ON SECOND-ORDER RELIGION, AGATHEISM AND NATURALISM

A REPLY TO BRANDEN THORNHILL-MILLER, PETER MILLICAN AND JANUSZ SALAMON

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These comments, on the paper by Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican[1] and on the critique of that paper by Janusz Salamon[2], divide into four sections. In the first two sections, I briefly sketch some of the major themes from the paper by Thornhill-Miller and Millican, and then from the critique by Salamon. In the final two sections, I provide some critical thoughts on Salamon's objections to Thornhill-Miller and Millican, and then on the leading claims made by Thornhill-Miller and Millican. I find much to commend, but also some things to dispute, in both papers. As is so often the way, I shall focus on areas of disagreement.

I.

Thornhill-Miller and Millican argue that rationality requires a retreat from 'first-order religion'. Their argument has two main prongs: (a) 'The Common Core/Diversity Dilemma'; and (b) 'The Normal/Objective Dilemma'. (2-5)

The Common Core/Diversity Dilemma has two horns: (A) in so far as religious phenomena point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their

[1] Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, 'The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), 1-49.

[2] Janusz Salamon, 'Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2015), 197-245.

evidential force; and (B) in so far as such phenomena involve a 'common core' of similarity, they point towards a proximate common cause for these phenomena that is natural rather than supernatural. (20)

Thornhill-Miller and Millican argue that (A) is supported by, for example, considerations about medical miracles and intercessory prayer (21-3); and that (B) is supported by psychometric studies and considerations concerning near death experiences, meditative and introvertive religious experiences, hypersensitive agency detection devices, and theories of mind (23-31). Moreover, Thornhill-Miller and Millican also argue that considerations about egocentric bias, confirmation bias, and needs for significance and social cohesion point to proximate naturalistic explanations of the fact that religions are so assertive and persistent in their claims to special authority in the face of obvious disagreement from so many competing faiths. (32-7)

The Normal/Objective Dilemma is really a question: if the psychological causes of religious belief are associated with normal, healthy mental functioning and various positive (individual and social) outcomes, should these rationally weigh with us more heavily than objective epistemological considerations would allow? (40)

Thornhill-Miller and Millican note that there are individual and social benefits of religious belief – enhanced happiness, increased longevity, improved recovery from addiction, deepened in-group trust, heightened in-group empathy, greater in-group cohesion, and so forth (37-41) – as well as individual and social costs of religious belief – intensified out-group conflict, increased insularity, greater xenophobia, heightened prejudices, and so on (41-3). Thornhill-Miller and Millican take the view that the in-group benefits are outweighed by the out-group damage; in their view, there may be no greater threat to humanity than intergroup conflict motivated by exclusivist and other-worldly religious thinking. (41) However, Thornhill-Miller and Millican also note that the very naturalness of religion makes it very doubtful that we can simply replace it with other things that deliver the same goods that it delivers: humanity is deeply immersed in well-established religious traditions whose rituals have evolved to fit human needs. (45)

Thornhill-Miller and Millican diverge in their preferences concerning the form that retreat from first-order religion should take. Millican favours walking the path of scepticism and learning to live in a godless world, something that many unbelievers have managed, and that might – with sensitive reshaping of social structures – be possible for all.

Thornhill-Miller opts for a kind of 'second-order religion' – deism – which finds intimations of divinity in the general structures of the world and in our religious instincts, but which is fully committed to the enterprise of natural science. (46) A major challenge for both approaches is whether they can deliver enough of the individual and social benefits that are currently delivered by religion while avoiding the individual and social costs that are associated with it.

II.

Salamon argues against a retreat from first-order religion. In his view, Thornhill-Miller and Millican overlook or downplay the importance of a number of fundamental aspects of religious belief. In particular, he thinks that Thornhill-Miller and Millican undersell the significance of hopes for immortality, desires for moral transformation, and estimations of the value of love, worship, and freedom of assent. (216) Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Salamon thinks that Thornhill-Miller and Millican misunderstand first-order religious traditions, which all explicitly or implicitly presuppose 'agatheistic' religious belief.

