

# ATHEISTS AND BELIEVERS: WORST FRIENDS OR BEST ENEMIES?

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**Abstract.** This article examines the question of whether the atheist and the believer can understand each other, to the point of being friends intellectually. The answer is no. The atheist and the believer can be best enemies, but their epistemic disagreement is definitely radical. For it is not a disagreement on religious belief itself, but about what *allows* the believer to believe. The article examines some aspects of John Greco's concept of 'friendly theism', the discussion of conciliationism and anti-conciliationism, and the epistemic role of the Holy Spirit.

*I came to the conclusion there was no medium, in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity, and that a perfect consistent mind ... must embrace either the one or the other.*

John Henry Cardinal Newman<sup>1</sup>

Is it really possible to exchange arguments between atheists and believers? We could be tempted to answer positively. Especially, if believers and atheists are philosophers, normally able to discuss independently of their personal deep convictions, because they are interested mainly by arguments. However, I want to show that intellectual friendship, that is to say, a good mutual understanding, leading to a common search for truth, on a neutral basis, is quite difficult between an atheist and a believer. If an atheist and a theist are friends, it is despite religion, and not about religion.<sup>2</sup> On such a topic, they can only be *best* enemies, respectful of

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<sup>1</sup> Newman (1994: 182).

<sup>2</sup> I will speak indifferently of the believer or theist, leaving aside the difficulties of the concept of theism.

one another, but in full and irreducible disagreement. I think we are encouraged to say the contrary by the fear to appear close-minded and intolerant.

## I.

Let us first look at the way William Rowe describes the situation between the atheist and the believer.

It is not difficult for an atheist to be friendly when he has reason to believe that the theist could not reasonably be expected to be acquainted with the grounds for disbelief that he (the atheist) possesses. For then the atheist may take the view that some theists are rationally justified in holding to theism, but would not be so were they to be acquainted with the grounds of belief – those grounds being sufficient to tip the scale in favour of atheism when balanced against the reasons the theist has in support of his belief. Friendly atheism becomes paradoxical, however, when the atheist contemplates believing that the theist has all the grounds for atheism that he, the atheist, has, and yet is rationally justified in maintaining his theistic belief. But even so excessively friendly a view as this perhaps can be held by the atheist if he also has some reason to think that the grounds for theism are not as telling as the theist is justified in taking them to be. (1979: 340)

According to Rowe, the *friendly atheist* thinks that the theist has done his best, and that the theist does not seem to be able to really do more. The friendly atheist adopts the attitude of a teacher realizing that a student cannot really go beyond what he has already done, simply because the student's capacities are limited. The friendly atheist considers that it is not really the fault of the theist that he believes in God: he simply lacks the epistemic reasons to disbelieve. Atheist friendship to the theist then resembles a form of condescension! Or, the atheist is less arrogant. He adopts the attitude of loving parents: their child believes in Santa Claus: they would find it too bad, especially on December 24, to explain to the child that the reasons for such a belief are unsustainable and she or he has to abandon it. It seems to me that this friendly atheist is actually someone who thinks that the theist may be sincere in his error, but facing up to his epistemic responsibilities, the theist *should renounce* his belief.

We find another and different account, this time of *friendly theism*, and not of friendly atheism, proposed by John Greco:

I want to argue for a version of friendly theism. More exactly, I want to argue for an epistemology of religious belief on which three things can be true together: (a) belief in God is rational for some persons, (b) disbelief in God is rational for some persons, (c) no person is making an epistemic mistake or is otherwise epistemically flawed. (2008: 51)

