

If You're an Egalitarian,
How Come You're So Rich?

G. A. COHEN

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Prospectus

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I read *The Great Gatsby* in 1963, and I found its final sentence, which is reproduced above, particularly arresting. Over the course of the past thirty-three years, I have often repeated that sentence to myself, with a mixture of good and sad feelings.

Scott Fitzgerald's sentence is, of course, about everybody: "we," here, means all of us. But while each person's past weighs strongly on his or her present, for some it weighs more heavily than for others, and it certainly weighs very heavily for me. For I was raised in a working-class communist family in a communist community in the 1940s in Montreal, on a very strongly egalitarian doctrine, and, with all the history both public and private that I have since witnessed and undergone, I have remained attached to the normative teachings of my childhood, and, in particular, to a belief in equality, which I continue to hold and to propound. I cannot escape from it. A powerful current bears me back to it ceaselessly, no matter where I might otherwise try to row.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity these lectures afford me to reflect on my belief in equality, and on the several ways that other thinkers have conceived both the character of equality and the mode of its advent. Three currents of thought for which social equality, in some form, is in some sense morally imperative have influenced the content of these lectures: first, classical Marxism; second, egalitarian liberalism, as it presents itself in the work of John Rawls; and, finally, the egalitarian strain within Christianity. These three doctrines regard equality, in one or

other form, as the answer to the question of distributive justice—the question, that is, about what distribution of benefits and burdens in society is just. But the three understand equality as something to be delivered by very different agencies.

According to classical Marxists, as I shall explain in Lectures 3–6, we come to equality through and as a result of history. Marxists live in the faith that the consummation of centuries of exploitation and class struggle will be a condition of material abundance that confers on each human being full scope for self-realization, in a society in which the free development of each will be the condition of the free development of all. For Rawlsians, delivering equality is a task not of class struggle (crowned by a future abundance) but of constitution-making. Democratic politics must institute principles of an egalitarian kind, or, to be more precise, principles that mandate equality save where inequality benefits those who are worst off in society. For Christians, both the Marxist and the Rawlsian conceptions are misguided, since equality requires not mere history and the abundance to which it leads, or mere politics, but a moral revolution, a revolution in the human soul.¹

When I was a child, and then an adolescent, I knew about and I believed Marxism, and I knew about and I *disbelieved* Christianity. A radical liberalism no doubt existed in some pre-Rawlsian form, but I didn't know about it. My attitude to the Christian attitude to equality—to the attitude, that is, of those Christians who believed in equality—was surprise mixed with mild contempt: I thought that the Christian prescription for equality was utterly naive, and that the transformation of society not by class struggle but by the moral struggle that Christianity demanded was not only impractical but also unnecessary. It was impractical because you could not change society by a sequence of individual self-transformations, and it was unnecessary because history was destined to make equality unavoidable. With all the moral striving in the world, equality would be *impossible to achieve* under the material scarcity that divides society into classes, and equality would be *impossible to avoid* under the material abundance which obliterates class difference and thereby makes a moral struggle for equality pointless. So in neither case—neither under past and present scarcity, nor under future abundance—would moral struggle be called for. And as for egalitarian liberalism, had I encountered it, then I would have said that its faith in constitution-building as a means to equality was also misconceived. I would

have said that egalitarian constitution-building presupposes a social unity for which equality is itself a prerequisite. I would have said that we cannot make a constitution *together* unless and until we are already equals, unless we are already the equals that only history can make us become.

As I shall indicate in Lecture 6, I have lost my Marxist belief in the inevitability of equality. As I shall indicate in Lecture 9, I also reject the liberal faith in the sufficiency of political recipes. I now believe that a change in social ethos, a change in the attitudes people sustain toward each other in the thick of daily life, is necessary for producing equality, and that belief brings me closer than I ever expected to be to the Christian view of these matters that I once disparaged. So in one big respect I have outrowed Scott Fitzgerald's stream; in one big respect I have outgrown my past.