According to Salamon, agatheism 'identifies religiously conceived ultimate reality with the ultimate good which is postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness through which we perceive and evaluate the goods at which our actions are aimed and towards which our hopes are directed' (201), and 'answers questions about the ultimate meaning of our finite existence as perceived through the lenses of our axiological consciousness which directs our thoughts and hopes towards some ultimate good which does not seem to be realisable in the physical universe' (201n7).

Salamon notes that he uses the terms 'ultimate reality' and 'the absolute' as 'synonyms capturing in the most inclusive way the meaning of the divine or highest reality that is the central focus of all religious traditions'. (202n9) He adds that 'all post-Axial religious traditions presuppose some possibility of ultimate fulfilment of human potential by way of transcending the limitations and contingency of our present condition; whether conceptualised in terms of salvation, redemption, liberation, or in some other way, this soteriological and eschatological promise is usually associated with the possibility of some kind of unity with the ultimate reality'. (222)

Against the claim of Thornhill-Miller and Millican that first-order religious belief is irrational – because there is no evidence or reason sufficient to sustain it – Salamon objects that rational first-order religious belief is grounded in 'reasoning from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good towards which human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed'. (211) Moreover, against the claim of Thornhill-Miller and Millican that second-order religious belief might be rationally grounded in consideration of the fine-tuning of our universe for life, Salamon objects that those considerations are inadequate to ground a belief in God or ultimate reality that can satisfy human existential needs. (217) According to Salamon, the most that theistic arguments can do – and all that they were traditionally intended to do – is to show how presupposed belief in God can cohere with other beliefs about our world. (209) 'Nothing more can be done to establish the rationality of agatheistic beliefs ... than ... to point to the concept of the ultimate good as the transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness and to see agatheistic beliefs as objects of Kantian "rational faith", or, better, rational hope'. (242)

Salamon claims to favour 'mystical inclusivism'. In his assessment, his mystical inclusivism '(a) allows for the possibility of veridical experience of God or ultimate reality in a variety of religious traditions; but (b) avoids the radical revisionist postulates of Hickian pluralism, akin to the revisionism advocated by Thornhill-Miller and Millican; and (c) leaves open the question whether the creed of any specific tradition is a better approximation to the truth about ultimate reality than the creeds of other traditions, creating space for a kind of pan-inclusivism that acknowledges that everyone else is also an inclusivist'. (243)

III.

I think that it is not the case that first-order religious traditions presuppose agatheism. Certainly, there are some members of some religions who believe that there is an ultimate reality that is also the ultimate good; and it may even be there are some religions in which the belief that there is an ultimate reality that is also the ultimate good is widespread and, in some sense, mainstream. However, there are clear cases of first-order religious traditions in which agatheism is simply rejected.

Consider the family of Buddhist traditions. In one sense, these traditions reject the notion of ultimate reality: there is nothing in these

traditions that corresponds to the God of the Abrahamic religions (e.g., nothing that is permanent, unchanging, eternal, the causal foundation of everything else, and so forth). In another sense, there are 'ultimate realities' in Buddhist traditions: *dharma*, *sunyata*, *samsara*, etc. But there is no sense in which any of *these* 'ultimate realities' is the ultimate good.

Moreover, in Buddhist traditions, it is not true that the ultimate good is postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness through which we perceive and evaluate the goods at which our actions are aimed and towards which our hopes are directed. Rather, according to Buddhist traditions, the 'ultimate good' is nirvana: release from samsara and consequent cessation of suffering. While, in many Christian and Muslim traditions, the ultimate meaning of our finite existence lies in some future good that is not realisable in the physical universe, in many Buddhist traditions, our ultimate goal lies in the pursuit of individual-annihilation-facilitating enlightenment.

While it is true that there is a sense in which Buddhist traditions maintain the possibility of ultimate fulfilment of human potential by way of transcending the limitations and contingency of our present condition, it is not the case that this is conceptualised as the possibility of some kind of unity with ultimate reality. According to many Buddhist traditions, we transcend the limitations and contingency of our present condition by coming to a complete understanding of those limitations and that contingency: when we become fully enlightened about the causes of our suffering and have done all that our karma requires, we are released from samsara and have achieved nirvana.