John Greco claims that this position is friendlier than Rowe's one. It explains, 'how two people [believer and unbeliever] can easily differ in their knowledge of a third person, and yet both be epistemically flawless' (2008: 52). Friendly theism is made possible by an interpersonal conception of faith. Therefore, it seems that there is an asymmetry between Rowe's friendly atheism and Greco's friendly theism. The friendly atheist sees the theist as someone lacking epistemological lucidity or even seriousness. This amounts even perhaps to a form of intellectual vice. The friendly theist sees the atheist as someone who did not *experience* a special interpersonal relationship with God. But the atheist, according to Greco's friendly theist, is not at all lacking epistemological seriousness and lucidity. The difference between the believer and the unbeliever, according to the friendly theist, is more *existential* than *intellectual*. This is the reason why John Greco's friendly theist is truly friendly, while the Rowe's friendly atheist seems to finally be an arrogant or even scornful character. I wonder if it would be a so good thing for the theist to be friend with someone who thinks that theistic beliefs are not epistemically serious, and even, perhaps, that they are mainly errors ... The only way for the believer to stay friends with the atheist seems to be to renounce his alleged crazy beliefs, at least when it has been explained to him that they are false and shown why. Rowe's atheist is definitively a strange friend for the theist.

Then, I propose to have another friendly theist, very different from Greco's one. Let us suppose now that friendly theism is the exact converse of friendly atheism. Such a friendly theism would not be much friendlier than friendly atheism according to Rowe – it means, I think, it would not be friendly at all. It would suggest that the atheist exaggerates the strength of his arguments a lot, or that he does not *understand* something, without being in this way culpable. He is not aware that he is intellectually irresponsible, but surely he is. The friendly theist could even interpret the atheist's incapacity to have a religious experience in terms of an intellectual vice, exactly as Rowe's friendly atheist thinks that the theist would be epistemically irresponsible still to believe after

it has been explained to him that his reasons are bad, or that there are good reasons not to believe. The friendly theist would think that the atheist does not experience something *because* he does not understand something, and that he does not understand something *because* he does not believe.

Nobody would think that the friendly theist I described is actually friendly. This discussion about friendship between theists and atheists leads me to the conclusion that they have no reason to be *intellectually friends* with each other. They can avoid getting on to the subject of religion, and appreciate each other as human beings, or even simply as colleagues in the department of philosophy. They may also belong to the same fire brigade and do in it a lot of valuable work together. They may also have affection towards each other. They may even be in love, why not? But *intellectually*, they disagree, fundamentally. And such a disagreement is nothing friendly. First, what constitutes a warranted belief, with perfect sense, for one, has no right to be believed, or even perhaps no sense, for another. Second, they are not intellectual peers and cannot consider each other this way.

Peter Geach says :

If I did not judge Christian belief to be 'more true, more correct, more reasonable' than modern atheistic humanism, then I could not be a Christian. Obviously we who say this are 'using our language-game as a basis' from which to judge what other people maintain; but anybody is bound to do this if he makes a judgment that other people contest. (1990: 300)<sup>3</sup>

It would make no sense to relativize the disagreement, by saying that the atheist and the believer do not share the same language-game, as some Neo-Wittgensteinians suggest.<sup>4</sup> Or so to say that the theist judge the atheist in his own language game, and the atheist in his own one, and that they do not disagree finally, but that they live, so to say, in different worlds. But what does it change finally? The believer thinks that the atheist cannot understand because he does not believe, and the atheist thinks that the believer is blinded by his belief and unable to perceive the weakness of his reasons to believe or even that he lacks any reason.

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<sup>3</sup> Terms in quotation marks are those of Norman Malcolm. Peter Geach is responding to him in this passage.

<sup>4</sup> The best and most convincing formulation of this thesis remains for me the book by Dewi Phillips, *The Concept of Prayer* (1965).

## II.

Conciliationism and anti-conciliationism are the two main positions on the topic of *religious disagreement*. The first thesis claims that if the disputants are just as qualified and well positioned to assess a disputed proposition, then they ought to adopt a level of confidence that gives significant weight to the views of the other side. But if each one gives significant weight to the other views, can they still *believe* in what they are supposed to believe, even to a lesser degree? They seem simply to do *as if* they were believing something, but no more to *fully* believe it, or to believe to a certain degree. They even know that there are good reasons not to believe it. But is it possible to believe *p* and at the same time to know that there are good reasons for a competent person not to believe *p*?<sup>5</sup> For me a positive answer is not at all obvious. However, it is surely possible not to judge someone negatively, when he does not believe that *p*, and you believe that *p*. But this is something else than conciliationism. But does conciliationism makes sense, even if it appears to be the attitude encouraged by the dominant ethic of tolerance? Do you really have beliefs you think there are good reasons for competent persons not to have?

