

## **On Russell's 'Why I Am Not A Christian'**

Emanuel Rutten

### **I**

In 1927 Russell delivered a famous lecture to the National Secular Society in which he explains why he is not a Christian [1]. His lecture is divided in two parts. In the first part he explains why he does not believe in God, and in the second part he explains why he does not think that Christ was the best and wisest of man. In this paper I shall first evaluate the reasons Russell gives for refuting the claim that there is a God. After that I assess Russell's reasons for rejecting the claim that Christ was the best and wisest of man.

### **II**

Regarding the first claim, the existence of God, Russell considers five arguments: the first-cause argument, the natural-law argument, the argument from design, the moral argument and the argument for the remedying of injustice.

Let us start with the first-cause argument. Russell states that the first-cause argument "does not carry very much weight nowadays, because, in the first place, cause is not quite what it used to be. The philosophers and the men of science have got going on cause, and it has not anything like the vitality it used to have [...]". Now, this might be the case for Russell's own time, during which logical positivism triumphed, but since the collapse of logical positivism in the second part of the 20th Century the dialectical situation has changed dramatically.

Philosophy has witnessed a total rehabilitation of the concept of causality. As Koons points out: "[...] Russell announced the demise of the concept of causality [...]. Subsequent developments in science and analytic philosophy have not supported Russell's contention. Far from withering away, the notions of cause and effect have never held a more central position.

The notion of causality is absolutely central to recent philosophical work in semantics, the philosophy of mind and intentionality, epistemology, and philosophy of science. [...] Attempts to explain away causation or to replace it with some purely statistical regularity (whether or not supplemented by some kind of psychologistic decoration) have proved to be catastrophic failures" [2].

Secondly, Russell maintains that "[...] you can see that the argument that there must be a First Cause is one that cannot have any validity". Now, to say that the first cause argument "cannot have any validity" is, at the very least, a gross exaggeration. For, it is surely intuitively reasonable to hold that the whole of reality is ultimately grounded in some absolute origin. Maintaining that there must be some 'metaphysical ultimate' from which all that exists eventually originates is definitely not just some irrational belief. Indeed, "The cosmos sinks into the abyss of nothingness, unless, beyond this infinite chain of contingencies, something supports it" (Kant, Critique of Pure Reason, A622/B550).

So, why does Russell think that the idea that there must be some first cause has no validity at all? He writes: "If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so there cannot be any validity in that argument". Now, this dilemma is false. The first horn of the dilemma is avoided by making a distinction, properly grounded in modern formal ontology, between contingently existing and necessarily existing objects. One might then say that all contingent objects have a cause, but from this it does not follow at all that all necessary objects must have a cause as well. Moreover, the Leibnizian version of the first cause argument clearly shows that the first cause of the universe, entailed by the premises of the argument, is a proper example of a necessarily existing object, not a contingent one. Further, the second horn of the dilemma is avoided by providing a clear and adequate definition of the universe. By definition, the universe is the sum of all contingent objects, and therefore the universe must be contingent as well, and thus caused.

Russell however also says that "there is no reason why the world could not have come into being without a cause". Well, it seems to me that the idea that the universe could have come

into being entirely uncaused, without any reason whatsoever, from literally nothing at all, is wholly against our most basic intuitions. Surely, it is more than reasonable to hold that from nothing nothing comes: being cannot originate from non-being. So, to suddenly appeal to this option in order to avoid a cause of the universe seems desperate.

But then Russell points out: "There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all". However, since the development and general acceptance of the Big Bang theory in the 20th Century it has become the proper scientific view that the universe began to exist some finite time ago, contra a beginningless universe. It would be quite unreasonable, not to say irrational, nowadays to simply ignore the Big Bang theory.

The second argument for the existence of God that Russell discusses is the so-called natural-law argument. Following Russell, the argument seems to be that the origin of the fundamental laws of nature need a lawgiver, and that lawgiver would be God. Now, I do not think this is a good argument at all, since, on the Aristotelian view, the natural laws are properly understood as being grounded in the properties of the world's fundamental objects, which brings us back again to the existence of those objects and properties on which we can apply a cogent contemporary first-cause argument. So, I shall not further discuss Russell's rejection of the natural-law argument.

