

# Atheism and Theism

*Second Edition*

J.J.C. Smart

J.J. Haldane

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# *Preface to Second Edition*

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*J.J.C. Smart and J.J. Haldane*

The original invitation to engage in a debate about atheism and theism was appealing. Although our principal areas of philosophical activity lie outwith philosophy of religion *per se*, we are each deeply engaged by issues in metaphysics and the philosophy of mind which bear directly on such questions as whether regularity and intelligibility have or need an explanation; and if they need one, what the form of this might be. Beyond that, we are each personally engaged by such questions as whether the fact that there is anything at all indicates a supernatural cause, and whether intimations of apparent meaning in human experience signify some objectively transcendent point or purpose.

As well as speaking and writing about such issues within professional philosophical contexts, we have also reflected upon them in non-academic fora, believing them to be among the most important questions for human beings to try to answer. Although professional philosophers may be well equipped by their intellectual training to make conceptual distinctions and to evaluate the cogency of arguments, they have no preserve of experiential wisdom, or sole proprietorial claim to the serious discussion of these matters. Moreover, if they start, as we each believe they should, with the facts of experience (as against some pure *a priori* foundation), then they must also attend to the reports of working scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and plain, common folk.

Turning to the more narrowly philosophical, neither of us is disposed to think that all philosophical questions are narrowly conceptual (in this respect we endorse the criticism by Quine of the analytic/synthetic distinction), but nor do we suppose, with post-modernists, that everything is in radical flux: that all is really and equally revisable, reformable and rejectable. To that

extent we are common-sense realists, believing that there is a great deal in the common stock of human knowledge that is and will remain beyond significant revision, and that this alone provides a basis on which to work in constructing philosophical accounts of reality.

In the Introduction to the first edition we expressed this view by writing that ‘in opposition to current trends [we hold that] that there is a world independent of human thought and language which may yet be known through observation, hypothesis and reflection’. In this second edition Haldane presents a line of argument that maintains this commitment but also considers that such a realism may only make sense on the basis of the assumption that what may elude human cognition, or that of other finite beings, is yet known – by an omniscient mind, i.e. the mind of God.

In the years since its first printing (in 1996), *Atheism and Theism* has been extensively reviewed and made the subject of discussions in the writings of others. The authors of these publications have made a number of interesting points, often critical but sometimes supportive of one or other argument or idea. Many of them have also commented that it is a pity that we did not have the opportunity to develop points further or to take up other matters. In this second edition the original material remains as previously published (subject to some typographical corrections and additions to the bibliography) but we have each added a chapter in which we address many of those writers’ concerns and try to answer at least the main ones, including some omissions. Space did not allow more extensive discussions and, such being the nature of philosophy, there is always more that could be said.

Since the primary purpose was not to engage in a further round of exchanges between ourselves but to take note of points from the audience, generally addressed to us individually (though in some cases jointly), we wrote the chapters simultaneously and without reference to one another. It is interesting to note, therefore, that while for the most part we discussed different issues there are points at which our discussions address the same topics, though in different ways, for example, on the matter of necessary existence and on the question of whether biology offers evidence of design.

The majority of reviewers chose to observe the friendly and respectful character of our exchange. It is interesting that this is something that should seem to merit comment. Perhaps the explanation is that – notwithstanding the ‘Debate’ context – we were and are less interested in scoring points than in sharing our wonder and speculation in face of the fact that there are things and that they are intelligible. As philosophy has become more of an academic profession it has not necessarily become more profound, and we can think of no better starting point for an exchange on atheism and theism than mutual respect for sincerely held, and seriously formed opinions. As the ancients were inclined to say, philosophy is best practised when it is an exchange

between those who have a benign regard for one another and conceive themselves as engaged in a shared search for truth. We hope this extended discussion will re-engage earlier readers and draw new ones into that common search for the truth about atheism and theism.

# *Introduction*

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*J.J. Haldane and J.J.C. Smart*

Philosophy aims at clarification and understanding. It is one of the wonders and delights of the subject that anything can be a starting point for the sort of investigation it conducts. A leaf falls and the speculative mind sets to work: what is the nature of the motion, is it determined or random? why do leaves fall, is it a matter of contingency or one of necessity? does the event serve a purpose or is it both blind and unguided? Initially, it may look as if these questions are ones for science, but even though detailed scientific enquiries are necessary in our efforts to understand the world, they operate against a background (or backgrounds) of assumptions which may themselves be questioned.