Anti-conciliationism claims that we may believe that *p* with confidence despite the fact that a qualified and well-positioned person, who seems as qualified as ourselves to assess the proposition's plausibility, hold *p* not to be epistemologically safe. Let us suppose my reader and I are excellent philosophers (not a problematic supposition), interested in the question of whether we have the right not to believe in God. Each of us is thoroughly acquainted with all of the extant arguments, thought experiments, and intuition pumps that the literature has to offer. None of us is in bad faith. We are more or less equally reliable when it comes to making judgments about the domain in question. Do we have to revise our original view, if each of us should give *equal weight* to his or her opinion and to the opinion of the other? One attitude, which sceptical philosophers encourage, would be to suspend our judgment.<sup>6</sup> But there is another possible attitude. No intellectual consideration forces someone to believe that atheism or agnosticism are superior to any competing

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<sup>5</sup> Moore's Paradox consists to say 'p and I do not believe that p'. Here the paradox would be 'I believe that p and I know good reasons not to believe p'.

<sup>6</sup> I am aware that it would be necessary here to consider all the sceptical literature about the suspension of judgment.

position concerning belief in God. It is a thesis that Peter van Inwagen seems to defend (in his paper 'Is God an Unnecessary Hypothesis'):

Consider any proposition whose truth is known to be highly improbable but which is not known to be certainly false. (For example: the proposition that New York City will be destroyed by a huge meteorite at 11: 23 p.m. on August 12, 2073.) If someone who is aware of this known probability does not accept the denial of that proposition (and, of course, does not accept the proposition itself), that person violates no norm of rationality. (2005: 136)

So, even if theism were highly improbable, it is not irrational not to accept atheism or agnosticism, if theism is not known to be certainly false. In this case, the reason why atheists and theists have difficulties being intellectual friends is perhaps that all atheists *prefer* that all non-atheists change their mind and become atheists, simply because for them theism is very highly improbable, or that, at least, theists become agnostics, by suspending their judgment. But in fact, some non-atheists stay theists and even do not become agnostics, even after the atheist briefing. And the problem for the atheists is that such an attitude is not at all irrational, or even epistemically vicious. The reason why is given by Peter van Inwagen when he says:

It would seem that all human beings have beliefs that are not forced on them by the totality of the relevant intellectual considerations of which they are aware. Most of our philosophical beliefs are like that. (2005: 142)

A Moorean Argument shows that sceptical doubts are always less believable finally than what they serve to raise doubt about. For example, the doubt about the fact that I have two hands is less believable than that the fact that *this* is my hand (and I show you my hand), and *this* is another one (and I show you the other one). A Moorean fact is one we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary. It seems that a believer could always appeal to a Moorean Argument. This could be what Peter van Inwagen does in this passage:

If someone tells me that, if I can adduce no articulable reason for believing in material things, then my belief in material things must be irrational, I'll reply that my critic has a mistaken and impossibly demanding theory of rationality. I want to say something similar about my belief in God. Why do I believe in God? Certainly not because I can write down some reason for believing in God that would force anyone who understood it to share my belief. There is no such reason. I can – I often do – set out

reasons for believing in God, but these reasons are not *coercive*: a person who understands them and is unmoved by them is not, by that very fact, irrational. (2005: 145)

According to Kit Fine, ‘in this age of post-Moorean modesty, many of us are inclined to doubt that philosophy is in possession of arguments that might genuinely serve to undermine what we ordinarily believe’ (2001: 2). This could be the case also of the religious believer. His religious beliefs are quite ordinary for him. Nothing special, just as philosophical beliefs could be, or scientific ones, for example. If the atheist says only that the believer has no argument to convince him to believe in the existence of God, how could it be a good argument against a Moorean Argument? But sceptics are generally not troubled by a Moorean Argument, because scepticism consists in ignoring such an argument, or in pretending that this is not an argument. Surely, the atheist could claim to have positive arguments against the existence of God – the ‘Argument from Evil’ or the ‘Hiddenness Argument’, and two dozen, at least, others. Fine adds something interesting in our context: ‘It may perhaps be conceded that the arguments of the skeptic appear to be utterly compelling; but the Mooreans among us will hold that the very plausibility of our ordinary beliefs is reason enough for supposing that there must be something wrong in the skeptic’s arguments, even if we are unable to say what it is.’ (2001: 2)

