



## Philosophy and the Human Situation

### *Faith and Reason*

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In this talk on faith and reason I want to argue that differences between one religion and another, or between some religion and no religion, at all can be rationally held even if the relevant beliefs are not resolvable by rational means. I shall appeal to two considerations. The first has to do with the nature of reason, the second is concerned with the nature of religion.

'Reason' and 'rationality' are wishy notions. For one thing, one can apply them not only to belief, but also to action. For another, the rationality of a belief or an action depends or may depend crucially on what one already believes about what is the case or what ought to be the case, and so what it is rational for A to believe or to do might not be the same as what it is rational for B to believe or do. In the jargon, rationality is person-relative because many of our beliefs are person-relative.

But what, more precisely, are person-relative beliefs? Or what is the person-relative evidence that renders a proposition more probable to one person than to another? The existence of such beliefs does not just signal the fact that evidence for beliefs is not total evidence, or the evidence available to everyone, or the evidence available to an impartial and ideal observer, for the recognition of such constraints upon the availability of evidence is among the commonplaces of the theory of knowledge. If, in the interests of rationality, we restrict our beliefs to those for which there is as a matter of fact evidence equally available to everyone, or to beliefs which in fact pass some general evidential threshold, then we shall end up with very few rational beliefs indeed. In the matter of beliefs and their justification, one must take account of the fact that one is neither infallible nor omniscient.

Person-relative evidence is evidence which as a matter of fact a person possesses which another person could in principle have, but cannot now obtain, or cannot now very easily obtain. For example, part of a person's evidence may be certain memories. Even if the memories are of some public event, no person can now have that evidence who did not witness that event. But if the event recurs, as the appearance of a comet may recur, then other people can have that evidence, or something very like that evidence, and come to share the beliefs of the first person, beliefs about the appearing and the appearance of the comet. If the memories are of some private happening, or of an event that will not recur, then the evidence is less accessible to other people.

So a person-relative belief may simply be a belief that one person has better evidence for than another. For example, I believed five minutes ago that I had five coins in my pocket, and the evidence for this is that I touched them. You can now have the belief that Helm had five coins in his pocket five minutes ago if you credit what I tell you, though your evidence for that belief is weaker than mine if only because I might forget something in what I tell you, or unintentionally misdescribe the situation. But it is the same belief.

Each of us, necessarily, has less than total evidence for the truth of a belief. And for at least some of our beliefs, perhaps for very many of them, even for most of them, we have unique evidence, evidence which as a matter of fact has come to us and not to others. Moreover this evidence in this strength cannot now be given to others.

I'm not arguing, however, that beliefs acquired directly and not as the result of the testimony of others are always stronger than their reported versions. Sometimes we need to correct our personally acquired beliefs by other beliefs that we have, and by beliefs that others communicate to us. Nevertheless, I think that the truth behind the significance of the idea of

person-relative beliefs is that of epistemic privilege of certain of our beliefs, conferring an epistemic advantage.

Another factor accounting for the significance of person-relative beliefs is that our direct experience is often, if not always, richer and more manifold than are the words we use to represent it to ourselves and to others. Philosophers set great store by words, and properly so, but it is a commonplace that words cannot convey the feltness and immediacy of experience, nor the vividness and complexity of the beliefs that immediately arise upon that experience.

For clarity, let us further distinguish between eliminable and ineliminable person-relative beliefs. An example of an eliminable person-relative belief would be the following. Suppose that it is reasonable for me to believe that I have five coins in my pocket by remembering that I put them there. Because your epistemic situation is different from mine, it may be less reasonable for you to believe this. But I might make it more reasonable for you to believe it, and even as reasonable for you to believe this as it is for me to believe it, by showing you the coins and then replacing them in my pocket. I have then eliminated our differences.

Ineliminable beliefs are, I claim, characteristic of one kind of an argument for religion, namely that kind which appeals to immediate religious experience or awareness, but also to the more common cases where the evidence of direct memory is part of the evidence for religious belief, and where ineliminable person-relative beliefs operate.

So the relativity of certain person-relative beliefs is ineliminable. There are some types of evidence which you at present possess which, in order for that evidence to be made available to me, would require me to be you, or at least require me to have direct access to your mental states.

There are also experiences which a person has had, and the beliefs that arise from these experiences, or which certain experiences might confirm. Are these data available in principle? Is, say, Luther's sense of his deep dissatisfaction with himself available in principle to us? Is, say, Isaiah's vision in the Temple available in principle to us? If not, and if the sense of dissatisfaction, and the awareness conveyed by the vision increased the rationality of some religious belief for Isaiah, (as we might suppose) then the rationality of religious belief for a person may be based upon, or may be increased by, the ineliminable person-relative beliefs of that person.

We could have an experience like Isaiah's, perhaps. But for it to have the evidential significance it had for Isaiah, we would have to experience it under conditions that, broadly speaking, Isaiah did. Is this possible? Even if we could be transported back in time to Isaiah's strange world, whether or not we could or would have had such an experience is not, presumably, up to us. For a consciously self-induced experience like Isaiah's would not be Isaiah's experience.

So each of us is in a unique cognitive position, which may or may not be significant, depending upon what we actually cognize, or claim to. I cannot now return with you to what I experienced and which you (had you been present) could also have experienced. In addition, in the case of private experiences such as visions, dreams or vivid memories, I am uniquely positioned in a stronger sense, that no one can bring it about, now or ever, that you have precisely these data, for to have them you would have had to be me.