It is not only Buddhist traditions that reject agatheism. The same is true for Hinduism, Daoism, Confucianism, Jainism, and most – if not all – indigenous religions. Consider the family of Hindu traditions. Classical Hinduism teaches that there are four proper objectives of human life – dharma, artha, kāma, and mokṣa – of which, perhaps, the last can be taken to be the ultimate goal of human life. Among the diverse Hindu traditions, some take mokṣa to involve union – or realisation of union – with an ultimate being; but even those Hindu traditions typically do not take that ultimate being to be the ultimate good postulated by agatheism. And there are Hindu traditions in which mokṣa is not taken to involve union – or realisation of union – with any kind of ultimate reality.

When we survey the religions of the world, we do not find that first-order religious belief is grounded in reasoning from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good towards which

human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed. If we say – with Salamon – that *rational* first-order religious belief is grounded in reasoning from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good towards which human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed, then we commit ourselves to the claim that rational belief is very sparely and unevenly distributed across the world's religions. It is, I think, quite clear that most – if not all – Buddhists, Hindus, Daoists, Confucians, Jains and members of indigenous religions do *not* reason from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good towards which human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed. Moreover, it is hardly any less clear that a great many Christians, Jews, and Muslims do not reason from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good towards which human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed. Perhaps, in this latter case, it might be replied that the rational religious belief of these many Christians, Jews and Muslims is grounded in the reasoning of *other* Christians, Jews and Muslims who are held to be authoritative when it comes to the teachings of the Abrahamic religions. But, even if we suppose that there is this division of rational cognitive labour, it seems to me to be largely false that Christians, Jews and Muslims who are held to be authoritative when it comes to the teachings of the Abrahamic religions accept that *rational* first-order religious belief is grounded in reasoning from human axiological consciousness to God as the ultimate good towards which human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed. The kinds of considerations that are marshalled in – for example – Part I, Book II, Chapter 2 of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* simply do not have the support of large swathes of those Christians, Jews and Muslims who are held to be authoritative when it comes to the teachings of the Abrahamic religions.

It is, I think, a fair point against the position that Thornhill-Miller prefers that considerations about the fine-tuning of our universe for life are likely to prove inadequate to ground religious beliefs that answer to human existential needs. On its own, the claim that our world is the product of intelligent design seems powerless to minister to people with existential anxieties about death, loneliness, social status, sex, and so forth. However, it is not at all clear that reasoning from human axiological consciousness to the ultimate good towards which human axiological consciousness is ultimately directed is any better suited to the task at hand. Since Hume wrote his *Natural History of Religion*, it has

been a commonplace that 'vulgar superstitions' are much better suited to the relief of existential anxiety than are the abstruse deliverances of theologians. Belief in an Abrahamic afterlife might assuage – though it might also amplify – anxieties about death; reading Part I, Book II, Chapter 2 of *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* is most unlikely to lead to any similar outcome. (Salamon makes it clear that he does not endorse Kant's 'moral argument'; he says that 'the fundamental intuition behind agatheism has more in common with Plato than with Kant' (201). But exactly the same kind of critical point could be made in connection with Plato's writings.)

I think that Salamon is insufficiently sceptical about what it is possible for arguments to do. In particular, I think that he is insufficiently sceptical about what it is possible for theistic arguments to do. A deductive argument can establish that a set of claims is logically inconsistent. Showing that a set of claims that includes the proposition that *God does not exist* is logically inconsistent is interesting to a theist only if all of the other claims in the inconsistent set are accepted by particular sufficiently well-credentialed atheists. In that case, the argument shows only that the atheists in question should reconsider the set of claims in question: something must give, but it is an entirely open question what that should be. While detecting – and, if necessary, demonstrating – logical inconsistency is an important part of the project of evaluating worldviews, it is arguably much more important to think about the evaluation of logically consistent worldviews. (Of course, deductive arguments establish logical consequences; one can learn about what one is currently committed to by one's beliefs by being presented with a good deductive argument. But atheists typically are not in need of arguments that show that they are committed to the claim that God does not exist.)