I would indeed have been shocked to foresee, when I was, say, in my twenties, that I was to come to the point where I now am. For the three forms of egalitarian doctrine that I have distinguished can in one dimension be so ordered that my present view falls at the opposite end to the Marxist view with which I began. That is so because an emphasis on ethos is at the center of my present view, and the Marxist view has less time for ethos, as an engine of social transformation, than the liberal one does. I have, then, proceeded, within one understanding of the following contrast, from the hardest position to the softest one (without, as it happens, having at any point embraced the middle, liberal, position). Very roughly speaking, I have moved from an economic point of view to a moral one, without ever occupying a political one. (Needless to say, I regard this progression as an improvement, induced by increased appreciation of truth, rather than a piece of backsliding for which I should apologize.)

Three views may be taken about what might be called the *site* of distributive justice—about, that is, the sorts of items to which principles of distributive justice apply. One is my own view, for which there is ample Judeo-Christian precedent, that *both* just rules *and* just personal choice within the framework set by just rules are necessary for distributive justice. A second view, held by some Christians, is that all justice is a matter of morally informed personal decision; on this particular Christian view, the rules set by Caesar can achieve little or nothing in the direction of establishing a just society. And a third possibility, which is hard to envisage

in a Christian form, is the Rawlsian view that distributive justice and injustice are features of the rules of the public order alone. What others might see as justice in personal choice (within such rules), Rawls would see as some different virtue, such as charity, or generosity, or self-denial; or, if indeed justice, then not justice in the sense in which it is the central concern of political philosophy.² I shall argue in Lectures 8–10 that this Rawlsian and, more generally, liberal view represents an evasion—an evasion of the burden of respecting distributive justice in the choices of everyday life, an evasion which may (or may not: it is very hard to tell) be encouraged by the circumstance that contemporary egalitarian political philosophers are, on average, much wealthier than other people are.

So this is my aim: to explore the theme of egalitarian justice and history, and of justice in state-imposed structure and in personal choice, in a fashion that brings together topics in Marxism, issues in recent political philosophy, and standing preoccupations of Judeo-Christian thought.

I *believe* that my topic is a suitable one for the Gifford Lectures. There is some basis for anxiety about that, since, in the testament in which he established these lectures, Lord Gifford directed that they be devoted to “Promoting, Advancing, Teaching, and Diffusing . . . the knowledge of God, the Infinite, the All, the First and Only Cause, the One and Sole Substance, the Sole Being, the Sole Reality, and the Sole Existence,”³ and so forth, and I cannot say that this will be my topic, in a very strict sense. But in the 110 years that have passed since Lord Gifford endowed this chair, its “patrons”⁴ have wisely failed to insist on a strict construal of the condition that I have just quoted.

The “patrons” have interpreted Lord Gifford’s directive very broadly, in two respects. First, one is not required to discuss God in the severely metaphysical terms, just illustrated, in which He is portrayed in Lord Gifford’s will. A focus on religion itself, rather than on the supreme object of religious devotion in its most abstract specification, will do. Thus, for example, an existential treatment of religion, an examination of religious belief as it is lived by the believer, or a study of the social or historical emplacement of religion: these, too, are allowed to pass muster. And the second respect in which Lord Gifford’s directive has been subjected to a relaxed interpretation is that the lecturer is not required to devote all of his or her attention to religious themes, however broadly the idea of a

religious theme may be construed. Only a portion of the lectures need be concentrated in that direction.

Now, I happen to hold old-fashioned views about the terms of bequests. To accept a bequest is to make a promise, and promises should, normally, be kept. Accordingly, I felt able to accept the invitation to deliver these lectures only after correspondence and reflection which satisfied me that I could offer something at least as close to the spirit of the bequest as what the invitation had specified. You may come to think that I shall not go very far toward satisfying Lord Gifford's wishes, but you should not reach that conclusion without taking into account a perhaps surprising liberality in the terms of his bequest which is expressed at a different point in his will from the one at which there appears the phrase that I quoted a moment ago. I have in mind Lord Gifford's willingness to allow that the lecturers

may be of any denomination whatever or of no denomination at all (and many earnest and high-minded men prefer to belong to no ecclesiastical denomination); they may be of any religion or way of thinking, or, as is sometimes said, they may be of no religion, or they may be so-called sceptics or agnostics or free-thinkers, provided only that the "patrons" will use diligence to secure that they be able reverent men, true thinkers, sincere lovers of and earnest inquirers after truth.⁵