However, first, this argument seems to immunize all belief, no matter how ridiculous it is: belief in aliens or belief in the return of the Great Pumpkin, belief in some gigantic conspiracy, and so on.<sup>7</sup> And second, the argument refers to ‘common beliefs’. However, believing in the existence of God or that Jesus is the Son of God, let alone belief in Mary’s virginity or her Immaculate Conception, these are not at all *ordinary* beliefs. It is possible to defend the right to believe that I have two hands, facing sceptical concerns. But some philosophers would judge it to be clearly unacceptable to propose an epistemological defence of our right to have religious beliefs on the basis of a Moorean Argument, or by saying that the existence of God is a Moorean fact! These are typically the kind of beliefs we *must* justify and not simply entertain without epistemological anxieties and proclaim without feeling the necessity to justify oneself.

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<sup>7</sup> I say nothing here of the Great Pumpkin Objection sometimes advanced against what Plantinga calls ‘warranted Christian belief’, but I discuss the point in Pouivet (2002) and (2013).

But I disagree with those philosophers who put aside religious beliefs, and especially have for these beliefs requirements they have for any other.<sup>8</sup> The possibility of a Moorean Argument by a believer is the reason why atheists and theists cannot be friends intellectually. Generally, of course, the believer uses such a Moorean Argument *implicitly*. What seems to the atheist a strong epistemological necessity to justify religious beliefs (and in fact the atheist claims it is impossible) appears to be without any sense, because it is exactly the kind of beliefs which are not to be justified. The atheist suspects that the believer succumbs to wishful thinking and even intellectual dishonesty.<sup>9</sup> But the theist would say that he does not succumb to wishful thinking and is not intellectually dishonest. But why does the believer adopt such an attitude? Because he believes he received a gift, a grace, to believe what he is believing. The atheist seems deprived of this grace. For a believer, religious beliefs are ‘built in him’. Even if these beliefs appear ‘extraordinary’, and extraordinary irresponsible and dishonest in the eyes of an atheist, it is *because* he is an atheist, and not because of some epistemological defects of such beliefs.

Let us recall these passages of the New Testament: ‘And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed *it* unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.’ (Matthew 17:17), or: ‘No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 12:3), among similar passages. Let us also recall Anselm’s well-known prayer:

I acknowledge, Lord, and I give thanks that You have created Your image in me, so that I may remember You, think of You, love You. But this image is so effaced and worn away by vice, so darkened by the smoke of sin, that it cannot do what it was made to do unless You renew it and reform it. I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that ‘unless I believe, I shall not understand’ (Isa. 7:9). (1998: 87)

*Without belief and even faith, no understanding is possible.* It is the reason why, at least in a revealed religion, there can be no epistemic symmetry

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<sup>8</sup> See Van Inwagen (1998).

<sup>9</sup> Such an intellectual dishonesty is of course at the base of William Clifford’s critique of religious beliefs.

between the believer and the atheist, and no epistemic parity. The believer prays for his more perfect conversion and for the conversion of the atheist; the atheist thinks that the believer is intellectually blinded. Or even, the atheists think the believer does not *really* believe what he says he believes; he imagines a God, he makes himself believe in all such things (on the model of the attitude we are supposed to adopt when we are reading a novel or watching a movie).<sup>10</sup>

The atheist could reply: 'I beg your pardon. Do you mean that if I am an atheist it is, precisely, that I have not received a divine grace, the gift of faith, which is the source of belief?'<sup>11</sup> But if God is the source of your own belief in its existence, there is an obvious epistemological vicious circle. You believe that God exists because God is the source of your belief that God exists. Your reasoning is not serious. It shows, if necessary, what your pitiful epistemological attitude is, and even your intellectual blindness! Speaking this way, I try to stay within the limits of a friendly conversation.' Now, the theist might answer that there may well be good arguments for the existence of God, based on non-religious premises, and not at all supposing a divine grace. Such arguments (and even proofs) could be found in abundance in the works of the best philosophers and theologians. But it seems that only the one who has received from God an apprehension of divine things can assess the truth of the Gospel. And this is exactly the grace the atheist is deprived. The theist could recall one of the Jonathan Edwards' wonderful sermons:

