

God, Science, and Imagination

(2008)

Among the oddest bedevilers of our time are the eminent scientists who use their heaped-up credentials, achievements, and awards as pedestals from which to foretell the future and pronounce upon the ultimate questions of life and religion. One of the most recent of these is Steven Weinberg's essay "Without God" in *The New York Review of Books* for September 25, 2008.

The oddity of these ventures, of which Professor Weinberg's is fairly typical, is in their ready—and, it seems to me, their thoughtless—abandonment of scientific rigor and methodology. For example, despite his protest that he does not want "to try to talk anyone out of their [*sic*] religion," Prof. Weinberg sets forth an elaborate argument for the nonexistence of God, an argument obviously meant to be persuasive but one that is based entirely on opinion.

As a fundamentalist of science, like the fundamentalists of religion, he is clearly evangelizing, hoping to convert or at least to disturb those who disagree. And like the religious fundamentalists, he uses a language that presents belief as knowledge. But more troubling than the authority he grants to his own opinions is his

claim to know what cannot be known. "As religious belief weakens," he writes, "more and more of us know that after death there is nothing." The only fact available here is that Prof. Weinberg and more and more of us do not, and will never, know any such thing. There is no proof of this "nothing," and there is no scientific or other procedure by which to attempt such a proof. ♪

Prof. Weinberg is a physicist, and he says that he is "professionally concerned with finding out what is true." But as a mere person he evidently is concerned, like too many others, merely with investing his opinions with power. This is the concern of fundamentalists of all kinds: religious, atheistic, scientific, technological, economic, and political. They all seek power—they seek victory, in fact—by abandoning the proprieties that permit us to seek and to honor what is true while acknowledging the limits of our ability to know.

Not far into his essay, Prof. Weinberg says, with proper humility, "Of course, not everything has been explained, nor will it ever be." But, two paragraphs later, speaking of "religious conservatives," he abandons the careful and exacting speech of humility, and prognosticates with the absolute confidence and gleeful vengefulness of a religious conservative: "I can imagine how disturbed they will feel in the future, when at last scientists learn how to understand human behavior in terms of the chemistry and physics of the brain, and nothing is left that needs to be explained by our having an immaterial soul."

This is something else that he does not know. Nor does he hesitate over the apparent difficulty of a material proof of the nonexistence of something immaterial.



The argument about the existence of God necessarily must be conducted in the absence of evidence that would stand as proof in either a laboratory or a court of law. There is no objective or empirical or experimental evidence on either side. The argument, as such, is by definition hopeless—a piece of foolishness and a waste of time. Even so, it has long existed and no doubt it will long continue, but only for the paltry reason that it cannot be won. Chaucer defined the problem about six hundred years ago, and I doubt that it can be more clearly defined:

A thousand tymes have I herd men telle
That ther ys joy in hevene and peyne in helle,
And I acorde wel that it ys so;
But, natheles, yet wot I wel also
That ther nis noon dwellyng in this contree,
That eyther hath in hevene or helle ybe,
Ne may of hit noon other weyes witen,
But as he hath herd seyde, or founde it writen;
For by assay ther may no man it preve.

—*The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women*

People of religion, and not just fundamentalists, can speak with tiresome confidence of knowing what in fact they don't know but instead believe. None of us is immune to the temptation to do this. Modern science itself, ignoring its famous devotion to empirical proof and factuality, has pampered and marketed itself by beliefs that have proved to be empirically flimsy and unimaginably damaging. Chemistry, while helping us to "live better," has poisoned the whole world; the "elegant" science of nuclear physics, while making us "safe" from our enemies and offering us "cheap" and "peaceful" power, has littered the world with lethal

messes that apparently are irremediable; and so on to genetic engineering and other giddy "miracles." These developments, at least in their origin, are scientific. But the science involved has not been comprehensive or humble or self-critical or neighborly or publicly responsible. Mere self-interest obliges us to doubt the scientific faith that facts alone can assure the proper or safe use of facts. Modern science, as we have known it and as it has represented itself to us, has encouraged a healthy skepticism of everything but itself. But surely it implies no disrespect for science if we regard it with the skepticism upon which it prides itself.