So we have, on the one hand, a requirement that the lectures be devoted to promoting the knowledge of God, and, on the other hand, a considerable liberality, or openness, with respect to who may deliver these lectures. Now, either those two parts of Lord Gifford's will are consistent with each other, or they are not. If the two parts are indeed *inconsistent*, if the liberality as to *who* is inconsistent with the stringency as to *what*, then Lord Gifford contradicted himself, and it's hard for me to know what I'm supposed to try to do. But if, as we may more charitably suppose, his will was consistent, then Lord Gifford envisaged promotion of the knowledge of God being effected in a great variety of ways. If an agnostic—for that, not an atheist, is what *I* am—if an agnostic can advance the knowledge of God, then perhaps I shall do so here.

In addressing my chosen theme, I hope to bring together two interests of mine that I have not otherwise had the opportunity to connect. The first interest is pursued in my recent research work in political philosophy, which is devoted to a critique, from the left, of John Rawls's theory

of justice. The second is a long-standing interest in scripture that I have not pursued academically. Let me explain.

My critique of Rawls reflects and supports a view that justice in personal choice is necessary for a society to qualify as just. This view shines forth in parts of the Bible that have occupied me nonacademically for a long time. Following a severely antireligious upbringing, which I shall permit myself to describe in Lecture 2, I began to rebel in the direction of tolerance for religion; I became, so to speak, anti-antireligious, in my late teens, and I progressed from tolerance to deep interest and sympathy as a result of seeing, on television, in 1969, a film by the late Pier Paolo Pasolini called *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*. I was so taken with the figure and the teaching of Jesus as they were presented in that film that I was moved to read the Gospels for the first time, and I was deeply impressed. Since then I have been a Bible reader, in both Testaments, but I have never publicly commented on scriptural material. Well then, my first such comment will be this one: that Jesus would have spurned the liberal idea that the state can take care of justice for us, provided only that we obey the rules it lays down, and regardless of what we choose to do *within* those rules. And I believe that Jesus would have been right to spurn that idea.

So much by way of introduction. I shall now raise some questions that have puzzled me and troubled me about our relationship to the central religious and political and moral convictions that help to give value to our lives. I am not sure what the correct answers to these questions are, but I raise them as a cautionary preface to the exploration of my own convictions that you have given me an opportunity to conduct.

Paradoxes of Conviction

We have all of us considerable regard for our past self, and are not fond of casting reflections on that respected individual by a total negation of his opinions.

George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*

1

I did not have a religious upbringing, but I did have a strongly political upbringing, and strongly political upbringings, of the sort that I had, resemble religious ones in several important respects. In each case, intense belief is induced in propositions that other people regard as false; indeed, very often, *most* people regard the propositions in question as *obviously* false. And, both in religion and in high-temperature politics, there is a powerful feeling of unity with other believers. They—we—feel embattled together, or triumphant together, according to circumstance. In both cases, there are texts and hymns that rally conviction and cement community. The melodies of some of the hymns that we sang in the North American communist movement in which I was raised were taken from Christian gospel songs. Some relevant verses from our communist hymns will appear in later lectures.

So I was brought up in a culture of conviction, and therefore in some ways my upbringing was like that of those raised in religious belief. I shall set out the early stages of my political and religious, and irreligious, beliefs in Lecture 2. But before I describe the development of my convictions, I should like to explore some aspects of the development of conviction in general, aspects that I came to find puzzling as I reflected on my own development. In the case of what are properly called convictions, but even, as we shall see, in the case of beliefs which might be con-

sidered too cool in temperature to be called “convictions,” there is a problem about how we manage to go on believing what we were *raised* to believe, in the face of our knowledge that we believe it *because* (in a certain sense, which I shall specify at p. 10 below) we were raised to believe it. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s point about the power of the past (see p. 1 above) is comparatively easy to accept with respect to our feelings and emotions. But, for many of us, his point also has force with respect to our beliefs, and that is more unsettling, since it raises questions about the rationality of those beliefs—questions that are more unsettling than parallel ones that might be raised about our feelings and emotions.

Suppose that identical twins are separated at birth. Twenty years later, they meet. One was raised as, and remains, a devout Presbyterian. The other was raised as, and remains, a devout Roman Catholic. They argue against each other’s views, but they’ve heard those arguments before, they’ve learned how to reply to them, and their opposed convictions consequently remain firm.