The mind of man is naturally full of prejudices against the truth of divine things: it is full of enmity against the doctrines of the gospel; which is a disadvantage to those arguments that prove their truth, and causes them to lose their force upon the mind. But when a person has discovered to him the divine excellency of Christian doctrines, this destroys the enmity, removes those prejudices, and sanctifies the reason, and causes it to lie open to the force of arguments for their truth ... God, in letting in this light into the soul, deals with man according to his nature, or as a rational creature; and makes use of his human faculties. But yet this light is not the less immediately from God for that; though the faculties are made use of, 'tis as the subject and not as the cause; and that acting of the faculties in it, is not the cause, but is either implied in the thing itself (in the light that is imparted), or is the consequence of it. (1999: 128)

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<sup>10</sup> On this attitude of religious make-believe, see the third chapter of Pouivet (2013).

<sup>11</sup> On such a possibility, see Pouivet (2013: 223-226).

Is it different from what Greco says: ‘our knowledge of persons tends to come through perception and testimony rather than through reasoning or arguments’ (2008: 52)? God in this case is supposed to be a person.<sup>12</sup>

On the perception model, we learn about who God is and what God is like by means of experiencing God in our lives. On the testimony model, we come to know about God by means of someone telling us about Him – either God himself, or other people who have had an experience of God in their lives. (2008: 53)

According to Greco, the perception model and the testimony model make it easy to understand how people can have rational disagreements, when neither one or the other is making an epistemic mistake or is otherwise epistemically flawed. But it is just not that easy to see how the atheist will not be led to think that the disagreement results from the fact that the believer indulges himself in his own religious experience. It is precisely the alleged irrationality of such an experience he contests. Conversely, says the believer, if this experience is a grace, the one who does not have it is devoid of what gives the ability to understand the value of certain arguments that might be made in favour of the existence of God. Greco surely is right to say that ‘it looks like the theist is going to have to say that there is something cognitively wrong with the atheist (or other non-theist) – that she (he) is epistemically flawed after all’ (2008: 54). This is why the friendship between the atheist and the believer has to be based on something other than the recognition of their intellectual symmetry and parity. I mean that if the atheist believes that the theist is blinded, and if the theist believes that the atheist has not received a grace, how could they be friends intellectually? If they can understand and appreciate each other humanly, they are intellectually not only opposed but even *enemies*: they have *no* good mutual understanding, leading to a common search for truth, on a neutral basis. They can be the *best enemies*, still able to debate, for example, but they actually are *worst possible friends*, because there is something very important between them.

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<sup>12</sup> I will not discuss this point, but it is far from evident that God is a person. That there are three persons in one God does not mean that God is a person ... and neither does it mean that to believe in the existence of God is the same as to believe in the existence of a person. But we could say, more safely, that there is an analogy between belief in the existence of God and belief in the existence of a person. I leave this important but difficult topic aside.

## III.

We have to consider the question of *the asymmetry of justification*. Discussions about peer disagreement often presuppose evidential equivalence. Believers and unbelievers would be equivalently familiar with the relevant evidence and arguments that bear on the question whether *p*. But in such discussions, we must take into account, to use Ernest Sosa's words, 'how deeply hidden and undisclosable reasons can be', and 'how epistemically effective a reason can be despite being dialectically ineffective' (2010: 296). And in the case of disagreement about religious matters, the asymmetry of justification plays a crucial role. They are hidden and undisclosable reasons to believe in God: they are dialectically ineffective, because they are the fruits of a divine gift,<sup>13</sup> even if they can be epistemically effective and, above all, rationally respectable.