We human beings, because we are short-lived creatures of limited intelligence, are going to remain under the necessity of talking about things that we don't provably know. But respect for "what is true," for what we don't know, and for our neighbors and fellow creatures, requires us to know and to say when we *don't* know.



Prof. Weinberg understands religious belief as "the belief in facts about God or the afterlife." This is a mistake. If "fact" means what we have agreed it means, and if we respect the word, then we have to say with Chaucer that none of us knows any facts about God or the afterlife. If we did, there would be no issue of "belief." We know for sure that it is possible to speak of beliefs and opinions as facts, but that does not make the beliefs and opinions factual; it only makes them lies.

Most writers about religion, however, have not been scientists, or consciously subject to the methodological strictures of science. If they speak of knowledge, they may mean the things one knows from tradition or from unreplicable experience or "from the heart."

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Even so, in the Bible the language of belief often falls far short of the confidence of factual knowledge. It is most moving—and, to me, it seems most authentic—when it is honestly confronting its own imperfection, or the inadequacy or failure of knowledge. Far from the cocksureness of fundamentalism, the starting place of authentic belief or faith is not-knowing.

One of the primary characteristics of the biblical God is his irreducibility; he cannot be confined in any structure of human comprehension. And so in 1 Kings, having completed his temple, Solomon cries out, not with confident religiosity, but with despair; his mighty work has contradicted what apparently was its purpose:

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the
heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee;
how much less this house that I have builded? (8:27)

The supplication of Mark 9:24 is likewise authenticated by its honest unknowing, unconfidence, and sense of struggle: “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.” And Paul’s letter to the Romans is precise and unrelenting in his definition of hope:

For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not
hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?
But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with
patience wait for it. (8:24–25)

“Faith,” at root, is related to “bide” and “abide.” It has certainly the sense of belief, but also the sense of difficult belief—of waiting, of patience, of endurance, of hanging on and holding together.

And so Prof. Weinberg’s definition of “belief” involves not

only a misuse of the word "facts," but also an implicit misunderstanding of the word "faith."



I dislike very much the disciplinary provincialisms of the universities; therefore, as a literary person, I ought to be delighted that Prof. Weinberg finds literature as irresistible as religion. But I am obliged instead to regret that he speaks of it with complacent oversimplification and ineptitude. When he says, for example, that "nothing prevents those of us who have no religious belief from enjoying religious poetry," does he mean that such enjoyment is the same for believers and unbelievers? If so, how does he know this? Does he have a way of comparing objectively the degrees and kinds of enjoyment? I would gladly agree that enjoyment is a desirable, maybe even a necessary, result of any art; but is enjoyment the only or the highest effect of religious art? What is it about religious art that unbelievers enjoy? The underlying question here, and an important one, is this: How do you authenticate, and make credible to somebody else, your response to a work of art? Prof. Weinberg seems not to have suspected that this question exists, or that it implies a careful, difficult job of work.

He likewise suspects no danger in his assertion that "we see already that little English language poetry written in the past few decades owes anything to belief in God." But who is "we"? How many decades does he have in mind? What is signified by "little"? The existence of God is not a statistical issue to be proved or disproved by quantities of belief or numbers of believers. If God exists, then, like Prof. Weinberg, he exists independently of anybody's knowledge or anybody's belief or disbelief in his existence. If *nobody* believed in God, Prof. Weinberg would still have

his case to make, and evidence would be required of him that he cannot produce.

He says further that "very great poetry can be written without religion," using Shakespeare as his example, apparently unaware that Shakespeare's religion is still a controversial issue among Shakespearean scholars. But you don't have to be an expert—you have only to read the Bible and the plays—to know of Shakespeare's frequent allusions to scripture and his concern with scriptural themes such as mercy and forgiveness and with scriptural characters such as the good and faithful servant. But if great poetry can be written without religion, what does that prove about religion? It proves only that great poetry can be written without it.