Then each of them realizes that, had she been brought up where her sister was, and vice versa, then it is overwhelmingly likely that (as one of them expresses the realization) *she* would now be Roman Catholic and her sister would now be Presbyterian. That realization might, and, I think, should, make it more difficult for the sisters to sustain their opposed religious convictions. Or, to come closer to home—or, at any rate, to where I am—suppose I were to discover that I have an identical twin, who was raised not in a communist home but in a politically middle-of-the-road home, and that my twin has the easy tolerance toward limited inequality which I learned to lack. That, I confess, would disturb my confidence in my own uncompromising egalitarianism, and not because my twin could supply me with an argument against egalitarianism of which I was previously unaware.

To be sure, the surprise which the twin sisters undergo need not make it hard for them to remain Christians; and the revelation which my twin brother and I experience need not make it hard for us to remain anti-Tory. But such further difficulty will supervene if the sisters turn out to be not twins but triplets, and they now meet their long-lost and now Jewish third sister. Which, so far as it goes, will no doubt leave their belief in (a) *God* secure, until they meet their long-lost and now atheist quadruplet, whose confidence in her atheism may be shaken when *she*

confronts *them*. And a similar extension of the story about me and my brother can, of course, also be rolled out.

Now, most of us are solo-birth children; most of us were, that is, born twinless, tripletless, and so forth. But it would be crazy to infer that the story about the twins has no bearing on *our* convictions. That I am *in fact* twinless should not reduce the challenge to my inherited convictions which is posed by the story I've told. An entirely plausible story could be told about a *hypothetical* disagreeing twin, and it would, or should, be just as challenging as a true story, to those of us who believe what we were brought up to believe.

That is not, of course, all of us. But it is very many of us. And although it does not follow from the fact that we believe what we were brought up to believe that we believe it in any sense *because* we were brought up to believe it, it is very widely true that people *do* believe what they do in some sense¹ because they were brought up to believe it: the statistics of parent-to-child belief replication prove that. And I think these stories about twins and so forth should give pause to those of us who are steadfastly devoted to the beliefs of our upbringing, while being aware that people of different upbringing are steadfastly devoted to beliefs contrary to our own. It should give us pause that we would not have beliefs that are central to our lives—beliefs, for example, about important matters of politics and religion—if we had not been brought up as we in fact were. It is an accident of birth and upbringing that we have *them*, rather than beliefs sharply rival to them, and (here's the rub) we shall frequently² have to admit, if we are reflective and honest, that *we consequently do not believe as we do because our grounds for our beliefs are superior to those which others have for their rival beliefs*.

The problem I am posing does not require a narrow view of the sorts of grounds that one can have for a belief. Consider, for example, the person who says that she believes in God because she underwent a profound experience that she cannot fully describe, an experience that induced faith in God within her. I am not skeptical about that claim as such. I do not find appeal to a special religious experience intrinsically unacceptable. The skepticism in focus here arises, rather, when we *compare* A's grounds for believing that *p* with B's grounds for believing that *q*, and we notice that, however good or bad those grounds may *otherwise* be, they do not relevantly differ in quality; so that, so it seems, it *should*

be difficult for each to maintain his convictions, when he confronts the other. For neither can reasonably believe that he believes what he does, rather than what the other does, because he has better grounds for his belief than the other does for his, as opposed to: because he was brought up differently.

So I do not say: because faith-inducing experiences are not pieces of scientific reasoning, they cannot credentialize belief. What I do say is that if, for example, profoundly Catholic religious experiences tend to take place in Catholic homes and profoundly Protestant ones in Protestant homes, then it looks as though both Catholics and Protestants should be wary about the messages apparently conveyed by their religious experiences.