Salamon thinks that arguments can have a role in establishing the consistency of worldviews: 'theistic arguments can show how presupposed belief in God can cohere with other beliefs about our world'. It is hard to see how this could be the case. Certainly, one can construct arguments for *relative* consistency: we can show that a worldview W1 is logically consistent given that worldview W2 is logically consistent. But arguments for the existence of God are never of this form. And merely putting together an argument in which you show that the claim that God exists follows logically from other things that you believe cannot possibly suffice to show that your worldview is logically consistent: for all

that your demonstration shows, it may be that your premises are jointly logically inconsistent.

The interesting comparative task for worldviews considers their relative theoretical virtue: which worldview effects the best trade-off between minimisation of theoretical (ontological, ideological) commitment and maximisation of explanatory breadth and depth? If 'coherence' is not logical consistency, then it seems to me best to align it with theoretical virtue: more coherent theories make better trade-offs between minimisation of theoretical commitment and maximisation of explanatory breadth and depth. A worldview that is committed to the bare claim that our world is the product of intelligent design and to the bare claim that there is an afterlife in which we flourish scores better – on the count of theoretical commitment – than 'vulgar' worldviews that pack more into the nature of the intelligent designer and the afterlife, but much worse on the breadth and depth of the explanation why the intelligent design includes an afterlife of that kind.

I am sceptical that Salamon's 'mystical inclusivism' lives up to its advertising. Agatheism is no part of many first-order religious traditions. If we are interested in defending the rationality of adopting any among the world's first-order religious traditions, then we should not be following the trail that Salamon blazes. While I agree with Salamon that Thornhill-Miller's 'second-order religion' does not provide adequate ministration to human existential needs, I think that exactly the same complaint can be lodged against Salamon's 'mystical inclusivism'. If we are concerned to defend the rationality of 'vulgar' religious belief – i.e. the kind of religious belief that does provide adequate ministration to human existential needs – then we need to be adopting a very different kind of approach.

IV.

I am a metaphysical naturalist; I agree with Thornhill-Miller and Millican that one can happily, comfortably, and reasonably 'walk the path of scepticism'. However, I disagree with Thornhill-Miller and Millican that there is only one other plausible way forward: a second-order religion that is strongly supported by fine-tuning considerations.

Thornhill-Miller and Millican claim that 'the fine-tuning argument', in contrast with other traditional theistic arguments, has not been 'decisively refuted' (47). In their view, 'Ontological Arguments are logically refutable, Cosmological Arguments are vitiated by their

reliance on general principles that seem initially plausible but go hugely beyond the scope of our experience, and Moral Arguments are founded on meta-ethical views that are both dubious in themselves and hostage to naturalistic accounts of morality' (47n144). (They go on to add that these topics are 'obviously too big to discuss further here'.)

I agree with Thornhill-Miller and Millican that extant ontological, cosmological and moral *arguments* are unsuccessful: they are not such as ought to persuade metaphysical naturalists to become theists. Moreover, I think that the same is true for all of the other classes of extant theistic arguments: other teleological arguments (e.g. biological teleological arguments), arguments from consciousness, arguments from reason, arguments from revelation, arguments from scripture, arguments from expert testimony, arguments from miracles, arguments from religious experience, and so on. In my view, there are no extant successful theistic arguments, and there is no reason to suppose that there are hitherto undiscovered successful theistic arguments. In particular, I think that there is no reason to suppose that extant fine-tuning arguments are in better standing than other kinds of theistic arguments.

Given my scepticism about what it is possible for arguments to do, it will be better for me to frame the coming discussion in terms of the bearing of certain kinds of considerations on the comparative theoretical virtue of theism and naturalism. I claim that the fine-tuning considerations do not favour theism over naturalism because there is no difference in the depth and breadth of explanation of the fine-tuning considerations that is afforded by theism in comparison with naturalism. Indeed, if all else were equal, then the fact that theism postulates an intelligent designer to explain the fine-tuning considerations would entail that we should prefer naturalism to theism on the count of minimisation of theoretical commitments.

Suppose, for the sake of argument, that the causal order is fine-tuned for life. For simplicity, let's pretend that we know that the natural order is just our big-bang universe, and that there is an initial state of that big-bang universe. These simplifying assumptions clearly do not load the dice in favour of naturalism: if there is a creator God, then we can take the causal order to begin with God's creation of our big-bang universe; and if there is no creator God, then we can take the causal order to be our big-bang universe.