In the boring, pointless, and destructive quarrel between fundamentalist science and fundamentalist religion, it seems to me that both sides are wrong. The religious fundamentalists are wrong because their disrespect for the materiality of the world involves, as a matter of course, disrespect for material evidence. They are like a jury that sees no significance in a "smoking gun" because its members don't believe in guns or smoke. The fundamentalist scientists are wrong because they counter one absolutism with another. Against their own history and tradition, they assume the posture of absolute certainty and unquestionability. Both sides assume that they are right now and forever. Neither can say "I don't know" or "I wonder." Both are bigoted, unforgiving, and humorless.

In his troubled and consoling last book of poems, *Second Space*, Czesław Miłosz includes a poem of exemplary generosity:

If there is no God,
 Not everything is permitted to man.
 He is still his brother's keeper
 And he is not permitted to sadden his brother,
 By saying there is no God.

This instruction, as Milosz undoubtedly knew, is perfectly reversible: If there is a God, that does not justify condescension or insult to your atheist neighbor. Such differences, so far as I can see, become issues of justice only when one side attempts to abridge or deny the freedom of the other.

If in fact the fundamentalist scientists were as smart as they think they are, and if the religious fundamentalists were as secure in their belief as they claim to be, then they would (except for issues of justice) leave one another in peace. They keep pestering each other because they need each other. The sort of mind that is inclined to fundamentalism is not content within itself or within its own convictions or principles. It needs to humiliate its opponents. It needs the sustenance of converts. It is fundamentally insecure and ungenerous.



Worst of all, the fundamentalists of both science and religion do not adequately understand or respect imagination. Is imagination merely a talent, such as a good singing voice, the ability to "make things up" or "think things up" or "get ideas"? Or is it, like science, a way of knowing things that can be known in no other way? We have much reason to think that it is a way of knowing things not otherwise knowable. As the word itself suggests, it is the power to make us *see*, and to see, moreover, things that without it would

be unseeable. In one of its aspects it is the power by which we sympathize. By its means we may see what it was to be Odysseus or Penelope, or David or Ruth, or what it is to be one's neighbor or one's enemy. By it, we may "see ourselves as others see us." It is also the power by which we see the place, the predicament, or the story we are in.

To use what is by now the most notorious example, the creation story in Genesis is neither science nor pseudo-science, neither history nor pseudo-history. Like other traditional creation stories, it welled up out of the oldest, deepest human imagination to help us, even now, to see what it is to have a wondrous world that had a beginning in time. It is not true by the corroboration of contemporary documents or physical evidence. It is the imagination, in the high sense given to it by the greatest poets, that assents to its truth, just as it assents to the story of King Lear or Blake's rendering of Jacob's vision. The following lines, from Hayden Carruth's *Toward the Distant Islands*, rightly ignoring the unwinnable contest of science versus religion, were written with a proper deference to mystery and a proper respect for imagination:

The Iliad, the Odyssey, the Book of Genesis,
These were acts of love, I mean deeply felt gestures, which
continuously bestow upon us
What we are.

As for the afterlife, it has been imagined by Homer, Virgil, the biblical writers, Dante, and others, with the result that at least some of us, their willing heirs, have imagined it also.

I don't see that scientists would suffer the loss of any skin from their noses by acknowledging the validity and the power of imaginative truths, which are harmless to the truths of science,

even though imagination in the highest sense seems allied less to science than to religion. The first chapters of Genesis are imagined and imaginable, whereas the big bang theory is the result of calculation. If you have read Dante, you can imagine Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but reading Prof. Weinberg cannot help you to imagine "nothing."



Perhaps the most interesting thing that Prof. Weinberg says in his essay is this: "There are plenty of people without religious faith who live exemplary moral lives (as for example, me)." This of course is a joke, modeled on the shameless self-commendation of politicians, but it is a joke without a context sufficient to reveal how large and sad a joke it is. The large sad fact that gives the joke its magnitude and its cutting edge is that there is probably not one person now living in the United States who, by a strict accounting, could be said to be living an exemplary moral life.