Let me say something about what I mean by “because” here, in such sentences as “she believes it because she was brought up to believe it.” When I say such a thing here, I do not mean that her belief is groundless. Nor do I mean to deny that she has reflected on and assessed the grounds she has for holding it, and continues to hold it only because her belief survived that reflection. I have in view, throughout, nurtured beliefs which have indeed passed the test of reflection for the believer. But even so, even though the beliefs I am targeting are not (any longer) held for no reason, they are there in a crucial sense *because* of the believer’s upbringing. The reflective nurtured Catholic and the reflective nurtured Presbyterian *may*, for all that I am concerned to contend, believe what their beliefs *have in common* entirely because they have drawn the right conclusions from the evidence available to them. But the whole explanation of the *difference* between their beliefs, the explanation for why one believes *p* as opposed to *q*, and the other believes *q* as opposed to *p*, lies, typically, in their upbringing,³ *rather than in the quality of the data that were presented to them or in the quality of their reflection upon that data.*

I emphasize that contrast because what disturbs me in the cases under inspection here is not, just in itself, that the person believes differently because of a different upbringing, but that she cannot honestly identify a relevant further difference. These cases differ from that, for example, where one person was brought up to believe that the earth is round and another that the earth is flat. When the round-earthier reflects that, had he been brought up flat-earthly, he would now believe the earth to be flat, that need not give him pause, for he can reasonably say that his grounds for believing it to be round are overwhelming. Round-earthiers

(justifiably) think they can prove their position. But Catholics—or, at any rate, enough Catholics to make my point interesting—would acknowledge that they are in the same epistemic boat as Presbyterians are, that the Presbyterians' grounds are no worse than theirs are. Since, in the relevant cases, you can't find anything except nurture that makes the difference, since you can't say, on independent grounds, that their nurture was defective, you can't say that you have better grounds for believing that p than they have for believing that not- p . And this flies in the face of what seems to me an undeniable principle about reasons for belief—namely, that *you lack good reason to believe p rather than a rival proposition q when you cannot justifiably believe that your grounds for believing p are better than another's are for believing q* (call that principle “the Principle”).⁴ For you have to believe that your grounds make it more likely than not that p is true, and they don't do that if they make p no more likely than his grounds make q likely.

Now, paradox looms here, not because there exist the truths about nurtured beliefs that I have labored, but because we, the believers, or anyway those of us who are reflective, are (at least implicitly) aware of these truths. Thus, for example, no intelligent and reflective Scots Presbyterian can *herself* suppose it irrelevant to the explanation for why she is a Christian and not a Jewess that she did not wind up in the wrong hospital cot at birth, and her reflection may tell her that she would not then have received a less good case for Judaism than the one she actually got for Christianity. And while you may think it unsurprising, at first glance, that I hold the egalitarian views that were instilled in me, you should perhaps find it a little surprising that I do, when you realize that I stick to them even though I *know* that I hold them *because* they were instilled in me, and that less radical views with no less good epistemic credentials might have been instilled in me if, for example, I had been brought up in the upper-middle-class Jewish part of Montreal instead of in the working-class Jewish part of Montreal.

To believe that p *rationally*⁵ is to believe that one has a good reason to believe that p , that one has grounds for believing that p which constitute a good reason for believing it;⁶ and, in particular, that the grounds for holding the beliefs one does must be such that they give one good reason to hold *those* beliefs, *as opposed* to the competing beliefs that others hold. To be sure, one need not believe, on pain of irrationality, that one could state the grounds for one's belief, forthwith, or even that one

could, with sufficient time, recover them. One can believe that one has forgotten, irrecoverably, what one's good grounds are. Or one can believe that they are there, in one's mind, but not yet capable of being articulated. One can say that one *senses* that one has good grounds for believing that *p* which have not yet surfaced into consciousness. But, so soon as one confesses that one's belief lacks appropriate grounding, one condemns oneself as irrational.⁷

Those qualifications constitute a partial explication of the claim that to believe, non-irrationally, that *p* is to believe that one has good grounds for believing that *p* (grounds, that is, which constitute a good reason for believing that *p*). But the qualifications do not erase the paradox toward which I am moving. For, even when we review the qualifications, it will remain evident, in leading cases of nurtured disagreement, that what distinguishes me from her is not that I possess special grounds of a kind that she lacks, or that I have a hunch of a kind that she cannot claim to have, but *just* my upbringing. And then I appear to be in difficulty. For the fact that I was brought up to believe it is no reason for believing it, and I know that.⁸

We have to believe about our beliefs that we have good reasons for holding them. Yet even when we become apprised of these facts about the genesis of our convictions and these norms internal to the holding of conviction, we, or many of us, still don't give up our beliefs; we feel that we needn't, in the face of all that, give them up. So it seems we can prove what we think we know is false: that we should give up our (controversial) inherited beliefs. An exceedingly familiar fact that belongs to what can be called the elementary sociology of conviction, one that we all know about from our ordinary experience, thereby appears to generate a paradox.