Now let's ask ourselves: where in the causal order are the values of the fine-tuned constants determined? Is the causal order everywhere

fine-tuned for life; or does the causal order become fine-tuned for life at some non-initial point?

On either view – theistic or naturalistic – if the causal order is everywhere fine-tuned for life, then, in particular, the initial causal state is fine-tuned for life. On the theistic view, this will be a matter of God's initial disposition to create a big-bang universe – our particular big bang universe – in which the fine-tuned constants take the values that they actually do; on the naturalistic view, this will be a matter of the fine-tuned constants taking the values that they actually do in the initial state of our universe. While I suspect that most theists will favour the view that God's initial creative disposition is brutely contingent – God could have had quite different initial creative dispositions and there is nothing that explains why God had the creative dispositions that he did rather than other creative dispositions that he might have had – and while I prefer the variant of the naturalistic view on which the initial state of our universe is brutely necessary, it is clear that theists and naturalists can jump either way on the modal status of the initial state. But, if that's right, then the views are simply on a par with respect to the virtues of the explanations that they give of the fine-tuning of the causal order for life.

Suppose, instead, that the causal order only becomes fine-tuned for life at some non-initial point. On either view – theistic or naturalistic – the only way in which there can be a transition from a state in which the causal order is not fine-tuned for life to a state in which the causal order is fine-tuned for life is if the transition of state is chancy with respect to the values that are taken by the constants. (Remember that the causal order is fine-tuned for life only if it is determined at that point in the causal order that our universe will have the fine-tuning of constants that it actually exhibits.) On the theistic view, God freely chooses from among a range of possible universes to create and there is nothing that explains why God freely chooses to create the particular universe that God chooses to create rather than any other possible universe that God might have chosen to create. On the naturalistic view, there is a range of possible transitions of state of the universe, and there is nothing that explains why we get the particular transition of state that we do, rather than any other possible transition of state that might have occurred. But, if that's right, then the views are simply on a par with respect to the virtues of the explanations that they give of the fine-tuning of the causal order for life: in each case, the key part of the explanation is that there was a tiny chance of getting what came to pass.

So, no matter where in the causal order the values of the fine-tuned constants are determined, there is no difference in the virtues of the naturalistic and theistic explanations of this fact.

Suppose that I am right to think that there is nothing special about fine-tuning arguments: they are in no better standing than any other arguments for the existence of God. Then it seems plausible to conclude that we should not think that the only plausible way forward – other than following the austere intellectual path of scepticism – is to pursue a second-order religion grounded in fine-tuning considerations. Should we then conclude that the only rational position to occupy is that of the naturalist? That would be very hasty. There are several relevant sets of considerations.

First, we need to be given some reason to think that there is something privileged about theistic religions. Even if we had a good argument that the only plausible way forward for friends of theistic religion is to pursue a second-order theistic religion grounded in fine-tuning considerations, that need not be a good argument that the only plausible way forward for friends of religion is to pursue a second-order religion grounded in fine-tuning considerations. I do not believe that there are compelling considerations that place Abrahamic religions in better rational standing than Eastern religions and indigenous religions.

Second, even if we are persuaded that fine-tuning considerations cannot carry a heavier load than other considerations advanced to support the existence of God, we might give a higher estimation of those other considerations than is provided by Thornton-Miller and Millican. While my own verdict is that, when we weigh all of the relevant considerations, my favoured naturalistic worldviews are more theoretically virtuous than any competing religious worldviews, I do not think that everyone else is rationally required to follow me in this judgment. There are many considerations that must be taken into account in weighing worldviews; it is not implausible, given the sheer complexity and scale of the task of weighing the theoretical virtues of worldviews, that there can be rational disagreement about the merits of competing worldviews.

Third, there is a lot that rests on the conceptions of rationality that are operative in this discussion. From the get go – in the first line of the abstract to their paper – Thornhill Miller and Millican say that they are interested in the 'possibilities and rational limits of supernatural religious belief'. But what we take to be 'the rational limits' of classes of beliefs depends crucially on what we take the requirements of rationality to be.