The third argument considered by Russell is the well-known argument from design. Now here Russell solely attacks the biological argument from design, which derives God from the irreducible or specified complexity of organic life forms. Now, I take it that Darwin's evolution theory, which I entirely accept, clearly shows that this argument is wholly untenable. For, according to the Darwinian theory of evolution, complex life forms developed gradually over time through natural selection.

However, in the second part of the 20th century a cosmological design argument arose due to the totally unexpected discovery that our universe appears to be 'fine-tuned'. The fine-tuning of our universe is the observation that the intelligent life permitting universe we inhabit is extremely unlikely from a statistical point of view. If the value of one of the cosmological constants as discovered by physics would have been only inappreciably different, then our

universe would have evolved into a universe that does not permit intelligent life. Thus we live on a razor's edge. It is so incomprehensibly improbable that our universe is intelligent-life-permitting that it would be unreasonable to explain this state of affairs by a mere appeal to chance. Hence, some other rational explanation for the fine-tuning is needed, and the explanation that the values of the cosmological constants are in some sense necessary is totally unsupported as well. Therefore, the phenomenon of the fine-tuning of the universe, provides, contrary to the phenomenon of complex biological life forms, adequate support for theism over naturalism. So, in this respect Russell's comments on the design argument are simply out-of-date.

The moral argument for the existence of God, following Russell's lecture, is that "there would be no right or wrong unless God existed". In a sense this is indeed obvious, since, on naturalism, reality just consists of matter, energy, time and space. So, on the naturalistic view, there simply is no ontological candidate whatsoever to ground *objective* moral values. Therefore, if God does not exist, naturalism would be true, and morality would be just a matter of subjective, personal opinion. On naturalism, if somebody would say that torturing an innocent young child merely for fun is wrong, one could always rebut by simply saying: 'Who says so? That's just your own personal subjective opinion, and I happen to have quite another one'.

Now, Russell tries to refute the moral argument by an appeal to Euthyphro's dilemma. Is something right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? According to Russell both horns of this dilemma are problematic for theism. Since, either God could command things we take to be obviously evil, or God is not the ultimate sovereign, since good and evil would be external to God himself.

But, again, this dilemma is false. As Koukl points out: "There are not two options, but three. The Christian rejects the first option, that morality is an arbitrary function of God's power. And he rejects the second option, that God is responsible to a higher law. There is no law over God. The third option is that an objective standard exists (this avoids the first horn of the dilemma). However, the standard is not external to God, but internal (avoiding the second horn).

Morality is grounded in the immutable character of God [...]. Could God simply decree that torturing babies was moral? "No", the Christian answers, "God would never do that". It's not a matter of command. It's a matter of character. So the Christian avoids the dilemma entirely. Morality is not anterior to God - logically prior to Him - as Bertrand Russell suggests, but rooted in his nature" [3].

The fifth, and final argument, that Russell considers is the so-called argument for the remedying of injustice. The argument would be that the existence of God is required in order to bring justice into the world: "[I]f you are going to have justice in the universe as a whole you have to suppose a future life to redress the balance of life here on earth. So they say that there must be a God, and there must be Heaven and Hell, in order that in the long run there may be justice".

Now, Russell objects to this argument by holding that "this world is a fair sample, and if there is injustice here the odds are that there is injustice elsewhere also". This objection however entirely fails, since it begs the question against theism. Surely, *on naturalism*, it would be correct to say that, most likely, there is injustice in other natural worlds as well. But, that is not the point of the argument. For the argument is that, if you are going to have justice in reality as a whole, then there must be some realm outside our natural world to redress the balance of earthly life. Hence, to attack this argument, Russell would have to argue that its premise is untenable, which he does not do in his lecture.