What marks out an investigation as philosophical is its concern to provide ultimate explanations and understanding, or failing this to find some other final or halting description, such as 'mystery' or 'brute fact'. Sometimes this feature of speculative thought is characterized in terms which are usually taken to originate with Kant (1724–1804) but which are, in fact, much older. Thus is it often said that the form of a philosophical question is 'How is it possible that \_\_\_\_?' where the blank is filled by a description of the thing to be explained. Consider again the case of the falling leaf. It spirals down in the breeze and someone asks why this happened. In reply he or she is told that it being autumn the trees are beginning to shed their leaves. If the enquirer is at all curious and persistent he or she is not likely to be satisfied with this explanation. First of all, it offers a very general description, apparently of an activity engaged in by trees, whereas the questioner may have been looking for an account of the 'whys' and 'hows' of the particular occurrence. More obviously, however, it raises a whole series of further questions. Do all trees shed leaves, and if some do not, why not? Is shedding a purposeful activity,



an automatic process or yet something else? Even if the general claim about the seasonal behaviour of trees is true it is an incomplete explanation since it does not address the issue of why leaves *fall* as contrasted with merely becoming detached: why don't they hover or float upwards? Imagine these questions being posed and a competent scientist or team of scientists offering one answer after another. The several botanical sciences are invoked to explain aspects of plant morphology, physiology and genetics, and in conjunction with these are offered meteorological explanations including some drawn from atmospheric physics. Now suppose that as the many 'whys?' and 'hows?' are answered the enquirer starts to add the query 'And how is that possible?' There will come a point where the sciences will have given the most fundamental and extensive explanations of which they are capable. What remains to be provided, if it can be, is the condition of the possibility of there being such things as organisms or molecules or motion or space and time, or whatever the last stage in the scientific explanation had posited.

'How is it possible that \_\_\_\_\_?' The question seems endlessly repeatable, and science proceeds by continuing to ask it. Yet at some points the character of the search and the style of the answers change as philosophers offer what purport to be ultimate explanations. For example, some may reason as follows: if what is necessary cannot fail to be, then if it could be shown that some fact is necessary, *a fortiori* the condition of its possibility would also have been established: such and such *is* the case because it *could not be otherwise*. Again, some might argue that the ultimate condition of the possibility of the various things investigated by science is the existence of a Divine being that wills energy, space and time into existence and fashions an order out of them. Alternatively, some may argue that beyond the point of scientific explanation no further questioning is intelligible; extra-scientific explanation is neither necessary nor possible.

As was mentioned, the formula 'the condition of the possibility' is associated with the rationalism of Immanuel Kant, but the earliest philosophical fragments of Pre-Socratic texts, preserved in the writings of later philosophers, show that in the first phase of philosophy (in the sixth and fifth centuries BC) thinkers were struggling to find some intelligible foundation for reality, some answer to the question 'How is the natural order (constituted thus and so) possible?' Indeed, what separates the earliest philosophers from the poetic mythologists who preceded them is not an interest in the heavens and the cosmic events that might occur there, for that was of as much concern to the philosophical Ionians as to the poets of Mesopotamia; rather it is the concern for explanatory adequacy.

Whereas the epic myths sought to account for the sorts of features and deeds that give perennial cause for puzzlement by tracing them to archetypes in the heavens and in the behaviour of gods, the philosophical fragments

show an awareness of the need to avoid regressive explanations. For example, an account of terrestrial seasons that explains them by reference to heavenly seasons may be interesting, but anyone struck by the question of what explains seasonal recurrence *as such* is not likely to feel that his or her puzzle has been resolved. Thus, when we read in the *Miscellanies* of Clement of Alexandria (150–215 AD) that according to Heraclitus (*fl.* c.500 BC) ‘This world order [*kosmos*] did none of gods or men make, but it always was and is and shall be: an everlasting fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures’,<sup>1</sup> we should recognize the mind of a philosopher at work in trying to fashion an ultimate answer to the question ‘Why and how is it thus?’