In the interests of achieving objectivity, or of coming to agreement, perhaps we should strive to eliminate as many such personal relative beliefs as we can, but it is hard to see how we could eliminate all of them, and hard to see what argument might be used to urge such total elimination upon us. If we cannot eliminate them, and if for something to be a proof it has to convince most people, then the existence of ineliminable person-relative beliefs – places severe restrictions upon what one person might convince someone else of.

The second type of argument is derived from the nature of religion.

I take it that 'religion' is a somewhat wider term than, say 'religious belief' or 'theistic belief'; for while it embraces such beliefs, or may do, it also has other concerns: ethical and spiritual needs and goals and ideals; the relation of an individual to a tradition, and the fact and importance of corporate life. Religion is an orientation of oneself that includes all these, or may include them and no doubt may include much else besides. When we are addressing the rationality of religion, therefore, considerations are relevant which are not relevant in the case of theistic belief alone, or even of religious belief. And the considerations relevant to the rationality of adherence to a religion may be as many-sided as religion itself. I want to develop this point as part of my second argument against the idea that only if differences are rationally resolvable are the relevant beliefs rational.

What I shall argue is that different people may want different things from religion, and that the only way of adjudicating between many such wants is by considering whether religion, or a particular religion is a possible, or likely, means to gain these ends. Hence it is unacceptable to insist that the rationality of religion ought to turn wholly on evidential matters, even if the rationality of religious belief should, and even if some of this evidence is person-relative in the sense discussed.

Religious belief is usually, if not always, grounded in a religious sense, in the awareness of a religious need. So the rationality in religion cannot be limited to the domain of the purely external evidential features of a person's situation. By this I mean that what grounds a religious belief, and so makes it a non-arbitrary belief, includes matters which the person believes are relevant to his own well-being. In saying this I do not mean that questions of danger and deliverance (if we take this as a typical example) are not cognitive in character. Let us suppose that they are, though we could argue about that. Rather, what I mean is that grounding one's belief in God on such matters as the removal of danger and the sense of forgiveness involves one in introducing considerations that are not only concerned with the issues of one's situation that are external to oneself, but also with a person's hopes and fears.

So rationality includes not only rationality about matters of fact about one's situation, nor even matters of fact about oneself, but means-end rationality, practical rationality. It is practically rational, for anyone who is concerned about her own forgiveness, to think that a religion which makes provision for forgiveness is more rationally acceptable than one that does not. For religion, and certainly the Christian religion, is concerned not only with purely evidential matters, but with matters which concern ideals, spiritual fulfilment, well-being and the like. And whether or not it is rational to participate in that religion may partly turn on considerations that are wider than the purely factual, without discounting the factual. Questions of truth are important; but they may not be all-important.

Of course questions about how we should act cannot determine questions of truth or falsity. The fact that we are agents, with a variety of interests, may affect the amount of time and effort we are prepared to put into getting our beliefs as rationally grounded as possible.

So one may reckon that religion is primarily and indispensably cognitive and that the truth or falsity of its claims is to be discerned only by reference to factual considerations, while nevertheless holding that other things besides investigating the evidential grounds of one's religion have a higher priority.

A person might approach religion in the following way: if you can prove to me that a particular religion is more probable than not then I'll take whatever that religion has to offer. But another may say, I want a religion that offers forgiveness, though only, of course, if there is evidence for its truth.

The two sorts of belief that we have been at pains to distinguish, beliefs about the world outside the self, and beliefs about one's own desires and needs, may happily cohere, but they also may come apart. A person may want what the God for whom he has reasonable grounds to believe in cannot give. And he may on that account cease to believe that God exists, or the belief that God exists may remain a merely theoretical belief. Alternatively, a person may want what only God can give but lack sufficient evidence to make belief in such a God a reasonable belief, and so may despair.

But not only may these two types of belief be out of harmony, it is possible to envisage a trade-off between one type of belief and the other. One of the ways in which the question of the rationality of religious belief may be unsettled, besides the fact that relevant evidence may not be generally available, the person-relative nature of the belief, is the fact that different people may place different value on the importance of having well-grounded religious belief and on the ends of religion as they understand these. If, in a Martin Luther-like way, a person has an overriding personal concern to be rid of his guilt before God, then it may be rational for him to become an adherent to a religion that holds out the prospect of such deliverance even though the evidential grounds for that religion are weak. Or suppose that one was generally sceptical about the possibility of settling fundamental religious issues on purely evidential grounds; in that situation of evidential equilibrium, it might be rational for a person with an overriding concern to be rid of his guilt to subscribe to a religion which offered deliverance from guilt. One might, in this way, offer a defence of the rationality of religion which had some of the features of Pascal's Wager. Indeed, adapting Pascal, one may say that the heart may have reasons that evidence knows not of.

It may be thought that the fact that different people place different values upon religion, have different concepts of religion and what it is supposed to do, the role that that religion is to play in life, is deplorable. But it seems to me to be a plain matter of fact, and if so it is surely a relevant fact in discussing the rationality of religion.

When it comes to the rationality of religion, wider considerations than the purely evidential intrude, and a person may take due notice of these, while not of course denying the importance of evidence for the rationality of religious belief, without necessarily leaving himself open to John Locke's charge that he is in love with his own fancies. The accumulation that he undertakes will include evidence, but it need not exclude everything else, and perhaps must not exclude everything else.