Suppose I ask you whether someone could rationally believe that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final. You might think that the answer to this question is obviously negative. Even if you have no knowledge about – and no interest in – soccer, you can readily discover that there is a Wikipedia page devoted to the 2016 F. A. Cup Final, and that what is says about the result of the game is confirmed by information on the official F. A. Cup website. Since accurate information about the result of the 2016 F. A. Cup Final is so easy to access, it would just be irrational for anyone who has anything riding on their belief about who won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final to believe that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final.

But you might also think that the answer to the question is really not so obvious. It is easy to imagine ways in which someone could come to have a rational belief that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final while also having something riding on the truth of that belief. Suppose that I am someone who loathes soccer; I have no interest in the game, and I do not go out of my way to acquire knowledge about it. I have just rung up a radio quiz, and I've been asked who won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final. I pretty firmly believe that it was Crystal Palace, because, a couple of weeks earlier, while travelling on the train to work, I overheard snatches of a conversation between two soccer fans who were discussing the 2016 F. A. Cup Final. Although I had no interest in what they were saying, and wasn't following what they said too closely, they were speaking sufficiently loudly that some of their words registered with me. On the basis of the words that I did hear, I was rationally justified in forming the belief the Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final. (That is, the fragments of their conversation that I heard constituted strong misleading evidence for the claim that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final.) Moreover, the belief became more firmly entrenched because I dreamed about the train trip a couple of times, and woke up vividly recalling the parts of the conversation that made it reasonable for me to form the belief that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final.

Perhaps, given this example, you might think that we need to distinguish between *internalist* and *externalist* conceptions of rationality: while there is an internalist sense in which it is possible for one to rationally believe that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final, there is also an externalist sense in which it is impossible for anyone to rationally believe that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final. Or, perhaps, given our example, you might think that we need to distinguish

between *conditional* and *unconditional* attributions of rationality: while it is true that it is possible for one to rationally believe that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final, it is not possible for one to rationally believe that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final *given* that one is in possession of certain readily available information.

An interesting feature of my example is that it suggests that there are cases in which it is possible for there to be rational belief of claims that are uncontroversially false. When we are thinking about claims that are uncontroversially false, we find it unproblematic to suppose that there are externalist and conditional senses in which belief in those claims is irrational. No one who is sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently reflective, sufficiently interested, and sufficiently well-informed believes that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final. Anyone who might plausibly count as an *expert* when it comes to assessing the claim that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final believes that it is not the case that Crystal Palace won the 2016 F. A. Cup Final.

There are many domains in which there is convergence of expert opinion *because* expert opinion tracks what any sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently reflective, sufficiently interested, and sufficiently well-informed person ought to believe. In mathematics, natural science, human science, medicine, engineering, pharmacy, and a host of other theoretical and practical disciplines, there are vast domains where expert opinion converges because expert opinion tracks what any sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently reflective, sufficiently interested, and sufficiently well-informed person ought to believe. In those domains, it would be irrational for sufficiently intelligent, sufficiently reflective, sufficiently interested, and sufficiently well-informed people to dissent from expert opinion.

But not all domains of inquiry are like this. In some domains of inquiry, there is no convergence of expert opinion. Philosophy is one such domain: the opinions of even the most intelligent, most reflective, most interested and most well-informed philosophers fail to converge. Sure, there are times and places where there is significant local convergence of expert philosophical opinion; but history does not disclose any stable global convergence of expert philosophical opinion. Some, but not all, intelligent, reflective, interested, well-informed philosophers have been, and some, but not all, intelligent, reflective, interested and well-informed philosophers are, determinists, substance dualists, consequentialists, communitarians, virtue ethicists, logical pluralists, phenomenologists,

existentialists, physicalists, legal positivists, and so forth. What credence, then, can we give to claims that it is *irrational* to believe in determinism, or consequentialism, or communitarianism, or virtue ethics, or logical pluralism, or phenomenology, or existentialism, or physicalism, or legal positivism, etc.?