The argument implicit in the foregoing discussion, the argument which is the locus of paradox, has three premises. The premises look hard to fault and the conclusion seems to follow; yet the conclusion looks hard to accept, because at least many people's considered convictions contradict it and their behavior appears to conflict with it:

- (1) It is not rational to believe *p* rather than *q* when you know that you lack good reason to believe *p* rather than *q*.
- (2) You lack good reason to believe *p* rather than a rival proposition

q when you cannot justifiably believe that your grounds for believing p are better than another's grounds for believing q . (The Principle.)⁹

- (3) In a wide range of cases of nurtured belief, people *who continue to believe p* (can readily be brought to) realize that they believe p rather than q not because they have grounds for believing p that are better than the grounds for believing q that others have, but because they were induced to believe p without being supplied with such differentiating grounds.
- ∴ (4) The beliefs described in (3) are irrational (and the people who believe them are *pro tanto* irrational).¹⁰

Call that argument “the Argument.” Note that its conclusion flatly contradicts what we (or, anyway, many of us) are confident is true, for we do not usually think that nurtured beliefs of the sort under contemplation here are irrational. That is the interest of the argument; that is what gives it its air of paradox, whether or not it is sound.

And I am, indeed, not sure that the argument is sound. If the Argument is unsound, and (4) has therefore *not* been shown to be true, then that would be good news, but we would then have the intellectual difficulty that it isn't so easy to see what's wrong with the Argument. But if the Argument is indeed sound, then our intellectual difficulty is not, of course, to show what's wrong with it, but to determine how (some of us) manage to sustain our strong impression that the beliefs here in view are *not* irrational. If the Argument is sound, then people are starkly irrational in contexts where we do not normally account them irrational. It is not, of course, news that people can be irrational, nor is it news that it can be puzzling to see how they manage to be so. What's puzzling here, if the Argument is sound, is not that people can be irrational (that puzzle isn't *especially* strongly raised in *this* sort of case) but just that we do not normally consider beliefs of the sort that I have identified as instances of our (perhaps even commonplace) irrationality.

Now, there are many significant challenges to the Argument, and examining all of them would take us too far afield.¹¹ But I shall now address three of them, the first two of which, so it seems to me, are defeated by the self-same compelling counterexample, which is presented in section 3.

2

The first challenge may be called the *depth solution*. It says that the case for competing convictions can be put more or less deeply, and that the case for p is put more deeply—with, that is, greater sophistication and circumspection—within a community sustaining p than in a community sustaining rival q , where, in turn, the case for q is put more deeply. That is how proponents of an inherited view are able rightly to dismiss so much of the attack on their view as superficial, as I have often done and can still do with respect to Marxism and socialism, and as some of you have often done and can still do with respect to Roman Catholicism. And so premise (3) of the Argument is an overstatement—those nurtured within a p -affirming community typically *do* have particularly good grounds for believing p , and need not, therefore, so readily admit their (comparative) cognitive nakedness as premise (3) suggests.

The depth solution works well enough for an easier question than ours—the question, namely, which asks: How can equally intelligent and open-minded people have utterly opposed beliefs? But that is not our question, because it formulates a purely third-person problem. The depth solution collapses just where we need it—at the reflexive level, where the relevant questions are posed in the first person. For how can *I* stick to p even when I can truly say that I see a deeper case for it than I do for q , when I have no reason to think that the q -believer sees a case for q that is less deep than the case *I* see for p ? The strength of that question is confirmed by the example laid out in section 3 below.

The second challenge is not to the soundness of the argument but to the interest of its conclusion. It runs as follows: “It is no accident that the beliefs which come from nurture, and, more generally, beliefs which display an irreducible element of (comparative) groundlessness, are characteristically religious or heavily political in subject matter. The strength with which such beliefs are held, the emotion that characteristically attaches to them—all that makes them suspect *anyway*; and it is therefore not surprising that their genesis, too, is suspect. Rational people should abandon them. They partake, more or less, of fanaticism.” Call that the *credal cleansing* proposal.