Further, I personally think that, under naturalism, there is in fact no reason at all to think that, ultimately, justice for humanity will prevail. But, I take it that, under theism, this premise is quite tenable (See [4]).

### III

Let us now continue with the second part of Russell's lecture, in which he attempts to show that one cannot grant superlative wisdom and superlative goodness of Christ.

Russell starts by saying: "I think that there are a good many points upon which I agree with

Christ a great deal more than the professing Christians so. I do not know that I could go with Him all the way, but I could go with Him much further than most professing Christians can.". Russell provides examples of teachings of Christ that he endorses, all from the Gospel of Matthew: "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also", "Judge not, that you be not judged", "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you" and "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven".

Russell readily admits that these are all very good, even excellent, principles. Yet, he points out that many Christians do not live up to them. Now, I surely agree that these maxims are not much practised, neither by Christians nor non-Christians, but that does of course nothing at all to show that Christ *himself* is in any sense less great or good. I take this to be a quite self-evident point.

Subsequently Russell contends that "[h]istorically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about him". Now, this statement has become entirely outdated. During the second half of the 20th century biblical historians started to realize themselves that historical skepticism towards Jesus is in fact unwarranted. As a result many critical scholars began a new quest of the historical Jesus. And nowadays, the vast majority of biblical scholars hold that Jesus of Nazareth did in fact exist. Moreover, most contemporary critical historians agree on many aspects of Jesus' biography, such as being regarded as eschatological prophet and autonomous ethical teacher, telling original parables, many about the coming Kingdom of God, being baptized by John the Baptist, and being crucified in Jerusalem on the orders of the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate. In fact, even the historicity of Jesus' tomb found empty after the crucifixion is now argued for [5]. In any case, Jesus is nowadays undeniably considered as being a part of recorded history. If we today would doubt whether Jesus ever existed, we could as well start doubting the historicity of many other well-known historical figures.

In his lecture Russell further points out that Jesus cannot be that wise, since "he certainly thought that His second coming would occur [...] before the death of all the people who were

living at that time". To substantiate this claim Russell cites two statements of Jesus from Matthew: "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes" and "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom". Now, these statements were uttered by Jesus before the crucifixion, and thus, for all we know, Jesus speaks here about the upcoming appearances of Jesus to the disciples (and others) after the resurrection.

The last tangible argument of Russell<sup>1</sup> against the superlative goodness of Chris is that "Christ certainly as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment". Now, I agree that this argument has some force. However, in the beginning of his lecture Russell admits that the belief in eternal punishment is not essential to Christianity, for he states: "I shall not insist that a Christian must believe in hell". I entirely agree with Russell on this point, and therefore I do not take this last argument as being a real problem for Christianity at all.

Nevertheless, if God exists, and if there is an afterlife, and if some monstrous evils are infinite, then it seems to me that it is not entirely inconceivable to think that wickedly performing such evils could result in being separated from God forever after death, or in not receiving eternal life. And, more importantly, if this would be the case, it would still do nothing to show that Jesus has pleasure in this, or that Jesus does not passionately desire every single human to be saved. In short, it does nothing to disprove Jesus' goodness.

## **Literature**

1. Why I Am Not A Christian, lecture to the National Secular Society (<http://bit.ly/2Fho>), B. Russell
2. A New Look at the Cosmological Argument, American Philosophical Quarterly (slightly different online version: <http://bit.ly/jLuCKY>), R. Koons
3. Euthyphro's Dilemma, Stand to Reason (<http://bit.ly/hVK5LI>), G. Koukl

---

<sup>1</sup> Russell concludes his lecture with some further remarks, such as that religion is based primarily and mainly on fear, that people who have held to Christianity have been for the most part extremely wicked, that Christianity is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world, and so forth. I take these remarks not to be serious objections, and thus I shall not spend time to refute them.

4. Does the existence of a good omnipotent God imply the existence of supernatural post mortem human states? (<http://bit.ly/iYv4Sl>), E. Rutten

5. Historical Jesus (<http://bit.ly/5I7dtJ>), Wikipedia