We are still somewhere in the course of the most destructive centuries of human history. And, though I believe I know some pretty good people whom I love and admire, I don't know one who is not implicated, by direct participation and by proxies given to suppliers, in an economy, recently national and now global, that is the most destructive, predatory, and wasteful the world has ever seen. Our own country in only a few hundred years has suffered the loss of maybe half its arable topsoil, most of its original forest and prairie, much too much of its mineral wealth and underground water. Most of its surface water and all of its air are polluted. Its rural cultures—the cultures, at their best, of husbandry—have been almost annihilated. Many of its plants and animals, both wild and domestic, are extinct or in danger.

It is littered with wastelands, landfills, and, most shameful and fearful of all, dumps, industrial sites, and whole landscapes made dangerous virtually forever by radioactive waste. An immense part of this damage has been done in the years after World War II, when the machinery and chemicals of industrial warfare were turned upon the land—to make production “efficient” by the most doubtful standards and to replace the people of the land economies. I have no doubt that the dualisms of body and soul, heaven and earth, too prominent among the religious, have been damaging both to people and to the world, for that division has made it easy to withhold the necessary protections from material things. But the materialists of the science-technology-industry complex, whose minds are not so divided, and who might have been expected to value highly the material world, have instead held it in contempt and damaged it more than anybody.

Scientists and scholars in the knowledge industry—corporate or academic, if there is a difference—are probably in the greatest moral jeopardy of anybody except political, military, and corporate leaders. All knowledge now is potentially a commodity, and there is no way for its originators to control, or even foresee, the uses to which it may be put.



I would like, in conclusion, to bring up a question of religion and politics that I think needs more attention from everybody, but maybe especially from atheists. Before going on, I had better say that I adhere absolutely to the First Amendment. Any form of religious coercion by religious organizations or by governments would be intolerable to me. The idea of the separation of church and state seems to me fairly clear when it is a matter simply of

limiting the powers of institutions. But the world is not so simple as to allow a neat, clear separation of politics and religion or of politics and irreligion.

My question is about the origin and existence of human rights. How did we get them? How are they authenticated? In ancient traditional cultures such as those of surviving peasant or hunter-gatherer communities, the people may be said to possess certain rights by tradition and inheritance: Because they have possessed them immemorially, they possess them still. No modern government, younger and of shallower origin, could rightfully revoke or ignore them. A younger nation of recent immigrants such as the United States possesses no rights by immemorial tradition and inheritance. The founders understood this, and so they stated in our Declaration of Independence the principle that "all men" (which we now construe as "all people") "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights."

I don't think it is adequately appreciated how essential, and what a stroke of political brilliance, that statement is. The purport of it is that, as humans, we have rights that precede the existence of any government. We therefore were not on our knees to the government of England then, and we are not kneeling to our own government now, beseeching a grant of rights. As a would-be free people we were, and we are, requiring any government whatever to recognize and honor the rights we have always possessed by divine gift. The difference between rights granted by a government and rights given by "our Creator" is critical, for it is the difference between rights that are absolute and rights that are contingent upon the will or the whim of those in power.

The possession of rights by divine endowment obviously is an article of faith, for it has no objective or empirical standing. It would have no standing at all with a government in principle

atheistic. (We had better hope, I think, that the separation of church and state implies the separation of institutional atheism and the state.) But vulnerable as this principle may be as an article merely of faith, I know of no other authorization of human rights that can adequately replace it.

It is easy to anticipate that some who will not allow any validity to divine rights will bring forward "natural rights" as an alternative. But this too would be an article of faith, and it forces upon us the probably unanswerable question of what, in the nature of nature, might bring forth and confer upon us rights specifically human.

I am not able to settle such questions, even to my own satisfaction. And so I am obliged to conclude by offering the possibility that we humans are by definition, and perhaps by nature, creatures of faith (which we are as likely to place in luck or science or the free market or our own intelligence as in some version of God); and that we are further defined by principles and cultural properties, not objectively verifiable, that we inherit.