The place of this grace, of this gift, forbids a definition of the atheist and the theist as epistemic peers. If the theist received an intellectual gift from divine grace, atheist and theist are of course not equally likely to be right. The believer benefits from divine help. The very notion of a sharable evidence, on which the atheist and the theist could be agree, and from which they can hope to convince each other, or even simply discuss, as if the question was to know the merit of a scientific hypothesis, makes no sense for such a reason in this context. Sometimes, philosophers seem to suppose that atheism, agnosticism, and theism are hypotheses of this kind, to be compared in an academic setting. But if faith, of which belief is a constitutive element, is not to be attracted by a hypothesis, but is truly a divine grace, the best possible relation between God and his creatures, the dialectical model of exchanging arguments simply cannot apply. This is sometimes supposed to be the model we use in the scientific debate (or we are supposed *to have* to use in such a debate). But the content of faith is not like a paper we send to referees with the hope that it can be accepted in a journal, or what is in discussion during a conference. The mistake is to think that this intellectual model, of working together on assumptions, or from neutral data, defines rationality.

The theist cannot and must not consider the atheist a peer on religious matters. Let us compare: one does not consider someone else to be a peer

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<sup>13</sup> Here we should develop the relationship between the virtues, gifts, beatitudes, and fruits of the Holy Spirit. Belief and faith are intellectual products whose source is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

about one's own headache. In this case, the belief's warrant does not come from a sharable basis between two disputants. In both cases, headache and religious faith, belief's warrant derives from the very fact believed even if there are no *sharable* reasons. So, it is perfectly *reasonable* for the theist to *downgrade* the atheist, even with no *independent* reason, sharable with the theist. The reference to a headache is not intended at all to suggest that faith is internal and subjective; and therefore, it would turn out to be inaccessible to arguments. It is simply to say that our reasons for believing something may not be shareable without being unreasonable. It is possible to consider them as sufficient to reject an atheist critique.

The type of knowledge we have of the existence of God is closer to the one we have of our own headache than it is to the existence of a certain planet in the universe. One does not believe in this existence as the conclusion of an argument. It is also close to the knowledge I have of the existence of my own wife. (Even if, of course, there is no relation between the two.) The atheist could not accept that a person can claim and believe in the existence of God in the same way that he believes in the existence of his headache or in the existence of his wife, that is to say without feeling obliged to give reasons the atheist expects, recognizes, and even, eventually, could finally share. But it just shows that the demand of the atheist is not acceptable, and that this demand does not enter in a friendly relation. The theist intends to monitor the rationality of one who has no reason to think himself irrational. It is like the situation of the one who is required to prove his nationality, even though it would make no sense to think that he can have another, and while he has no evidence to provide.<sup>14</sup>

We do not believe in God apart from God himself, as we believe in the existence of a planet because it is the best possible explanation of certain astronomical phenomena. Would it be friendly of someone to ask you to give credible evidence of your wife when you start talking to him about her? Sure, you could sometimes give him what he asks. However, he could have a level of epistemological requirement so high – the kind that the sceptic can display – that it would make satisfaction impossible. Anyway, it is no more a friendly relationship between interlocutors. Rather it is a strong disagreement between people who do not share much intellectually, even if they can of course respect each other (and even appreciate each other).

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<sup>14</sup> This has sometimes been the situation of some people in France in recent years.

Ernest Sosa says – but, I must be clear, he does not speak about religious beliefs – that ‘our inability to defeat an opponent in public debate need not rationally require us to abandon our beliefs’ (2010: 294). The theist downgrades his opponent’s judgment that he is wrong, or that he has no good reasons to believe in the existence of God. To downgrade is simply to think that the atheist must go wrong somehow. And likely if the atheist goes wrong it is that he did not receive a certain gift. Such downgrading is based *on the very substance of the disagreement*: on this question, the existence of God and other beliefs about it, atheists and theists are more likely to be best intellectual enemies than good intellectual friends.