There are two objections to the credal cleansing proposal. I am more sure of the soundness of the second one, but I enter the first one too be-

cause it would be extremely interesting if it is sound, and I am not sure that it is not.

The first objection is that, if we *were* to abandon all religious and heavily political views, then most of us would be stripped of the convictions which structure our personality and behavior. Life would be bland, lacking in élan and direction. Everybody would be *l'homme moyen sensuel*. Maybe irrationality is preferable to a dull existence.¹²

And the second objection to the credal cleansing proposal is that it is, to an important extent, false that beliefs which have a significant trace of nurture are all of a religious, heavily political, or similarly high-temperature sort. As I shall show in the next, and closing, section of this lecture, quite reconditely theoretical beliefs also display substantial traces of nurture. It accordingly begins to look as though the credal cleansing policy is more drastic than it presents itself as being. If their suspect genesis shows that religious and political beliefs have to go, then much more has to go with them.

The credal cleansing proposal is also very drastic because it would cut away a great mass of nontheoretical quotidian beliefs. For a belief's being due to upbringing is neither necessary nor sufficient for it to be at variance with rationality; I have focused on upbringing because it is, nevertheless, an especially potent source of beliefs that have the power to resist rationality. Plenty of other widespread belief differences are not more rationally based than inherited belief differences are, but reference to nurture immediately generates a host of compelling examples, which are especially relevant here, because of my focus on my own beliefs in the next lecture.

Realizing that the Argument would also impugn casual beliefs of ordinary life, one critic of the Argument (Brian Barry) adduced the following example, which is the third challenge to the Argument that I shall consider. You and I go to the same play, and we disagree about how good it is. There must be something about *us* that accounts for the disagreement, something about personality or history or whatever, since we are responding to the same thing. We may agree about the good-making and bad-making characteristics of the play, yet simply be differently impressed by their relative importance. Does this make it irrational to hold the views we do? Why should it? We both have reasons for our views, and we admit they're not conclusive. If, though, our disagreement is not

irrational, then the standards that I have laid down for rationality are pitched too high.

There is, in Barry's example, something unapparent that explains the difference between our judgments about the play. Barry says that we are not being irrational, but I think that whether or not we are being irrational here depends on our view, speculative though it perforce is, about what the unapparent explanation of our difference of judgment is. Each of us might think that his faculty of judgment and/or sensibility is, in general, superior to the other's, and that this explains why we do not agree. If so, we can indeed comfortably persist in our disagreement, but the case is then not parallel to one where we assign our difference to mere differences of nurture. On this interpretation of Barry's example, it does not represent a counterexample to my position.

If, however, we avow that the reason we're differently impressed by the play is not different quality of judgment and/or sensibility but *simply* different background etc., *then* our disagreement, on my view, becomes peculiar—not that it breaks out, but that we persist in it at that point. It is *at that point* that we become placed as nurtured believers are; but then the suspicion of irrationality persists, and the example is, once again, no special threat to my claims.

I do not, accordingly, regard Barry's example, taken in whichever of the two ways it may be interpreted, as an embarrassment for my view that persistence in a belief which one assigns to one's upbringing appears to be irrational.

3

The problem that I have canvassed arises not only in the region of heavy-duty matters of religious and of moral and political conviction, and in the region of casual ordinary belief, but also with respect to quite abstractly theoretical tenets. This fact defeats the tough-minded types who featured in the second challenge in section 2 and who say: "Well, all those ideological and religious beliefs are garbage anyway; their sensitivity to upbringing only confirms that. If we stick to scientific and technical matters, we shall unsaddle ourselves of beliefs for which we lack impressive grounds." Here is a counterexample to that policy of selective credal disburdenment.

In 1961 I was on the eve of doing graduate work in philosophy, and I

was able to choose between going to Harvard and going to Oxford. Against the advice of some of my McGill University teachers (and of one in particular, who said, I recall, that Harvard's Willard Van Orman Quine "could put [Oxford's] A. J. Ayer in his pocket"), I chose Oxford, not because, despite the stated advice, I was more drawn to Ayer than to Quine—I was agnostic about their comparative merits—but because it seemed much more exciting to leave Montreal for Europe than to leave Montreal for Massachusetts.

