are.

What we have seen, then, is that the reasoning implicitly or incipiently found in Montaigne, Hume, Russell, and like-minded others can be brought into the light of day with the support of science. In our culture, science is most often taken as supporting metaphysical naturalism. But what it actually supports is doubt about whether naturalism is true and also about whether any religious proposition is true. What science supports is religious skepticism.

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Notes

i. What this means is that skepticism here is not simply or specifically knowledge skepticism, which could exist even in someone who happily believes a proposition p and thinks she is justified in doing so (someone in this condition might still wonder whether she knows that p). Of course someone skeptical in my sense will not claim to know either of the propositions involved

in her skepticism if she recognizes that knowledge entails belief.

ii. It should be noted that the ‘passivity’ involved here reflects not the absence of such actions as are involved in active skepticism (in which case passive and active skepticism would be mutually exclusive) but rather the involuntariness of doubt just mentioned.

iii. Of course, as my descriptions already suggest, one could be both actively and passively skeptical (even after he reaches doubt, Sam may engage in active skepticism to keep himself in that subjective condition). These two attitudes are not mutually exclusive. But it is also important to note that they don’t have to go together, and in particular to recognize that active skepticism may occur without passive.

iv. The case I here present in outline form is a somewhat revised version of the case detailed in Schellenberg (2007).

v. For an authoritative survey of recent scientific thinking about these early periods, see Wade (2006). The behavioural changes I’ve alluded to are visible in the archaeological record of about 50,000 years ago, and recent genetic evidence suggests that they may have been spurred by the advent of fully articulate language – something that could be required for anything more than incipient religiousness.