The search for metaphysical ultimates or stopping places became more precisely defined in later antiquity and in the tradition of mediaeval scholasticism, which in turn shaped the concerns of modern rationalist enquiry up to and beyond Kant, and to a lesser extent influenced empiricism. In the chapters that follow we continue this tradition of enquiry not in the spirit of those who believe they have new answers, but rather of those who hope to establish the merits and defend the adequacy of answers long ago proposed but still disputed. It is difficult to know when the issues of atheism and theism were first debated. The problem is not simply the lack of ancient texts, serious though that deficiency is; for there is also an interpretative-cum-philosophical question: *what are atheism and theism?* Thales of Miletus (died c.546 BC), by tradition the first philosopher, was accused of atheism, yet it seems that what he was held guilty of was infidelity to a civic religion not disbelief in a single ultimate source of being. We simply have no evidence as to whether he had opinions concerning the latter.

The civic religions of antiquity were polytheistic, believing in many gods, one or more per city. Unsurprisingly, neither of us is a polytheist. Smart believes there are no gods and Haldane believes that there is precisely one. Our debate is defined by the core of monotheism supplemented to some extent by the historical and theological claims of Christianity. As we both understand it, theism involves belief in a single, self-existent, eternal, immutable, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, omnibenevolent, immaterial creator and sustainer of the universe. As if that were not already enough to argue over, we also consider features unique to Christianity, and Haldane discusses aspects of Roman Catholic doctrine to which his belief in theism is connected.

Here it is worth mentioning that ours is an unevasive debate. We are both agreed that theism makes a number of ontological claims which admit of rational assessment. That alone serves to distinguish us from some philosophers and theologians who have a less metaphysical view of Christianity and other monotheistic faiths. While for them religion may proceed notwithstanding the metaphysical non-existence of God, were it so, for us religion without God is fantasy and delusion.

In fact, though this is not directly at issue in our exchange, Haldane is willing to go further and affirm the Catholic dogma that the existence of God *can* be known by the natural light of reason. The point of concern here is not an emphatic expression of theistic belief, or a statement of personal hope or conviction that an argument for God's existence may be developed. Rather, it is that fidelity to the major tradition of Western theism *requires* one to believe that God's existence can be known.<sup>2</sup> To put it otherwise, Haldane is committed to the proposition that if it were impossible, *in principle*, to prove the existence of God (allowing some breadth to the notion of proof), then what his religion teaches in this important respect is false. His philosophical position, therefore, is that any 'meta' argument intended to show the impossibility of establishing the existence of God is unsound; and at one point he considers and rejects such an argument deriving from the premise that we cannot reason from features of the empirical world to the conditions of a transcendent super-empirical reality. That said, he makes no claim to have provided, or to be able to provide on his own account, an irrefutable proof of God's existence. What he offers, both *a posteriori* and *a priori*, are considerations in support of theism.

Matters of particular doctrines are only broached for purposes of example or where they bear upon the central argument about the existence of the God of theism. For the most part the debate revolves around a familiar set of questions: is there reason to believe in the existence of God? are there grounds to deny that such a thing exists? is theism coherent? Yet this is not written as an introduction to or survey of the philosophy of religion. For one thing it does not cover the range of topics one might expect to see dealt with in such works, and for another it goes into such specific questions as the evidential value of Christian scripture. Additionally, it places an emphasis on philosophical methods and metaphysical theses which would be unusual in a general guide to issues in the philosophy of religion. This emphasis is explained by two facts about the authors. First, we are both metaphysical realists who hold, in opposition to current trends, that there is a world independent of human thought and language which may yet be known through observation, hypothesis and reflection. Second, and as previously mentioned, we believe that theism is ineliminably metaphysical.

Our contributions both turn on these claims: indeed one might say, somewhat over-simplifying, that for Haldane metaphysical realism leads to theism while for Smart it leads to atheism. The format of the exchange is straightforward. In chapter 1 Smart lays out his case for atheism; in chapter 2 Haldane develops his argument for theism; chapters 3 and 4 consist of replies. Neither of us changes his mind on the main issue but each makes some concession to the position of the other, and the volume ends with a brief afterword in which we reaffirm our commitment to metaphysical realism, be it that we

have different views about what reality contains. Like God, in one of Browning's poems, some readers may choose to consider our work so as to 'estimate success'; our hope, however, is that you will be prompted to enter in and contribute to the continuing debate between atheism and theism.

### Notes

- 1 See G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven (eds), *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), Fragment 30, p. 199.
- 2 This teaching is long-standing but was defined as an essential dogma of the Catholic Faith by the First Vatican Council in the words: 'If anyone shall say, that the one and true God, our Creator and Lord, cannot be known for certain by the natural light of human reason; let him be anathema'. See H. Denzinger, *Encheiridion Symbolorum*, 29th edn (Freiburg: Herder, 1953), Canon 1806.