I was pretty ignorant of Oxford-style philosophy before I arrived in Oxford, and I spent my first year there absorbing what I could. One thing I learned to do was to ask questions about the *status* of truths, and of supposed truths. If someone said "*p*," you'd then pounce, as follows: Is that analytic (that is, true by virtue merely of the meanings of the words in which it is expressed), or is it synthetic (that is, true for some more substantial reason)? An example would be the contrast between "All bachelors are unmarried," which is analytic, if anything is, and "All bachelors are tetchy and demanding," which may be just as true as that they are all unmarried, but whose truth depends on more than just that they are rightly *called* "bachelors."

"Is that analytic or synthetic?" was a terrifically important question in the Oxford of 1961. If, as sometimes happened, someone, perhaps from Germany or Italy, said something rather grand and general, such as that memory falsifies experience, or that God is everywhere, or that reason is tripartite, or that man is distant from being, or from the isness of being, then he or she would be subjected to the cited interrogative pounce, and if the response was "Um . . . er . . . ," as it often was, then that would be that as far as *they* were concerned.¹³

By the end of my first year at Oxford, I was reasonably agile at distinguishing (apparently) analytic points from synthetic ones, and I enjoyed doing it. Then, in the autumn of my second Oxford year, I read a famous article by Quine, called "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." Quine there said, among other things, that it was a false dogma that truths could be sorted into analytic and synthetic ones, for there was no such thing as analytic truth: all truths depended for their truth on the way the world is.

I did not want to believe that Quine was right, but I also did not want to believe or disbelieve anything just because I wanted to believe or disbelieve it. So I worked hard at Quine's arguments, and, in the event, I decided that they were not good arguments. In reaching that conclusion I

was helped by my reading of various anti-Quine articles—by, in particular, H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson and Jonathan Bennett, and also by a pro-Quine-ish (or pro-ish-Quine) article or two by Hilary Putnam. I still think Quine was wrong, but I don't care about the issue as much as I did then.

Now people of my generation who studied philosophy at Harvard rather than at Oxford for the most part *reject* the analytic/synthetic distinction. And I can't believe that this is an accident. That is, I can't believe that Harvard just *happened* to be a place where both its leading thinker rejected that distinction and its graduate students, for independent reasons—merely, for example, in the independent light of reason itself—also came to reject it. And vice versa, of course, for Oxford. I believe, rather, that in each case students were especially impressed by the reasons respectively for and against believing in the distinction, because in each case the reasons came with all the added persuasiveness of personal presentation, personal relationship, and so forth.¹⁴

So, in some sense of “because,” and in some sense of “Oxford,” I think I can say that I believe in the analytic/synthetic distinction because I studied at Oxford. And that is disturbing. For the fact that I studied at Oxford is no reason for thinking that the distinction is sound. Accordingly, if I believe it sound because I studied at Oxford, if that *explains* why I believe in it whereas, say, Gilbert Harman does not, then my belief in the distinction is ill-grounded. But I can't comfortably believe that a belief of mine is ill-grounded. So I can't comfortably believe that the only reason I believe the distinction to be sound is that I went to Oxford. I can readily believe that this is how I came to believe it in the first place, but I have to believe that my present reason for sticking to it is that I have good reasons to do so. But what in the world are they? Might they include the reason that Oxford is a better belief-producer than Harvard is, because, for example, it has better architecture? (And one thing that I must believe, of course, if I stick to my belief in the analytic/synthetic distinction, is that I am *lucky*, with respect to the view I have of this matter, that I went to Oxford, rather than to Harvard. Maybe I am lucky that I did *anyway*.)

Consider, in the light of the analytic/synthetic distinction example, the depth solution, which I floated, and sank, in section 2. Perhaps a deeper case for the distinction was available at Oxford than at Harvard. But that doesn't make it right for me to believe the Oxford doctrine now,

since I can be pretty sure that a commensurately deeper case for rejecting the distinction was available at Harvard. You see the deeper case at home, but that doesn't help, since you know that the other guy sees the deeper case against it where he is.¹⁵

Well, enough of these morose meanderings. In the next lecture I shall lay before you some of the history of my own formation of conviction, under the title "Politics and Religion in a Montreal Communist Jewish Childhood."