And theism? Some, but not all, intelligent, reflective, interested, well-informed philosophers have been, and some, but not all, intelligent, reflective, interested and well-informed philosophers are, theists. Is it really credible to suppose that the theistic beliefs of those philosophers who are theists are irrational in ways that the naturalistic beliefs of those philosophers who are naturalists are not? Certainly, there are *standards* against which the theistic beliefs of those philosophers who are theists are irrational: for example, it is more or less certain that the theistic beliefs of those philosophers who are theists are not beliefs that would be held by ideal Bayesian agents. But, against those standards, it is true in general that the philosophical beliefs of philosophers are irrational. In any case, what really matters is not the standards that we adopt, but the comparative case that is to be made: is there any compelling reason to think that the naturalistic beliefs of naturalistic philosophers are *more* rational than the theistic beliefs of theistic philosophers?

Thornhill-Miller and Millican invoke human cognitive failings – egocentric bias, confirmation bias, optimistic bias, and the like – in the case that they make for the Common Core/Diversity Dilemma. But, of course, these human cognitive failings are universal: we can run up against these failings anywhere that people are engaged in reasoning and argumentation. Moreover, we have good reason to suspect that these kinds of biases are in operation wherever there are strongly held beliefs despite a lack of convergence of expert opinion. So a question naturally arises about the extent to which the views of Thornhill-Miller and Millican on the question of the rationality of naturalistic and theistic beliefs are themselves affected by these universal cognitive failings. Perhaps you can imagine a slightly different paper on the limits of rational *philosophical* belief that works with the following pair of 'Dilemmas':

(1) In so far as philosophical data (e.g. philosophical intuition) point toward specific philosophical theories or explanations, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their evidential force; and, in so far as such philosophical data involves a common core of similarity, they point towards theories and explanations that are scientific rather than philosophical

(2) If the psychological causes of philosophical belief are associated with normal, healthy mental functioning and positive individual and social outcomes, should these rationally weigh with more heavily than objective epistemological considerations would allow?

I note, in passing, that there is a considerable empirical literature on philosophy for children that supports the claim that philosophical belief *is* associated with normal, healthy, mental functioning and positive individual and social outcomes.

To strengthen the case for scepticism about the claim that theistic – and, more generally, religious – belief is, *ipso facto*, irrational in ways that naturalistic philosophical belief is not, we might also consider the ways in which we all rely upon testimonial information in forming and revising our beliefs. While at least those of us who are sufficiently intelligent, reflective, interested and well-informed are pretty good at identifying genuine experts in mathematics, natural science, human science, medicine, engineering, pharmacy, and the rest of the theoretical and practical disciplines adverted to earlier, it is not within the bounds of credibility that we are good at identifying genuine experts that we can then reasonably take to be testimonial authorities on philosophical – or religious, or normative political – questions. But, of course, we all acquire much of our philosophical – and religious, and normative political – belief from the testimony of those whom we suppose at the time to be authorities on the matters in question. And there is no prospect of making over our philosophical – and religious, and normative political – beliefs in ways that free them from dependence upon the testimony of those we once regarded as authorities on these matters.

There is much that might be added to the rather sketchy considerations that I have advanced against the claim, defended by Thornhill-Miller and Millican, that the only *rational* ways forward lie with naturalism and second-order religion grounded in the fine-tuning data. However, rather than try to develop these considerations more fully, I shall conclude with a comment on another controversial aspect of the position that they stake out.

Thornhill-Miller and Millican say that second order religion may be able to deliver the in-group goods that are supported by first-order religion without also delivering accompanying out-group damage. But why should we be more optimistic about this prospect than about the

prospect that first-order religion might be able to deliver the in-group goods without also delivering the out-group damage? Thornhill-Miller and Millican themselves note that that the well-springs of the out-group damage lie in an authoritarianism that is not the sole preserve of first-order religions. While Thornhill-Miller and Millican quite correctly note that it is a mistake to interpret the widespread decline of religiosity in prosperous democracies as evidence that first-order religion is on the way out, it remains open that that data supports the claim that the spread of appropriate social conditions can moderate, or even eliminate, the out-group damage that has often been associated with first-order religion. Given that there are many first-order religionists who get the benefits of first-order religion without causing the out-group damage, why not suggest working to bring about social conditions in which first-order religion everywhere delivers in-group benefits without causing out-group harms?