According to the equal weight view, when you learn of your friend’s disagreement, you are called upon to consider him equally likely to be right. This is not at all possible for the theist: it would make no sense, exactly like if you would consider seriously the person who tells you that you do not have a headache or that your wife’s existence is disputable because you have no better argument than that you do not feel well or that you love her! And there are perfectly good reasons for the theist to downgrade his opponent without intellectual embarrassment or shame. He does not disrespect him. If so, they are not good friends at all with regard to religion – because of the faithless assurance of the atheist – rather they will be best enemies.

It is important to add that the theist is not *at all* exempt from arguing from his side as fully and convincingly as he can manage, and even that it would be a form of respect to the atheist to argue. ‘Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear’ (1 Peter 3:15). But the believer’s inability to defeat his opponent is not a reason for him to abandon his beliefs. In fact, are the arguments that everyone, atheist or theist, advance really intended to convince the other? Rather they seem to have a negative function: to show that those who believe in the existence of God, or that God does not exist, or that we cannot know whether God exists or not, do not consider themselves released from any epistemological obligations. They are not released from such obligations, but they do not believe on the basis of arguments, even if they would be able to deliver such arguments to defend their beliefs. This is the reason why we can have very serious doubts about the possibility that the disagreement between atheist and theist could be dispelled by an exchange of arguments, based on intellectual friendship. But that does not mean that religious belief is a subjective passion that would ridicule any rational theology, and

especially natural theology. However, the function of natural theory and rational theology is not foundational: they do not serve to give a basis to the theist beliefs.

There are many books in which a theist and atheist discuss and exchange arguments in the greatest respect one another. For example, *Atheism and Theism* is a dialogue, or so to speak, between Jack Smart and John Haldane (2003). So to speak, the book gives the impression of two parallel discourses, despite the efforts made by the two friends to exchange arguments. Something goes wrong. We know, in advance and without suspense at all, that they will obviously not change their minds; and indeed the arguments that they advance are already well-known to each other, even if they manage to give them a more contemporary look. In the preface to the second edition of this book (actually one of the best in this fashionable genre of a serious debate between serious philosophers who seriously disagree), we read that ‘the majority of reviewers chose to observe the friendly and respectful character of (the) exchange’ (2003: x). It would be far more interesting to know why Smart and Haldane are unable to convince each other, and why their exchange changes nothing regarding what they believe or do not believe! The final form of this preface seems to be simply a good example – of course, nothing bad in itself – of academic politeness. The protagonists say that they hope that ‘this extended discussion will re-engage earlier readers and draw new ones into that common search of truth about atheism and theism’ (2003: xi). In a sense, if it is simply to characterize the two opposing positions, the book, one more time, does this quite well. But if it is for the theist to notice he was blinded, or for the atheist suddenly to realize that his own arguments are not conclusive, really nobody thinks it will happen and even could happen.

In the original preface of the book, it is said that ‘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’ (2003: 4). But manifestly, Jack Smart resisted, and does not think at all that John Haldane possesses a proof of the existence of God, or even something close to a proof, like a justified true belief, or a hypothesis to the best explanation. That does not mean that the existence of God cannot be known by the light of natural reason. But this possibility does not imply that Jack has to be convinced by the arguments of John, even if Jack is intellectually honest, perfectly competent, and is even John’s

friend. And nothing changes for Haldane if Smart is not convinced in his turn. Presumably, the ability of Haldane and Smart, impressive for sure, to give excellent arguments, was not decisive for either one or the other.

## CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, I quote William Rowe who says that ‘it is not difficult for an atheist to be friendly when he has reason to believe that the theist could not reasonably be expected to be acquainted with the grounds for disbelief that he (the atheist) possesses’ (1979: 340). I have come now to the conclusion that it is difficult for the theist to be friendly when he has reason to believe that the atheist could not reasonably be expected to be acquainted with the grounds for belief that he (the theist) possesses. These grounds consist basically of divine grace. This does not imply that religious belief is not reasonable. Indeed, we can rationally believe without having shareable reasons, such as those that we share in philosophical or scientific debates.

‘But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man.’ (1 Corinthians 2:15) This quotation explains what makes intellectual friendship between the believer and the unbeliever so difficult. The truly difficult question for the theist is not that of a hidden god, but why God does not extend His grace to all mankind, and why the atheist, intellectually honest and even generous, disagrees with him.

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